

**Evan Holloway & Julia Friedman**

JF This show with Xavier Hufkens is your sixth. Twenty years have passed since the first exhibition you had at the gallery, and your work has evolved quite a bit since then, but there's still something very consistent in the way you approach sculpture. I thought this show was particularly interesting because of the types of work it combines. How many bodies of work are there?

EH There will be three bodies of work in this show: the automatic drawings, the Enochian tablets, and the improvised scrap sculptures.

JF Let's start with the tablets.

EH The tablets have their origin in the late 16th century, through secretive work by the court astrologer John Dee with his partner in this venture, Edward Kelly. Around 1583, they began a series of communications with angelic spirits. It was sort of an experiment. They didn't really know what they were going after but they were meeting spirits that no one had met before... Okay, this is already going off the rails. [laughs]

JF Angelic spirits. For 2022, that's quite heavy!

EH We can't really approach a medieval mindset, but from their perspective, they were communicating with angelic spirits and those spirits were revealing different instructions for how to build tools. These instructions included a series of alphanumeric grids.

They were told to draw grids of 12 by 13, totaling 156 squares. They were instructed at random where to place the letters, not beginning from right to left or top to bottom. Later, it was revealed to them that this was an index of the spirits' names. That's around 1588–1589. They hid their work, and it became the stuff of legends. In the mid 19th century, a group of British occultists who called themselves



*Tunnel Arrangement, 2022*  
steel  
68.6 x 43.2 x 35.6 cm  
27 x 17 x 14 in.

the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn were interested in putting together different things from the Western esoteric tradition. One of the things they started working with was this Dee and Kelly material which they found in the British Museum's library.

It's a long story, but in short, the Golden Dawn assigned colors to the letters, based on other systems such as Kabbalah and Tarot. Now, I am taking the instructions provided by the Golden Dawn and making a tablet that, as far as I know, no one has ever made in three dimensions. Theirs tended to be flat instructions. Also, typically, you might put the planetary and astrological symbols on the pyramids. I'm using colors that could correspond to those planets. An easy example of that is red for Mars. These works are basically color extrapolations from the Golden Dawn's work. Enthusiasts of Enochian magic, and they exist around the world, will recognize these tablets for what they are and hopefully appreciate how faithfully I've reproduced everything in its correct position. I'm not really making decisions beyond the interpretation of a particular color: what I consider emerald or crimson, for instance.

JF What you're describing is truly democratic in a sense. You're not just appealing to the art crowd. There's a whole different audience for these, people who might not care about contemporary art. Yet, when you look at these tablets, if you know your 20th century art, several things come to mind—different styles, different movements, everything from geometric abstraction to minimalism. You mentioned the occult, and of course we then think of all the prominent 20th century artists, such as Hilma af Klint, Kandinsky and Mondrian, who worked off

theosophic doctrine to create modern painting. How do you see yourself in terms of the early 20th century adaptation of Theosophy and esoteric tradition to abstract art?

EH Good question. I feel like some of the early 20th century artists were illustrating a particular state of mind. They were rendering their own subjective experience. While one could have a subject experience with a tablet, the rules are written. They are rendered according to a set of instructions. Artists like Hilma af Klint and others were arriving at their own color systems, following their own instructions. I'm using somebody else's system, a previous system that goes back to the 16th century. That's probably a key difference.

JF What about their decorative elements? The less pattern there is, the more it activates an optical illusion component of the work which borders on the decorative. Did you take a decorative reading into consideration as you were working?

EH Not really, no. It's kind of a surprise when it's completed. The quadrants you see correspond to Earth. Those four quadrants appear anywhere the element of Earth is referenced. I don't get to choose where they arrive. I get to choose my interpretation of the colors citrine, olive, russet and black but even those are arrived at through a system that will take too long to explain here [laughs].

Obviously, one could follow the instructions and

come up with a very different looking thing, so I am making some aesthetic decisions and design decisions because I also want to move forward some of the conversations around Western esoteric artwork and occult practices in Western art. I want it to go towards something that doesn't have the typical occult "witchy" look. The content is really important, but the aesthetics around it can shift a lot.

JF I see. But basically, to me it sounds like the main characteristic of this body of work is that it has rules and preset parameters, within which you work, but you're really trying to delegate the decisions to the original instructions. Whereas this other body of work, the drawings, looks completely different. One is about self-contained work within a set of rules, and the other one looks like something which is not self-contained.

EH Yes. The Enochian tablets are a sort of visionary tool and the rules don't get to change. The automatic drawings are maybe more like the experience. They are produced by my interior experience with the pen which is deeply subjective.

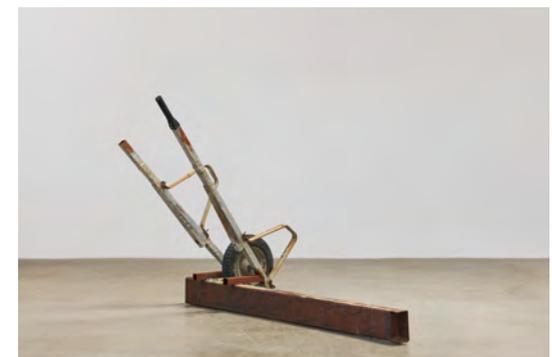
JF So essentially it is a flow of consciousness. I also see that there are tears and interruptions in the drawings. Are those part of the process?

EH Yes. Not paying attention to the paper and not being concerned with what happens to it in the mark making process. That is what results.

JF Do you start with a preconceived idea or are they

properly "automatic"? How do you make them? Of course, the Surrealists had all sorts of ways which are hard to replicate in contemporary conditions.

EH I'm not looking at the paper so I'm completely in the dark. They're on a turntable, which accounts for some of the mark-making. After a session, I review what came out and might choose a different colored pen or bring in some conscious decisions to spray them with water to make them bleed a little. The folding is so that they fit on the turntable in different ways, and I can access different parts



*Work Form, 2022*  
steel, wood, rubber, plastic, 122 x 183 x 111.8 cm, 48 x 72 x 44 in.

of the page. Because of that, I'm not really getting a look at the whole thing. Maybe that relates to the Surrealist Exquisite Corpse game.

JF Right. Except I don't know if you can do that by yourself because it requires several divided

psyches. [laughs] The Exquisite Corpse was meant to bring up one's sexual dysfunction and in the more contemporary understanding, it's considered subject-less drawing. You're not trying to self-analyze or anything like that...

EH No, no. This is about the free flow of the ink. I'm also very curious about what happens later, when I or somebody else looks at the drawing. They're very dense and they tend to draw you in really close to the point where you've forgotten about the larger picture. And so, they are a site of inward movement. Maybe that relates to the title of the show: *Scry if you want to*. To scry is to seek a vision in something. You might look into a crystal ball, smoke or a bowl of water reflecting the full moon... things where there are unstable reflections, and something can be seen inside. It's a way of overriding the conscious mind to let something else through. When looking at it, the work provides that opportunity. It generates this incredibly subjective state between the artwork and the viewer.

JF But you're not trying to take the drawings on the level of Rorschach?

EH No. Did you see something? [laughs]

JF What about the accretions and the paper breaks that happen while you're drawing?

EH I am disengaging somewhat from that material thing until I need to repair it. I like how that carries a kind of energy in it. There are all kinds of information

in these that is carried through the mark-making. The tears are a form of the mark-making.



*Verse Fragment*, 2022  
steel, aluminium, plastic, 53.3 × 48.3 × 17.8 cm, 21 × 19 × 7 in.

JF The perfection of imperfection... So what about the third body of work, the sculptures?

EH The improvised scrap sculptures! I'll start by justifying their relationship to the other two. I've usually made sculpture in real space without preliminary drawings, by moving material around and by seeing how I have a physical relationship to the mass and the line as I move around the work. I don't have a preconceived idea of what I'm getting at in terms of a completed form. In a sense, that is also a kind of scrying. There's shared improvisational territory with the other bodies of work. The scrap sculptures really have their origin in a construction project I did here at the studio. When we were finished, there

was a big pile of metal. Instead of calling someone to pick it up, I decided that it would be fun to work with the scrap directly. Also, I have this amazing opportunity now, where I have an outdoor space and I'm alone. Nobody can see me doing my weird sculptures, which is...

JF Ultimate freedom.

EH It's a dream.

JF Of course, you're known as a sculptor, and we started our conversation by talking about wall reliefs and then drawings, but you come from sculpture. We might think of the history of 20th century sculpture as a conversation between one school that argues a relational type of sculpture where different elements must cohere as the viewer looks at them, say Anthony Caro, vs. Minimalism, which insists on the specific object in real space. Your sculptures very effortlessly combine both approaches! The work you've shown me today almost feels like references to Caro, in relational bits, but you also seem quite at ease with them being objects in and of themselves.

EH They're recognizable. That's true.

JF Please tell me about the West Coast part of it. We're here in Los Angeles and you are a California artist.

EH That split you mentioned is also British sculpture versus American, New York sculpture. I was introduced to these different currents simultaneously, not knowing that I wasn't supposed to mix them. That is probably why things resulted the way they

have. [laughs] The physical reading with the body—the idea of scale—is always important to me.



*Animal Impression*, 2022  
steel, rubber, aluminium, 48.3 × 53.3 × 20.3 cm, 19 × 21 × 8 in.

JF What about the West Coast tradition? West Coast Assemblage?

EH Early on, in the library at UC Santa Cruz, I discovered the catalog of the 1967 Funk show at the Berkeley Museum. A lot of the work was great, parts of it were really visceral. I'm thinking of the Fur Rat, Joan Brown's piece. Do you know that reproduction? It's a terrible reproduction.

JF Yeah, they're all pretty terrible reproductions.

EH That seemed visceral and important. Another one is Bruce Nauman, who I discovered around the same time. Six inches of my knee extended to six feet. It's about the body and it's also a formal object. I mean, it's an excuse to make a shape in space. A shape

that has qualities in the way it handles light.

JF That seems totally plausible. It's almost a Northern California brand of sculpture which is closer to what Robert Arneson was doing in ceramics and Funk Art, the sort of impish critique. Essentially, he was holding up a mirror to a culture as it became increasingly distorted. Whereas in Los Angeles, there was the Cool School and the Finish Fetish. This body of work is much closer to Northern California's tradition of assemblage. The stuff that was shown at the Ferus Gallery early on.

EH There's a whole bunch of stuff going on in California sculpture. Think about DeWain Valentine making those enormous polyester resin works... the technical know-how, and not to mention a space that he had to literally raise a stink. That was intense. For a variety of reasons, I couldn't approach it. Maybe I didn't have the technical know-how and I certainly didn't have the access to real estate. It was a different time.

JF You started using whatever by necessity. The scraps.

EH Well now I can do a lot more, so my argument doesn't really apply.

JF But that's a choice and it's an interesting one. It's not exactly going back to the original assemblage sculptures that you did. This is something else. It's also notable that you're doing it alongside the tablets and the automatic drawings. It reminds me of when Charles Ray, who you studied with, said

he saw Anthony Caro as a contemporary. He didn't see him as a canonical figure at the time. There's a great sense of freedom in going in whichever direction you choose to.

EH Yes, this is a free assortment of things. The works end up having a shared territory, even though they're visually and materially different from one another. If you look at the early work of Bruce Nauman, where he's making videos alongside minimalist



*Air Test*, 2022  
steel  
281.9 × 139.7 × 101.6 cm  
111 × 55 × 40 in.

type sculptures, neons and photographs... Those are very diverse bodies of work, but they all make a space. They define something by being adjacent to one another. That has always been interesting to me.

JF He's truly a beacon.

EH Yes!

JF Then the question that arises naturally is, why now? In all the work that I have seen of yours, you have reacted to the contemporary situation and to the environment around you. You don't spell things out, but one can see that the works are of a certain period. Now we are in the post-pandemic period, with all its political and social upheaval. We're in the period which is extremely disorienting and almost



*Partial Victory*, 2022  
steel  
182.9 × 88.9 × 43.2 cm  
72 × 35 × 17 in.

as tumultuous as the late 1600s. Do you think that there's something about the time in which you're doing these things? Again, there's this clarion call,

scrying, and we must orient ourselves because we don't know where the top is at this point.

EH Gosh. You're asking how it relates to the contemporary cultural moment? I don't know if I'm well positioned to make grand proclamations.

JF But that's what you're doing with the work. I mean, it's not unhumble. It makes sense.

EH I can say that, personally, I love working directly with the sculpture and frankly, I am tired of making really expensive productions. That's post-pandemic economics. I've been doing this for 30 years so I think that when I move around junk, I can do it in a way that is compelling. I also think, hey, if it works for me, that's not nothing.

JF Post pandemic economics. The pandemic was kind of a big deal artistically. Right? So that's how you processed it?

EH That's part of it. Also, I was inspired to make these junk sculptures when I visited a place called the Porter Sculpture Park in Montrose, South Dakota. I was on a road trip and I saw this 80 foot tall bull head that was made out of scrap steel railroad parts. It was amazing! I guess you would call this guy an outsider but that's a weird term. He didn't get an M.F.A., I'll say that. Scrap sculpture is to some degree now understood as a populist form. Not everybody has a taste for this level of abstraction, but making a weird robot out of junk is very popular. I also think that the ability to comprehend

abstraction is no longer a radical position.

JF Is this some sort of impish act of resistance to the art market?

EH Who's going to get the last laugh in that? No, I am not trying to resist the art market. People have been making these kinds of sculptures for 100 years and what's curious to me is if I roughen the material a



*Actor*, 2022  
steel, aluminium, rubber, 43.2 × 53.3 × 48.3 cm, 17 × 21 × 19 in.

little bit, it becomes difficult to place over the last 100 years. These parts aren't special. I'm choosing ferrous metal because I can weld it, leaving out plastics and aluminum. Our world is mostly still built the same way. Driving in my car, which is made from sheet metal, I am surrounded by simple objects, like an aluminum sign that's on a stock pole. It's all fairly primitive. This stuff flows into the environment, and it comes out of the environment. I found this

on Sherman way... Maybe when Kurt Schwitters was picking up stuff it was similar, but the context is completely different.

JF It's tragically real and that's so different from the idea of the metaverse and the urge to make artificially assisted intelligent art. This is quite the opposite, which brings me to ask you about... what did you call it? The analog...

EH The analog counterrevolution. I came up with the



*Shells*, 2022  
steel, plastic, 53.3 × 53.3 × 25.4 cm, 21 × 21 × 10 in.

term about 20 years ago and on some level, it was just meant to be funny as the opposite of digital revolution... Basically though, it is the idea that confirms we're never really going to override the physical world. We still need plumbing, for instance. There is no digital plumbing.

JF That's right. We still get sick. We still die.

EH Yes. I locate the work in the body and in that physical place. So, those two words are as much of a manifesto as I've ever written, but I feel like it's held up OK.

JF Analog counterrevolution. It's as relevant as ever considering the rise of not only the digital but also the virtual. The gentleman who won the prize at the state fair for his A.I. work triumphantly declared that analogue art is dead. It's all going to be artificial intelligence from this point on.

EH Well, what are you going to see that art with?!

JF And where does it come from? It comes from the images that were harvested from living people.

EH The experience of art is still a visceral and corporeal experience.

JF That's right, which kind of brings us full circle here. We can't run away from ourselves. With the route that you're pursuing, you can go in the direction of abstraction, guided by rules. Or, you can go in the direction of movement, formerly claimed by the Surrealists. Or you can go tragically visceral and it's all artmaking! Finally, you mentioned that there's an audio component to the show?

EH Yes, I would love to talk about the country songs that I've been writing. I play music with some people and one of them is a pedal steel player. When you work with a pedal steel player, it's fun to play country music and so that got me interested in the form. The theory around the work became

the subject of the songs. This really helped with the songwriting because I've written a lot of songs and they're mostly all terrible. I like these songs because they don't use a lot of first-person pronouns, and they're not about my feelings or anything. And it's country music! It's an accessible and sincere form which I think is appropriate to the show. There's no snark in this show. A lot of work I've made has had irony, or it's been in reaction to things that I see going on in the art world. This is a different body of work for me. I'm sincere about all of it.

JF It seems more life-affirming than snarky.

EH Good. That's where I'm at.

Los Angeles, December 2022