Glenn Kaino on reconsidering the everyday

November 10, 2017 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2385 words.

Tags: Art, Inspiration, Process, Collaboration, Education.

Your work encompasses so many different mediums and materials. Do you work out of a studio?

I don't really work in a studio in any conventional way. I have several different places where I work and it's purposely set up to serve as a kind of thinking space regarding the way my projects materialize. It's not a conventional studio practice, per se, but I'm making stuff there as well. For me it's really about having a heterogenous working environment in order to encourage the work to grow. I find the ideas mature when I'm able to engage the ideas over these different sites of thinking. So, I have a studio in Hollywood where we do mostly design and my library is there. None of my studios are clean, but it's a cleaner space than other spaces. We have the more curatorial meetings there. We have a space in downtown in LA which is a straight-up fabrication facility. I also have a small office where I go to write. My day usually consists of two out of the three spaces.



Desktop Operation, 2003, Wood, paint, plastic tarp, sand, and water

Can you talk me through the way one of your pieces might evolve?

I just did a piece in Chicago that I think would resonate with that type of thinking. It's a flag hanging off the wall that appears to be sort of dyed, producing the image of a target, like concentric circles of black, tan, and white. It hangs from the wall and there's a light that shines through the flag and the shadow that the flag casts is a pristine, unadulterated shadow of the American flag—but when you focus on the flag itself, it looks like a burnt rag.

The project was conceived and iterated upon starting with the conception of the material. It started as an all white flag that has been wrapped and tie-dyed using an old Southern recipe for confederate tarring. We made them and left them in the corner of the studio and they spontaneously combusted, literally lit themselves on fire.

We blow it out and hang it on the wall, and the shadow remains unadulterated. The project began as an experiment with shadows, about the materiality of shadows and the illusion of shadows, but it became somehow layered in with a conversation regarding the crisis of our time. It also spoke to the notion of painters not leaving rags in the corners of their studios because linseed oil and certain types of oils can spontaneously combust and that's how a lot of painters have accidentally burned their studios down.

So, from a conceptual art perspective, it invokes questions of what's to blame when you see someone burning a flag or taking a knee. There's assumptive blame that happens about this political act, but what happens when the flag burns itself? The work is representing this moment of spontaneous combustion, but with the hopeful gesture that somewhere inside the resonant, damaged exterior still represents this pristine, beautiful value system that one can hope will re-materialize.

The work came about from material experiments that were happening at the same time as some writing I was doing. I love it when an artwork tells you what it needs and has a life of its own. I definitely experience that when I make things. I like having a bunch of different inputs happening simultaneously, when work just sort of appears.



Invisible Man, 2016, Blackened Aluminum and Mirrored Stainless Steel

These days, is there ever a time when you're not working towards some project, when you can walk into the studio with no agenda?

I'd like to think that my practice and body of work is a continuously connected engagement with a set of ideas that will happen until I die or something, but there is a section of work that I want to investigate and ideas that I want to investigate, and there's a human condition that I'm interested in engaging with.

One of my early teachers said something like, "Don't make work for a show." I like to think that I let the work dictate what goes where. I'm fortunate that there are opportunities to show the work, but I try not to let the spacial conditions dictate the ideas, while they certainly dictate the form.

Juggling a variety of large projects requires that you must be, on some level, a pretty good multitasker. Was that a skill that you always had?

I think so. I grew up in a very diversified social landscape with lots of varied interests, so I learned to connect the dots early on in life in terms of different communities of people and learning how to translate. When I started my studio and started working on large scale projects, it became a natural extension of that. Multitasking is, to me, less about how you use your time from a practical sense than how you connect the dots from different systems.

My practice is designed to connect—using an internal language that we have at the studio—with systems of knowledge and production that don't normally have a chance to connect. Whether it's me working with Tommie Smith or me working in the world of magic with Derek DelGaudio or with biologists, it's really about connecting different systems and learning how to operate on different time scales. Each cultural sphere has a unique signature of operation in terms of how the rhythms work. What I try to do is connect those things using art as a means of abstraction to allow those connection points to happen.



The Burning Boards, 2007, Chess game performance for 32 players with wood chessboards and wax chess pieces

A lot of your work is about the multitasking of objects. It's a way of thinking that allows you to see the creative possibility of objects, taking things and making them do something totally unlike what they were made for. Is that something you were doing even as a kid?

Absolutely. That pretty much epitomizes my kitbash mentality. It's a sort of metaphoric unpacking of our potential and the revealing of the invisible things inside of us that are not necessarily always foregrounded and obvious. There's a direct correlation between not wanting to just see an object as what it appears or what it's initially intended to be used for, and the desire to take it and make it something more.

I think that there's a hopefulness in that. One of the largest frustrations that's certainly tearing apart the country right now is this notion of being heard and seen. You know, being seen for what I *really* am, being seen for who I *really* am and what I *really* think. I hope that all of my art has done some type of work to reveal and complicate the notion of what things are. I've always had an affinity towards that type of thinking.

How did that kind of thinking apply to your project with Tommie Smith, which really expands and expounds on that classic image of him with the raised fist?

Throughout my practice, I've had the opportunity to meet with and work with a lot of different great collaborators and revolutionary thinkers. I had a picture of Tommie Smith taped on my computer for years. One day a friend of mine walks into the studio and points at it and says, "Oh, Coach Smith, you want to meet him?"

It turns out Tommie lives in Atlanta, so we flew out there a few days later to meet him. He greeted me, shook my hand, brought me to his living room, and played the famous 1968 race for me in slow motion and narrated every single step, including the famous salute. It was amazing.

Around his house are hundreds of images of the salute. I said, "I was born after that happened, so for me it's always been symbolic, but for you it's probably personal. You shook my hand with that hand. You brush your teeth with that hand and you drive with that hand. But for history, and for the rest of us, that hand is in the air. So there's a big gap between the way history has recorded that and the way your memory has recorded that. What if we could create something that functions in the *now*, allowing you to be a spectator for the first time."

So we eventually came up with the large bridge sculpture, which is built from all of these casts of his raised arm. In our talks Tommie calls it, "Bridge to Civil Rights" or "Bridge to Hope" or "Bridge to Equality." I wanted to film interactions with Tommie and see how this changed over time, so we've filmed him for three years now. He has always been welcoming and great, and we have made a bunch of different artworks. It has been interesting as this project developed to see how we could get attention utilizing the mechanics and the structure of not just the art world, but also see how institutions function to put forth knowledge for consideration in different ways. I think it speaks to how the value of art has been increasing in contemporary society. Through our work together, we eventually got Tommie into the Oval Office to meet President Obama. I was really proud, not just of the work we'd done together, but proud of art. It was because of art that we connected two historic figures in a way that should have already happened a long time ago. The infrastructure of sports and politics are huge, but art was the tool and the platform that Tommie was able to use to get into the Oval Office and meet President Obama. I love that.







Bridge, Fiberglass, steel, wire, gold paint, Dimensions variable. Installed at 5x5 in Washington D.C. Photo: Glenn Kaino Studio

I like that this project with Tommie also involves an educational aspect. The two of you will be traveling around and hosting workshops where people can draw. People can not only interact with it, but also actually make something of their own.

That's the goal. I'm from a fourth generation Japanese-American family and I grew up in East LA. I grew up with a wide range of people, but was exposed to nothing related to art. So the idea that I want my work to function from a visual and engagement way really is a political gesture in itself, because I don't want to invest in the unpacking of ideas and *not* make them inspiring to the people where I came from.

That's why the education component of this is so powerful. I've done a lot of thinking and exploring with other teacher friends about how people learn and how people view their own abilities. For example, you could go walk into a restaurant and put a paper in front of every patron and say, "Make a drawing." Ninety-nine percent of people in that restaurant are gonna say the exact same phrase, "I can't draw."

They *can* draw. They might not be able to render things well technically, but that's sort of like engineering drawing anyways. You *can* make your mark. It might not be perfect or stylized, but as a practical matter, you can make your mark. It's very scary to make your mark, though. It's scary because when you draw it's a skill that sort of translates, ostensibly, a reflection of what's in your brain. As long as you hold a pencil it's still all just your brain. You want to give people the tool to set those things free.

When Tommie and I have the opportunity to talk to young people, it's often about the idea of—as literal as it might sound—making a mark on a piece of paper. Filling up the blank page. Creating circumstances where people could feel confident doing that and feel like they have permission to do that is the most important thing.

One of the most moving stories about this whole project was when we first showed the bridge in Washington D.C. There was an elderly African-American man who came up and looked at us, then looked at the bridge and said, "My mom would never let me do what you did." He was pointing at both of us. We said, "Oh, why is that?" He said, "I always wanted to stand up for myself and play sports, and I always wanted to be an artist, and my mom wouldn't let me do either one. I'm so proud to be here today to watch the two of you get together to do that crazy thing." That was just so awesome. To me, that's what this project is really about—giving people the permission and confidence to have a dialogue, to say something maybe they've always been wanting to say.



Tank, 2004, Aquarium, resin, coral

5 things for my friends from my friends by Glenn Kaino

In & Of Itself, written and performed by Derek Delgaudio. (Daryl Roth Theater,NYC) An experience that confronts us with the notion of our identity and complicates the parameters from which we might be classified in this world of increasing definition.

n/naka restaurant by Niki Nakayama. An invisible performance inside of a kitchen that patrons experience only from the ephemeral artifacts that are presented at their tables.

Ebroji, an app by Jesse Williams that is a GIF Keyboard curated and tuned to expand our voice and address the cultural politics of language and inclusion.

Prince: A Private View. The new book from Afshin Shahidi that documents their decade long collaboration.

Fathomers, a new model of arts organization led by Stacy Switzer that was created to help challenge us to live and act differently in our world.

Name
Glenn Kaino

Vocation
Artist





Photo: Courtesy of Glenn Kaino Studio