

INTERVIEW WITH NANCY SHAVER BY STEEL STILLMAN



Installation view of exhibition, *Retail*, at Feature, Inc., NY, 2007

Nancy Shaver's first mature work, more than thirty years ago, was in photography and her attention remains outwardly focused: her subject is the external world and its objects. Echoing William Carlos Williams, Shaver finds her ideas in things, discovering in them layers of imagination, use and history. Like a detective, she investigates what catches her eye -- including art works -- looking for evidence of lives being lived. In a culture where newly made objects get all the buzz, Shaver's work broadens our gaze, elaborating relationships in which different times (including the present) and social worlds (not always our own) coexist -- as fitfully as they coexist in everyday life.

Though Shaver describes herself as a sculptor, she does not make unitary things. Instead, her work takes the form of montage, with disparate elements brought into surprising coherence. Among the objects and materials she uses are: wooden blocks and boxes, bits of wire, sheets of glass, cracker boxes, coat hangers, paper, cardboard, fabric. These elements, as they are picked and chosen, and then combined or multiplied, are frequently embellished: perhaps wrapped in brown paper or coated in layers of richly hued paint. The resulting structures -- in which the abstract and the ordinary vie for attention -- can grow to human size or larger, and sometimes hang on the wall like three-dimensional paintings.

Nancy Shaver was born in 1946 and graduated from Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, in 1969. At Pratt she met Haim Steinbach, and the two were married a few years later. They divorced in 1977. Shaver lived in New York for much of the '70s and all of the '80s, with the exception of a few years spent in New England, most notably in New Haven between 1971 and 1973, where she got to know Walker Evans. Though she was in touch with what was happening in art and culture during those decades, it was not until 1986, with sculptures and drawings that incorporated objects, that her work became well known within the art world. In the early 90's,

Shaver moved to Jefferson, New York, where she has lived and worked ever since. Her second husband, John Jackson, is also a sculptor.

Eighteen years ago, in response to the unpredictability of the art market and the need to make a living, Shaver embarked on an important side career, and her passion for objects became also her business. Today she is the proprietor of an antique store in Hudson, NY, called Henry. To visit Henry is to step inside an ever-changing collection in which each object saturates the eye and, having a story to tell, educates the mind.

In Shaver's art work seeing and thinking are virtually the same operation. And visual properties alone, what some might call formal properties, are never the whole story: they are merely the presenting surface. We must not be fooled by what might seem home-made or slipshod in Shaver's technique for these are deliberate, intellectual choices. Her work possesses a sophistication grounded in the perceptions of Henry James, the tricks of Marcel Duchamp, and the refinements of Charles Ray. To appreciate Shaver's work requires an eye tuned to the particular, to the different. In Shaver's world, and in her work, the qualities that make something peculiar are the ones that make it both distinctive and human.



Assortment: brown, yellow, green, red and gray, 2006; wooden blocks, fabric, house paint, flashe acrylic paint; 10.5 x 10.5 x 3.25"

For the past ten years Shaver has taught in the Bard MFA program, in the sculpture division. Her work has been in numerous solo and group shows in the US and Europe. She has been represented by Feature Inc., in NY, since 1999. The following exchange is the product of

several conversations during 2008: the first on a spring day in Shaver's Jefferson studio; we continued on one of her visits to New York City, and concluded in September, in her shop in Hudson -- though revisions and clarifications continued into January of 2009.

S: Where did you grow up?

N: I grew up in a rural area about forty miles east of Buffalo, New York. Both my grandfathers were farmers -- their farms were adjacent to one another. My father had left farming and gone to work on an assembly line, making radiators for General Motors. He had been to college and was interested in history, but wound up in a hideously boring job. He came home every day and sat in a room filled with books, which he called the library, and read the newspaper.

My mother had also gone to college, to what was then called a normal school, and was an elementary school teacher. After they married, my mother stopped working to raise her family -- there are four of us -- and then when I was in sixth grade she went back to teaching.

S: Did you have art classes in school?

N: I was in the college-track program in high school, which meant there was no time for art until I was a junior. But when I began art classes, I enjoyed them very much.

S: How did you decide to go to Pratt?

N: That was one of those lucky things. The expectation was that I would go to Buffalo State and become an elementary school teacher, like my mother. I remember, while riding the school bus, having a grim vision of the sameness of my life. Around the same time I became close to the art teacher's daughter, who was a punk thirty years before there were punks. One day she announced she was going to Pratt and I said, That sounds good to me!

I applied with my own money because my parents didn't want me to go to New York. But when I got in they paid for it. They thought education was important and had saved money to send us all to college -- even though, in 1964, in that part of upstate New York, parents tended not to send their daughters to college.

S: What was Pratt like? What were you studying?

N: I went into interior design. I wouldn't have been able to get into the art program, considering my limited art training. As it turned out, I was completely unprepared. I probably would have had a nervous breakdown and flunked out had I not had a roommate, Melody, who came from a similar background and helped calm me down. Interior design wasn't what I expected. It was all mechanical drawing and perspective, and I hated doing it. Fortunately, I had a two dimensional design teacher who liked my drawing, and she and Melody encouraged me to apply to the art program.

S: Did things get better?

N: Again, it was horribly difficult because I'd had so little experience, but gradually I began to understand the language of art. I loved contour drawing -- it seemed like magic -- and I took photography and did well in it. I also began to paint, though it was difficult. The other students were making things that looked like Richard Diebenkorn and Hans Hoffman, and I felt intimidated and

frustrated. What they were doing felt false; I just wanted to paint something of my own. I was sort of stuck all the time and then, somehow, I hit on collage and that made painting possible and unstuck me.

Photography opened things up in other ways. Part of it was being at the age, right around twenty, when you begin to examine yourself and try to figure out where you've come from. In photography I made a book about my family, and my interest in the ordinary and in the vernacular grew out of that project.

S: What was the book?

N: It was a series of photographs matched with letters from my mother. The photographs were of the area we lived in upstate: landscapes, still-lives and portraits of her. The vernacular was in her writing, in the way she described seeing a particular kind of bird in a tree; and it was in the photographs, which took the same ordinary subjects as their content.

S: When did you meet Haim?

N: In my last year at Pratt. He had already graduated and I met him because I'd made a painting that he really liked. He was a bit of an odd character, very intense, with little art books that he carried in his pocket that he was always studying. Haim was the only person I met at Pratt who seemed totally involved in art and artists, and in how and why they made things. He was totally committed to contemporary art.

S: It sounds like Pratt, at that time, in the late 60's, was operating as a traditional art academy, staying within the conventions of the known.

N: That's exactly it -- it was an academy education. You were never encouraged to go to the galleries to see what was going on -- although the galleries were not what they are now -- but Haim was curious and would go.

S: What did you do after Pratt?

N: Haim and I lived in Brooklyn for a year or two and I wound up working at Pratt as a secretary. Now it seems a total joke because I couldn't type. Haim got a job teaching art in an elementary school. They were both pretty horrible jobs. The time after finishing school is the hardest time in the life of a young artist because you have to find your own motivation. I see it all the time with my own students. So it was wonderful to be with Haim then, because our ambitions and interests were so similar.

S: Were you making any work?

N: We both were. I bought an enlarger and made a darkroom in one of the rooms of our apartment and was trying to take pictures. I was under the influence of Edward Weston and was trying to take pictures of ordinary things. One day, upstate, near where I'd grown up, I took a picture of a road and some trees: there was water on the road and it was all very gray. I submitted the picture to a competition for a Pratt alumni show and won. That was the beginning of my own work and I started taking pictures of junk on the ground and on the street, framing things very simply: just one thing in the middle of the frame. And then, in 1971, we moved to New Haven because Haim had gotten into the MFA program at Yale.

S: How did you meet Walker Evans?

N: Evans was teaching at Yale and Haim encouraged me to sit in on his classes. Evans loved my pictures but the other students didn't know what to make of them.

S: Did Evans encourage your interest in the ordinary?

N: I'd already begun to understand that if I were going to make art, I'd have to find my interest in what was in front of me. I no longer believed in the kind of drama that Weston represented. So getting to know Evans and his pictures -- and reading *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* -- helped me gather a number of the threads I'd been looking for.



untitled, 1973; photograph; 5 x 7" (image size)

S: Wasn't Evans quite literary?

N: He was -- and his preoccupation with reading provided me with other clues. In his classes, Evans rarely talked about students' work -- all he talked about was literature, about Flaubert, or Baudelaire, or whomever. I decided I had to read these people, and started on a program to educate myself in literature, reading voraciously for four or five years.

As I read, I began my own investigation into the history of photography, trying to figure out what various writers -- like, for instance, Henry James -- thought of it. I hit on the fact that photography was a vernacular medium and that the snapshot was at its center. Photography, I decided, needed to be used in relation to the everyday rather than in the heightened, dramatic manners of Weston or Steiglitz.

S: Whose aesthetic principles were borrowed from the more traditional arts.

N: Right. It also seemed significant that women were allowed into photography from day one, because it was so new and unformed. That made me feel that it had a history I could participate in, whereas imagining myself in relation to Picasso and Matisse felt nearly impossible.

S: My understanding of Evans is that he loved the vernacular.

N: That's true. I remember once in his class someone came in with a picture of a Model-T Ford -- a lousy picture, poorly seen -- and Evans raved about it. It took me a while to realize that he was raving about the car, not the photograph.

S: How often did you go junking together?

N: We'd go out once a week. I would have preferred to go to flea markets but he liked more natural settings, like the beach, where he could find things worn by time. He had a huge pair of bolt cutters and he'd steal signs and I'd help. It was fun to find things and give them to him. We had the same kind of eye and became friends.

S: What would you look for?

N: I'd always loved old things, but at Yale my relationship to objects began to evolve. I came to understand that there were hierarchies of objects in terms of taste and meaning and in terms of class. I had never felt class-conscious growing up, but at Yale I came to see that society did indeed have a class structure, and that it was reflected in all the things people surround themselves with.

In New Haven we lived a couple of blocks from State Street, where there was a long line of antique stores that were only open on Sundays. I would go every Sunday and look and look and look, and buy furniture and other objects. Our apartment became probably the most beautiful interior I've lived in, and from that I learned, for the first time, that taste, or visuality, can trump money. From then on, having that kind of heightened visual understanding became a huge part of my identity. I considered it a form of intelligence and, since I wasn't much of a speaker, I hoped it would become a means for me to demonstrate my sensibilities.

S: When Haim finished his MFA he got a job teaching at Middlebury College in Vermont.

N: In 1973 we moved to Vermont and I stayed for a couple of years. Middlebury was a spiffy little town, oddly more class-oriented than New Haven had been. We had another charming apartment, and I remember looking out the window and thinking, This is not for me! But the Middlebury years were fantastic because I didn't have to have a job, so I was free to read and to intensify my research into the vernacular roots of photography. I read piles and piles of books.

At the same time, I did immense junking research. We didn't have a car, but there were church-run junk stores nearby, and I would go almost every day and spend hours looking. It was a visual craving. I had no parameters. I just didn't want to see anything boring. I began looking at children's clothing and toys. Anything that was interesting. And interesting meant being able to look at things the way I now look at a sculpture by Charles Ray: looking until you find some seemingly dumb object engendering layer upon layer of thought. It's a kind of looking where you find yourself thinking about what this object is and how it came to exist and why -- about the human desire that put this particular thing into production.

S: Were you already photographing children's clothes?

N: A couple of things were happening. I was beginning to make connections between the objects I'd been seeing in the junk shops and various ideas I'd been absorbing from contemporary art. Haim had been looking into what Douglas Huebler, Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha and other '60s artists were doing. With all of that in mind I began to build a conceptual basis for my own work. Yvonne Rainer's word pieces, which were very simple descriptions of relationships, became important to me and gave me permission to link my own experience to a wider framework of ideas.

At the same time, I'd been struggling with my photographs -- the landscapes had become boring. During a residency at the McDowell Colony, in a pique of frustration, I threw my sweater on the floor and took a picture of it. That image eventually became the basis for a series of photographs of children's t-shirts, each one centered in the camera's frame and shot in black and white on tweed-ish carpet backgrounds. Those images were shown at 100 Acres gallery in New York in 1974.

S: What led you to start teaching?

N: It is hard to believe now, considering the extent to which photography has since pervaded the art world, but in the early '70s there was no place for photography either in the art world or in college curriculums. It wasn't part of the program at Middlebury but students were clamoring for it. In desperation, the administration came to me and asked if I would teach a course. I hated the darkroom so I decided instead to give a course in looking at photographs. I used Beaumont Newhall's book, *Looking at Photographs*, and my own research as the basis for a series of slide discussions, followed by weekly critiques of student work. There were about five or six students and they didn't understand me from Russian. What I was doing was quite radical for that time, because I was trying to get them to look at pictures from catalogues, advertising flyers and mass-market magazines. I wanted them to understand how ubiquitous photography was and how much it was taken for granted. The students were resistant because they only wanted to learn how to dodge and burn, and how to make a blacker black. It was a war for the first few weeks.

S: In 1976 you and Haim separated and you returned to New York.

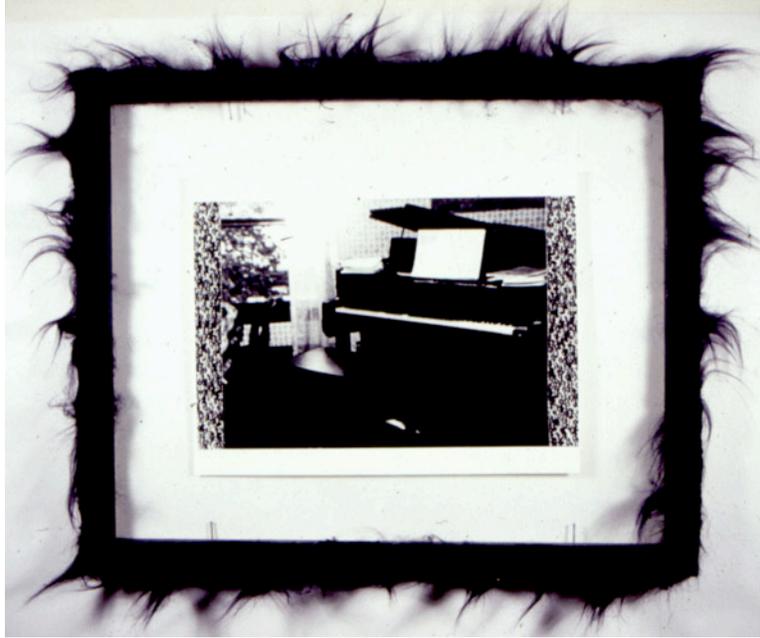
N: I had a friend who was giving up a funky little apartment in Soho, on Sullivan St. The rent wasn't very much, so I moved in and began my life as a day-worker. Waitressing at first, and later working in a flower store, I'd work three or four days a week -- sometimes just two when the money was better -- in order to have enough spare time for my art work.

S: It must have been exciting to be back. Did you go to the galleries and museums?

N: Not that much. I read a great deal and went to thrift stores and spent hours on 14th St, going in and out of the cheap stores there, looking at things. That was my research rather than going to museums.

S: Were you meeting other artists?

N: Soon after I moved to New York a number of people from Middlebury moved down. One of them was Robert Gober, who lived around the corner from me. We had breakfast every morning and talked about art and what we wanted and so on.



untitled, 1978; photograph, glass, wood, fake fur, nails; 19 x 28 x 2"

S: What were you working on?

N: I was in a horrible in between time again. I'd gotten bored with the children's T-shirts and I didn't want to just keep turning them out. I felt lost again in the way that artists get lost, when they can't find the next step. I was becoming dissatisfied with photography, sort of personally hurt, realizing that it wasn't what it was made out to be, that it was just a lie.

I'd been reading lots of fiction and found myself making connections, noticing how much photography and fiction have in common. I began to re-examine the vernacular roots of photography, to think about how it had been used. I remembered the early Kodak slogan: "You press the button and we do the rest." The '70s was the era of the Instamatic so I began using one and found it liberating. The Instamatic allowed me to get over my phobia of taking pictures of people -- no one paid attention -- I was just like any other tourist. I felt free to use the snapshot with my own set of reasons.

But I wanted to do more. I wanted to let the viewer know that I knew that this snapshot was a lie, so I embarked on a vast, complicated process of dissecting the photograph and putting it back together. I did this by re-photographing the Instamatic picture with a 35mm camera, which meant there was some left over space at the sides of the image, the difference in the two formats' dimensions. That empty space I collaged with bits of things before shooting the 35mm picture. I then mounted the re-photographed photograph between two sheets of glass. Finally I surrounded the whole thing with a frame on which I put an assortment of objects. This body of work was truly unwieldy, totally crude and crazy, and I had no audience. I'd get appointments to show them and I'd be clinking up on the subway with my portfolio of glass pictures and I'd hear a clunk, which meant they'd all broken! They were impossible, but even now I see them as a key step in my work. I've always tried to see things from all angles, in a three hundred and sixty degree way, and this was the first time I tried to put that kind of awareness into my work.

S: It's interesting that you were trying to apply that kind of multiplex view to a photograph, to an object predicated on one-point perspective. Also I'm struck by the fact that on a formal level these elaborate, object-laden frames foreshadow your later paintings and sculpture.

N: They were certainly the beginning of that, but their own roots were in the years I spent in thrift stores, trying to think about objects in every possible way.

S: I remember your being impressed with that 1929 book, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*, by Robert and Helen Lynd, which examined life in a small American city during the 20's and 30's.

N: Though it was more scientific and less emotional, *Middletown* was like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. What I appreciated most about *Middletown* was its presentation of individuals and families in their own words. I was interested in how language revealed people's class status.

Just before I got caught up in the glass pictures, I'd decided to take pictures of words, and had started photographing descriptions from my reading. I'd been looking into "B" fiction, and so I used a line from Louis L'Amour: "The coffee was black as sin." The words were like pictures. I used descriptions of characters and their attitudes. For instance, there was something from Kerouac that revealed his attitude towards women. In a way, I was making pictures of pictures of pictures. Years later, I realized they were pictures of pictures of me and of all that I was trying to figure out at the time.

S: Photographs of photographs and photographs of words: both series were about language.

N: I was thinking of them conceptually – thinking of both fiction and images as constructions, as artifice.

S: When you talk about the pictures of words as representing you, I want to ask: What impact did feminism have on you in the '70s?

N: I was torn because I believed in the intellectual values my parents had instilled in me and had no reason to revolt. Having grown up in a farming community, where so much depends on partnering, on everyone doing his or her share, I may have had a less hierarchical view of the relationship between the sexes. I'd not been constrained by gender roles. My mother was a model for me, within the boundaries of her circumstances. The fact that she had independent work and money from her teaching meant that, for me, many of feminism's values were already in place. So, for instance, as I was making the t-shirt photographs, I was not thinking polemically, but I was certainly aware that the boys' shirts were about baseball and cars and the girls' shirts were about princesses and flowers.

From a wider perspective, feminism was enormously important to me for demonstrating how deeply embedded sexism was throughout society; the sad truth is that it still is, even if it is almost impossible to see.

S: Do you have any sense of your work as being gender specific, of its being feminine.

N: I do but it's a very tricky question, because what you might call feminine, or decorative, or hand-made are all positive qualities for me. They connect to a kind of practicality, the ability to not just make do with the materials at hand, but to find truth and meaning in them. Some may dismiss these

qualities as feminine or domestic, but they are really just aspects of life, and they have been the subject of writers and artists for generations -- Proust and Matisse, among them.

S: Framing is a device that is prevalent in your work to this day -- you seem to use it to give order and shape to things. Considering your early involvement with photography, what does framing mean to you?

N: We've been talking about the photographic frame, but when I began working with objects on their own I started to use framing as a grammatical device -- the way a comma or a period is a device: to get the viewers' attention. If I put something in a frame -- say a crummy vase from a five and ten cent store -- I realized I could make viewers stop and look. So framing became both a structural and a conceptual device. It is a kind of formality -- clarity in presentation -- that allows you to present something awkward or messy that would not otherwise be seen or understood. Evans was a master of this. Obama, by the way, is a master of it, too!

S: After the elaborate frames of the glass pictures, the photographs began to disappear and objects themselves became the centerpiece of your work.

N: That's exactly what happened. The more interested I became in the objects I was putting on the frames, and in making the frames themselves, the more I wanted to physically make things. And the urge to paint came back. So I quit the photograph and started putting objects directly on the wall.

S: Did that feel like a radical decision?

N: It seemed related to conceptual art, which was all about thinking. I wanted to make something visual using my ideas. I thought if I could make you look at a scrap of paper on the ground and be specific enough -- in the way that I had come to see the objects I'd found in junk stores -- then that scrap would open you up to vast layers of thinking.

S: Associations. References.

N: Yes. Here again, Charles Ray is a good example: his work, besides being utterly material, is totally conceptual. Flannery O'Connor said that if you choose specifically enough you can just jam everything into that thing, and that's what Ray does. What interested me about conceptual art was that it imagined an experience that was both visual and intellectual. And you could start anywhere, which led me back to the vernacular.

S: Back to the everyday, back to what we all know and use.

N: Yes. I felt I could use the vernacular and if I used it well it would open up whole worlds of meaning.



untitled, 1989; photograph and two drawings in found and custom frames;
26 x 42 " (overall)

S: When did you move back to Brooklyn?

N: Around 1980 I bought a falling down house on Adelphi St for eight thousand dollars. It was a little row house, built in the nineteenth century for workmen at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and I made it beautiful. It was unlivable for at least two years. I spent every free moment working on it, trying to save money to employ people to do what I couldn't do. I had a wonderful studio on the parlor floor.

Gradually I began teaching myself to paint, which meant figuring out what my subject was. The first paintings and drawings were still lifes and architectural interiors of the house itself. Vernacular themes. And I began working with objects by just nailing things straight onto the wall: socks, shoes, rubber balls. I was trying to let the objects speak for me.

S: I remember the walls of your studio being covered with images and objects all over the place.

N: It was a transitional time and I hadn't fully abandoned photographs. Instead of surrounding them with frames I would just treat them as any other object, and pair them up with something else. In a way, I was trying to write a novel using photographs, using them in their entirety against objects. I wanted the images and the objects to refer to one another, to create a bigger picture. But photographs are such strong things that I found them almost impossible to break into. So I began including drawings and paintings into the mix. It took me years, a long lonely time.

S: It wasn't always clear, visiting your studio, which pieces were meant to be art and which weren't.

N: I know. It annoyed some people that I didn't seem to care where anything began or ended.

S: At the same time it was quite wonderful: the wall, or the studio itself, seemed to be the real artwork, and everything was somehow related. What was disconcerting was your tendency to move things around when visitors showed up, saying one arrangement was as good as another.

N: It was a kind of intellectual perversity. I enjoyed presenting people with: “Oh, you don’t like this -- Well, how about that?” As it happens, I’m currently working on some pieces that incorporate a similar kind of choice, though this time the viewer decides.

S: Back then it seemed to some viewers that you just hadn’t figured out what you were doing. But, in your own mind, you were playing a different game – a game about language. Objects were treated like words or sentences and arrangements became like paragraphs or even stories. Nonetheless, this all-over approach didn’t last and you began clarifying boundaries, creating selections.

N: That was framing again. Someone had said, You’ve got to make it easier for the viewer – when all this time I was trying to make it harder. I had thought, If it is hard for me, why shouldn’t it be hard for the viewer? But this person was probably right, and framing became a way of clarifying things.

S: Just to be clear, framing is a metaphor here; not everything had an actual frame around it. You were making specific arrangements of objects.

N: Right. Soon after I began doing that, in 1986, Robert Gober included me in a show at Cable gallery, which was the first show I’d been in ten years.



untitled, 1991; found objects; (dimensions?)

S: What did you show at Cable?

N: There were portrait drawings of Walt Whitman; an arrangement that paired a gray enamel pot and a yellow piece of paper that said: “a yellow dress”; another arrangement with a rusty wheel next to a line of text that said: “he looked at his watch”; and there were a few drawings of chairs and other scenes from my house. Annie Philbin, who was then the director at Curt Marcus’s gallery, brought Curt to the show at Cable, and shortly thereafter he offered me a show.

S: That was when the art world began to take note of your work.

N: The first two shows I had at Curt Marcus gallery, in 1987 and 1989, were essentially of arrangements of objects mounted on the wall. The objects were usually in small groupings of two or three things, some of them framed. Some of the arrangements included objects on the floor. I loved taking a beautiful, but essentially low-class, object, and, by relating it to other objects, revealing its history and its art history. I thought, if I triggered enough visual and narrative associations, that the objects would become meaningful in ways they had never been, and that the arrangements might highlight issues of class and money.

S: Were you thinking about your use of objects in relation to the tradition of the Duchampian found object?

N: I felt I was appropriating the tradition of the found object and using it for my own purposes. I wanted to present objects in a way that preserved their integrity but that also implied their sociological significance. I may have been using cheap, overlooked objects but they were rich in meaning. A cup painted silver spoke volumes about desire – suggesting that silver paint could actually *be* silver in someone's mind. I was interested in the ordinariness of these things and in the roles they played in people's lives. The fact that most of the objects I used were old meant they had histories of use that could be unraveled. I wanted to bring viewers in, to make them work as hard at understanding each object, and the possible threads connecting one object to another, as I had. I wasn't insisting on any one interpretation, I just wanted whatever I made to have a life in the middle space between the viewer and me.

S: This generation of your work appeared at a time when so-called appropriation art was at its height, but while much of that work took mass culture -- and mass-produced objects -- as its subject, your eye was on a different kind of ordinariness. Your objects bore traces of the hands that had made and used them.

N: Sometimes I think of myself as an archaeologist. The objects I work with are not mute and they're not dead. They exist in the realm of story and use, and their use can change over time from the practical to the aesthetic, or back again.

S: Throughout your career, your objects have connected the lives that made and used them to the lives we live now, where they are again playing a part.

N: I rarely think of myself in political terms, but, in fact, I have a strong socialist streak. I am interested in visual leveling, in the fact that visibility has no class. Visual interest and pleasure do not depend on monetary value. My most recent show at Feature, which we will get to, was all about the idea that visual value *exceeds* monetary value. You can call it visual arrogance. Evans had it, too: he took perverse pleasure in making his moneyed viewers look at -- and buy -- pictures of sharecroppers. In my work with objects there are many layers of interest -- from the narrative to the formal to the sociological -- and I have always sought to make these differences equal.

S: With such a commitment to objects, it is curious that for quite a while, from the late '90s to the early '00s, objects virtually disappeared and your work became quite abstract.

N: I was getting tired of using objects to speak for me. In art there is always a kind of ebb and flow. You get comfortable with something and then you need to change, to let it go. I knew I wanted to use my hand more, but I didn't quite know how. Again it was that terrifying artistic question of how to continue.



Figure #3, 1994; wooden blocks, colored chalk, paint, pencil; 69 x 28 x 23"

S: How do you deal with that not-knowing?

N: It can be scary, but I've come to trust in what Flannery O'Connor called the habit of art -- to trust in the practice of art. I have always used the studio as a place for intuitive adventure. Anything that happens, even a tape measure falling on the floor, is fraught with possibility. Photography taught me a lot about observation. So in the midst of this crisis I began to observe the studio, which is usually somewhat of a mess. I noticed some small blocks of wood, square pieces of cut-up two-by-fours, and putting them together in a rough grid I came up with a shape: a square made up of nine three-inch square blocks, with a second layer underneath. The resulting shape worked for me both as an object and as an abstraction. I came up with this format about fifteen years ago and I'm still happily using it.

S: Working with blocks seemed to allow art and art history into your work in a new way. It was as though modern art history, specifically modernist painting, became a found object for you, a material for you to reinvent.

N: When I gave up working with objects, art became interesting to me in a whole new way. I began to educate myself in all kinds of visual art in much the same way that I'd immersed myself, years before, in literature.

S: In the early '90s you built many sculptures out of those three-inch square blocks.

N: I made an intuitive decision to build big, rectangular shapes out of lots of little blocks. I modeled them after refrigerators – which gave them a familiar and domestic size, scaled to the human body, but left them almost completely abstract. I painted them in various shades of white and covered their surfaces with areas of drawing and fabric.

S: How did you become an antiques dealer?

N: I moved upstate, to Jefferson, NY, in 1990. I was making a modest living from my art work and I'd had enough of New York. But shortly thereafter the art market entered a recession and I was left living in an extremely rural area with no means of support. The only jobs were at Burger King and I'd had enough of waitressing. I did, though, have a talent for finding objects and so I began a business based on that. At first I took space in a multi-dealer shop in Oneonta and tried selling things at flea markets. It was horribly difficult but I managed to attract a small following. I knew that Hudson, NY, which was about an hour and a half from where I lived, was becoming a mecca for antiques, and that people from New York were going there to buy, so I gathered up two or three friends and together we rented a space and called it Fern. It was much better having a shop than being an itinerant salesperson. But after a year or two of compromising with my partners on aesthetics and other matters, I opened a place of my own named Henry, at 348 Warren St., where I have been in business for more than nine years.

S: We've been calling it junking, but what is the process of shopping for Henry really like? Has it evolved over time?

N: Junking is the most incredible visual experience, rich with visual, political and sociological information. I always feel that there is something necessary about it that far exceeds its practical importance. Until five years ago, I thought it was more exciting than going to museums. Now it's becoming harder to find the kind of things I want -- perhaps they've begun to enter the mainstream. So while it is less stimulating than it once was, and while I have to keep looking farther afield, it is still in my blood, and one of my great pleasures -- even when I don't find anything.

My big challenge when I go shopping for Henry is to stay on top of the socio-economics of the retail world, which means that I constantly have to relearn and readjust my business. These days, in order to survive, I need to attract more well-heeled buyers, so I need more expensive items. But it's hard to find these things in my old haunts especially when the path in my brain leads more to totally inane, cheap, things.



Installation view at Henry, Hudson, NY, 2008

S: When you go junking do you have particular things you're looking for, or is it more free-floating?

N: Mostly it's a free-form visual experience and that's when I like it most – when I can go out without pre-conceived ideas. What's frustrating about having a business is that I can't just buy anything I like. If I have X, Y and Z in the shop I have to buy things that will be compatible, which puts a kink in my visual experiments. Here's an example: my favorite thing in the shop right now is a set of plastic fish – they're cartoon-like and sculptural, with bulbous features, little smiles and big bulging eyes. They've been hand-painted and there are three of them -- red, yellow and blue – and they're straight out of the '70s. I think they're hilariously funny and exquisitely beautiful, but it's almost impossible to create an audience for that type of thing, unless someone is already willing. They are extraordinary art objects and would be the perfect decoration for almost any interior. But it is an uphill battle. If I had a Jean Prouve table in the shop to put them on, they would be snapped right up! But, since I don't have the Prouve table, I still have the fish!

S: As with art, it is a matter of creating, or seducing, an audience.

N: Right, that's the question: how to seduce an audience? I never feel I'm any good at it, but I keep trying, often kicking and screaming the whole way!

S: You've lived now in three different houses in and around Jefferson -- how has living in them and working on them affected you?

N: Houses and interiors have played a huge role in my life. Though they've taken a lot of my time, working on them has been a vital part of my art work. They've taught me a great deal about space and light and color. And because I've never had any money, but have always wanted to have art, my houses have taught me about looking. It is because of them that I learned how to find some bit of trash on the street -- something my eye told me was beautiful -- and to create a setting for it that transformed trash into art. Henry comes out of that experience.

My houses have been laboratories where I've had visual encounters that I wouldn't have had any other way. For instance, for several years I lived in a barely renovated barn, which sat in the middle of a meadow like a big boat. During that time, I became absolutely convinced that Persian carpets had been invented in response to the sight of meadows filled with wildflowers in the spring. My discovery was instantaneous and visceral and was not based on art history. This was not something I'd read about, it was something I saw!

S: After the large refrigerators, and quite a few other wooden block pieces, your work changed again, and you began using boxes -- mostly found boxes, which you'd hang on the wall with their open side facing out, and whose interiors you filled up or covered in a variety of ways.

N: When I moved into the barn, which was my second upstate house, it was a total wreck. I was still traveling to flea markets and it was a difficult time money-wise. The irony was I had a three thousand square foot building but no studio because my energy had all gone into carving out a satisfying living space. There was a little, four-inch wide, half wall between the kitchen and living spaces, and, one day, I put a box up there and thought, Maybe this is my work. I'd lie on the couch for hours looking at the box on the half wall and, for a while, that half wall became my studio.

The first boxes were found wooden boxes. In my mind they were part of the lexicon of Picasso and Braque's found objects and I was also thinking of Joseph Cornell. I was trying to re-invent that vernacular, to make it contemporary in some way. At first I thought about these boxes in terms of architecture; but as time went on I wanted less of that and I began instead to think of them as paintings, as surfaces to paint.

S: Over the next few years, as they evolved into three-dimensional paintings, or very painterly sculptures, you immersed yourself in art history, especially Braque, Morandi and Japanese art.

N: Yes, and I began exploring the decorative. I was trying to understand what decoration really was, feeling that I wanted to go all out in that way. And I was thinking about issues of scale -- specifically, how to make scale project from within a very small piece.

Those early box sculptures were transitional pieces. Because they were open rectangular forms, they allowed me to think abstractly, yet they remained boxes, physical things. These days I'm going down that path again, to a place where forms -- squares and rectangles and so on -- meet the world of objects and things, to a place where the abstract and the physical intertwine.

I've come to think of the boxes and blocks as both material and subject matter. But when I began work on the first box pieces, years ago, they seemed like a peculiar invention, perversely interweaving years of observation in the object world with what I knew of art history. I was stealing from art history, and putting it to my own use.



Blue box, Yellow line, 2004; wooden box, cardboard boxes, charcoal, flashe acrylic and house paint; 13 x 8 x 8"

S: Stealing sounds a little risky.

N: It had that potential. You might say I was visually stealing Donald Judd's box -- not for his reasons, which I understood, but didn't necessarily care about -- and making it work with my own set of ideas. This kind of stealing is something that happens with young artists, and it only becomes dangerous when what you are stealing is not an idea but a product. Speaking as a teacher, I get frustrated when young people don't know the difference.

I gave a talk recently to a group of art students and I spoke about Douglas Huebler, Judd, Carl Andre and Joan Jonas, and how seeing their work early on, when I was still making photographs, gave me permission to take these ordinary things -- a box, a metal plate on the floor, a simple object -- and use them for my own ends. That, after all, is what they had done. They gave me permission to visually steal, to use standard visual forms in relation to my own objects and ideas. What I wanted then -- and what I still want -- was to make an art object that can be thought about in a multi-layered way, in which idea piles upon idea.

S: Earlier you mentioned that Charles Ray's work can be seen in this layered way, and I'm reminded that he said his intention, when he was working on a recent sculpture, was to make something so real that it became abstract, and so abstract that it became real.

N: That is absolutely, totally, my interest in art. And I believe this exchange of intellectual ideas can be found in anything -- if one looks closely enough -- and in the ordinary particularly. That is why I see my interest in art as being inherently sociological.

S: Along with the boxes, found objects have come back into your work in recent years. The most striking example might be the rocking chair piece you showed in the exhibition, *Retail*, at Feature.

N: It's been somewhat of a surprise to be working with objects again. It has developed out of the back and forth between Henry and my art work. Occasionally it happens that I buy something, thinking it is for the shop, and before even putting it in the car, I discover that it has jumped categories, that it has gone from being a Henry object to something I want to investigate for my art.

The rocking chair was a modern, mid-20th century, tubular steel chair, which the manufacturer saw fit to change into a rocker by adding wooden runners. It was a beautiful and puzzling object, an oxymoron, really. Someone decided to take this ultimate modern object and marry it to an idea of comfort from another age. It was a crude version of an idea the Eames's also had when they put rockers on their own modernist chairs. I took it to Henry and put it in the window and knew instantly that nobody would buy it, that it had jumped categories. It lived for a number of years in my studio before I figured out what to do with it. Eventually I draped a piece of raw silk, which I had drawn on with black ink, over its back; the resulting intervention felt less like an addition than a completion.

The rocking chair piece is an example of the way that I interweave history, art history and the everyday. This chair had begun life as a mass-produced object, originating in an idea of modernity developed by Corbusier and others. Its design was then adapted for the masses, for whom it was made in factories and sold at local furniture stores. At the same time, this chair is in a direct line from Duchamp's readymades -- though he would roll over in his grave if he knew about it. And while I've had to make it more retinal, to use Duchamp's word, in order for it to be seen as a readymade, what I am doing is stealing from art history and raising the ante. Art often comes about in reaction to other art, and I find pleasure and humor in building on, and contradicting, what has come before. Good art is full of contradictions.



Covered chair, 2004; chair, silk, ink; 32 x 30 x 21"

S: *Retail* was an ambitious exhibition. How would you describe it?

N: I wrote the following for a talk I gave recently:

“Retail was a combination of my shop, Henry, and my art. One idea was to confuse and complicate commercial gallery space. Goods from Henry were for sale at Henry prices. My art prices, Hudson, my dealer at Feature, had established. There were overlaps, hybrids and bargains. I also wanted to bring studio space into the picture, further complicating things with not-quite-sculptures. These became tables for the Henry objects. Meanwhile there were also hand-made display tables, which I designed for other Henry objects. Some Henry objects were meant to go out of the show as they were sold. Others, visually important to the display, would remain for the four weeks of the show. “

Retail was a redo of my first show at Curt Marcus in which my interest had been to make a dent in hierarchical ways of thinking about art. A friend of mine says that art is only for elites, that it requires a specialized interest and sensibility -- but I don't think that's true, and proving that it isn't was my real motivation.

The job at Henry is to present objects that are beautiful and have visual value regardless of price, and that is what I wanted to do at the gallery: to flatten the hierarchies that divide art from non-art, to dirty the white walls. I wanted the experience of visuality to be what hit you, like a blast in the eye, when you walked in the door. I wanted to create an overload of visual information.

Doing my research for *Retail* it became clear that Braque, Picasso and Matisse, for all the differences in their thinking, found their visuality in the kind of shop I now own. There is a long history of this kind of search for, and use of, beauty.

S: Do you worry about confusing your audience? Or do you think of confusion as a positive value, as bringing together things normally kept apart?

N: It is hard for me to be fully aware of the kind of confusion I create. I live in a world without categories; for me, confusion is exciting. But I understand that other people are made uncomfortable by it.

S: Has teaching changed you?

N: Being quite introverted it has forced me to have more of an outside, to have a public self.

Teaching has also forced me to think about art in an altogether different way, using a kind of critical language that I'd earlier hated. Basically I feel that the language of what is now called 'theory' constitutes a kind of intellectual class-ism: 'theory' has become a specialized language, used only in a certain range of texts, and unintelligible unless you're fluent in it. I've learned how to get around a

bit in the 'theory' world, but I still believe that good fiction deals with the same ideas in a broader, more accessible way. I remember years ago challenging a philosopher-artist friend of mine, Jean-Philippe Antoine, saying I thought it was possible to think to the same depth without all that excess of language. Now I'm not so arrogant. But I do still see 'theory' as a product, as something that can be used as a defense, rather than as neutral information.

Having said that, there is also a part of teaching that I love and that keeps me in touch with my younger self. I think of it as the arrogance of youth – and it is the nerve that encourages young artists to assert their right to think whatever they want. The arrogance of youth is part of the charm of being an artist, because it never really goes away. It is, in the end, one of the many complications of the artist's life and a driving force in art making. It is the arrogant pleasure of ideas -- the arrogance of taking an idea and creatively misusing it. I think every artist does it: Picasso and Matisse did it; and Duchamp did it all his life.

S: Have art schools become like factories, rushing students through without helping them to think independently?

N: Art education, at many schools, seems to be caught between traditional practices, like painting and sculpture, and more recent developments, based on Duchamp and conceptual art. What worries me is that students are not learning that these are different sides of the same coin.

S: Considering that the art of the twentieth century was all about avant-gardes, what do you make of its institutionalization in museums and schools?

N: Walker Evans used to rant and rage about how much he hated museums. Hearing him, I'd wonder how else I could learn about art. Now, at the age of sixty-two, I understand what he meant: museums and other institutions, including schools, commercialize the intimate experience of the individual looking.

S: Do you mean they commercialize individual experience – that they turn it into a product?

N: I do. I think 'individual' is the unspoken word in art making and art viewing -- in the way that 'retail' is the unspoken word in the gallery world. Art is every bit about what it has always been about: an individual, whether an artist or a viewer, looking. Since the '50s and '60s when it became an enormous source of subject matter, popular culture has come to be seen as the primary arena for artists to perform art in. That used to make me angry, because it felt like a lie. It made it seem as though the rest of life didn't exist. As I say, art is made by individuals for individuals. Just think of: Andy Warhol; Charles Ray; Jeff Koons; Thomas Hirschorn; or anyone. Some may say this is a given, a well-known cliché. But I'm not so sure. I feel that the individual is a taboo subject in art -- and beauty, by the way, is another.

I suppose I've become something of a ranter myself! But acknowledging that I am an individual, and having that be a part of the art I make, is very important to me. I feel like a Baptist minister, pointing out to his people that they are not doing what they say they are doing. An artist may be pointing out aspects of the culture, but it is still the artist as a single, specific person that is doing the pointing.



Retail, 2005-2006; plywood, metal shelving, brackets, glass shelving, wooden shelving, cardboard boxes, house paint, flashe acrylic paint; 91 x 36 x 26"

Copyright 2009 Steel Stillman