

Aaron Curry In Conversation With Will Corwin

By William Corwin – March 16, 2011



Aaron Curry is an artist based in LA. Born in San Antonio Texas in 1972, he studied at The Art Institute of Chicago and then the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. He was a Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin in the fall of 2010, and much of the work made during that residency ended up in his exhibition at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin in January and February of this year. He had his first museum exhibition at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles 2008-9 and is represented by Michael Werner Gallery, New York, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. This interview was recorded for Art International Radio in October 2010 at the American Academy in Berlin.

Will Corwin: Let's start off with what you're doing here in Berlin, how did you find out about the Academy?

Aaron Curry: I was nominated by Chrissie Iles from the Whitney Museum and it was sort of just brought up out of the blue. I've always been interested in Berlin but it wasn't really something I was thinking about at the time.

Wm. C: Had you been here before?

AC: I'd had two shows here in the last two years, one at Daniel Buchholz and another at VW (VeneKlasen/Werner), which was a two person show I did with a friend Tom Houseago. And so I accepted and ended up here.

Wm. C: Where are you working?

AC: They've given me a studio in Kreuzberg. The first month and a half I've been doing very touristy things, going to museums and stuff. I had this idea – I've been looking at Dieter Roth a lot lately. I studied undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and there's a great artists' books room there. I worked in the library and this room was part of the library. I discovered Roth's books in the early nineties and it's always been something I've been interested in doing. I thought coming here would be a great time to start thinking about making books.

Wm. C: What direction do you want to take that in?

AC: I like the idea of it just being anything that can be on a table, kind of flipping through something that has to do with time, but it changes... It's a physical thing like a sculpture, but at the same time you manipulate it in a different way. Instead of walking around it, you flip the pages. It's something I've been thinking about and I don't really know what it all means yet. I thought I would get here and really start to play around. It's started but I haven't really come up with anything concrete yet.

Wm. C: You have a title though—isn't it called "two sheets thick"?

AC: That was the title of the show David Kordansky Gallery. I'm going to give a talk here in a couple of weeks and they wanted a title, so I just gave them that title because I thought it would make sense to talk about the most recent show that I'd done. But then I felt a bit guilty because they've given me this beautiful space here and it's an amazing sculpture space to make big things in, so I've kind of changed my idea. We'll see.

Wm. C: Changed in what direction?

AC: I kinda think I'm going to make some sculptures while I'm here.

Wm. C: “Two Sheets Thick”—let’s talk about your art physically, because a lot of it relies on a play between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, because you do use flat, or semi-flat forms that intersect. Does that relate to your interest in books and printing?

AC: Yeah, absolutely. I’ve talked about this a bit before. My understanding of art first came from books and seeing things as images, sculpture as images. Once I started making sculpture, it was this weird thing that I started to approach. I come from a background of painting, so I’ve always thought about things in a two dimensional way.

Wm. C: When you say a background of painting...

AC: I painted in high school and I went to undergraduate school and studied painting. It wasn’t until maybe ten years ago that I started making sculpture. But when I did, I found myself looking at all of these sculptors that were thinking about flat planes, like David Smith, early Noguchi. I liked the awkwardness of it, like something that’s not either one—as you walk around it, it can flatten out and create a window to something —almost like a cubist painting always refers to the surface but then always gives you illusion at the same time. It’s an awkward space that I still find rather exciting to play with.

Wm. C: Your most recent exhibition at Kordansky played with the idea of creating an environment in which the surface of the wall also had imagery on it. Do you want to talk a little bit about creating an environment as a sculptor?

AC: That show came out of a show I had done in Hannover, where I had seen the reconstruction of Schwitters’ “Merzbau” and I was thinking a lot about it. Parts of my sculpture and parts of my collages are made of cardboard, so I had come to this idea of making a room that was covered in cardboard. It’s not necessarily a wallpaper, but it was the slightest way of getting the walls to creep into a three-dimensional space. It’s like a quarter of an inch thick of material – so sculptural but also completely flat and painterly. I came up with this sort of pattern that I had created using a computer tablet that I drew on just like a sketchbook. At the time I was really interested in an image that was created in a completely digital space and this sort of weird dimension, then bringing that to life in a very simple physical form, which would be to print it on something other than paper—a very thick surface.

Wm. C: Was it the viscosity? What was it that really attracted you to cardboard?

AC: Well it was a bit of both. It’s a very cheap material and I use it a lot, even on my sculptures when I’m making them, because the way that I start to make them is that they’re created from these planes that we talked about, then as I go, they’re created almost like collages: I can add and take away from them and change them as I go along. Sometimes even if it’s a wood sculpture I’ll put a piece of cardboard on it and cut into it and see how that looks. It’s a very basic way of constructing form. I started playing with the idea, what if the sculptures are printed in the same pattern? Do they become invisible in a way? Until you walk around them and experience them, then they sort of come out from the walls. This all even goes back to a previous show I did where I was interested in World War One

camouflage that was used on ships—Razzle-Dazzle camouflage—they used it on ships in WWI, not necessarily to hide the ship, but to obscure where it was in the water. A lot of the Cubists at the time were coming up with the patterns for the ships, which I found really fascinating. I started playing with this idea of camouflaging forms and trying to make them really flatten out into two dimensions until you walked around them. Then they appear.

Wm. C: When you talk about your most recent project, what I find really interesting is that on a certain level it's an experiment by creating the wall, and then seeing if the sculptures within this environment don't really make themselves strongly apparent until you walk around them. How did that work out? Were you happy with how it came out? It's one of these things with sculptors in particular, where you don't know what it's going to be like until you see it...

AC: I was happy with it! I mean, I definitely made some dogs that ended up in the trash, but for the most part, you know it's hard, because you have an idea of what you want something to convey – how you think that it should look – but that's not where the magic happens. It's during the creation of it and it always is something completely different from what you think it's going to be. There's an excitement in that. I'm not one of those artists that comes up with an idea of what the show should be and then just installs it. That wouldn't be exciting, but in the end I was quite happy with it.

Wm. C: As Americans in the American art scene, the German artists are just so massively important to contemporary art—I mean Kiefer and Beuys for example, so do you find yourself coming here almost with a preconception, “I've already been influenced by German art, I know what they're doing...”

AC: No, not necessarily, because the great thing about artists like Polke and Kippenberger, I mean there's this long line of artists – the thing I really like about them is, I haven't figured them out yet. They're still really exciting to me.

Wm. C: Have you been hanging out in a lot of museums?

AC: I've been looking at more Northern Renaissance and Flemish painting. The Gemäldegalerie has some amazing things. I just got back from Vienna where they have a whole room of Breughel paintings. There's a Cranach painting that's a copy of a Bosch that's in the Gemäldegalerie that's really quite amazing, and I just saw the actual Bosch, in Vienna as well. It's an amazing idea to think about an artist looking at another artist and trying to copy it exactly. What does it mean to see the copy? And the copy's kind of amazing.

Wm. C: You've talked about this already, but obviously painting is incredibly important to you, but how does looking at a Cranach or a Breughel then influence your own image-making? Do you still see things as a painter? Do you then convert them?

AC: I do, because I think that we see everything – not we, I don't want to generalize – but I look at things in a very flat way. I look at my computer screen all the time, I watch movies, I watch television, I look at books, I read books, everything for the most part, other than

going out into nature or dealing with the environment around me, a lot of the complex thoughts come from a flat space in a weird way. There are things, like the Tillman Riemanschneider sculptures, that are quite amazing here. I'm one of these artists, I get most excited about two-dimensional work, it's quite strange and I don't quite know why that is.

Wm. C: You went to the Art Institute of Chicago, but you're from San Antonio, Texas, and you're now in LA. What do think the differences are between the NY and LA scene?

AC: It would be tough to work in New York. In LA you can have a massive amount of space for quite an affordable amount of money. It's a great place to disappear if you want to. There is a scene if you want to go out. You can go to galleries, be around artists. I moved there for school. It has this great history of schools and teachers that are amazing artists themselves, and are still teaching even though financially they don't have to, supporting artists.

Wm. C: Who are we talking about?

AC: I moved there to study under Mike Kelley and Richard Hawkins, I went to a great school where there was Liz Lerner, Christopher Williams, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe...the list goes on and on of artists that were teaching there, and then there were other schools. UCLA had Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, John Baldessari, all these really important artists that, for my generation, had a big impact. I remember being in Chicago in '91, there was a show called Helter Skelter at the MOCA in LA and I got the catalogue and thought, "wow there's some really weird shit being made in LA," and it felt real exciting to me. Ten years later I end up going there to study with these people. So you make connections, and there are other students that went there for the same reason. I've remained friends with a lot of them and it is a great scene. And I met other people, like Thomas Houseago and Amy Bessone, who show at the same gallery as me. There's a great scene of artists there. But it is the kind of place where you don't go out and party, it's not like we're out to dinners all the time and going to openings.

Wm. C: Is there an artists' bar?

AC: There is, but I don't go to it! There's probably a few, I have no idea. I drink at home. It's kind of an amazing place, but only for my own reasons, I think. I think everybody else has their own reasons.

Wm. C: What are your reasons?

AC: I'm not anti-social, but I don't go out much, and I like that I can do that in LA and not feel like a weirdo.

Wm. C: You just mentioned a few of your colleagues, sculptors, and if we think about the Nancy Princenthal article in Art in America, she talks about you and Thomas Houseago and the fact that you work together, not physically. Talk a bit about the idea of maybe, a

“movement,” a “school?” Do you feel like you’re in a play of ideas with other sculptors? Do you look at each other’s work, do you talk to each other about ideas that you’re working on?

AC: I don’t know if I’d call it a movement. I’d like to call it a movement. I don’t have a manifesto but Thomas might. The one thing I have realized, being in the art world – now that I’m almost 40 years old – throughout my twenties, I was painting and I was aware of the art scene and contemporary art but I wasn’t a part of it in any way. Now that I am participating in this thing you call the art world, it becomes very selfish. From the get-go it’s a selfish way of going through life. You are totally wrapped up in your own ideas and how you experience life. I think too often artists get confused and think that this becomes about them being geniuses and not looking at the other artists around them and finding exciting things about their ideas. The one thing I’ve always done is have friends whose work can be completely different than mine, but I see their work and it excites me because it isn’t something that I would do. If you look at the past, there’s this whole history of Picasso/Braque, Rauschenberg and Twombly and Johns, artists that figured out that they’re alone in this world except for them having these friendships—and then using one another to push themselves, to make themselves better and to think about things that they normally wouldn’t. I have quite a good group of friends...

Wm. C: How do they push you?

AC: It’s more that they do things that I hadn’t thought of yet and it’s not that I would make the same painting or the same gesture, it’s the idea that they were able to open up their mind a little bit more and look at something else that you wouldn’t normally see within the practice. For me, that’s what it is. There are definitely dialogues of “oh wait, how’s this working, it’s not working at all, or wow that’s really great.” It’s a complex thing, but it can be really great. I’m sure when I’m 60 I might not have these relationships, but I hope that they stay like they are as long as they can.

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