

Fixin To

By

Jonathan Quinn Nowell

B.F.A. Mississippi State University, 2013

Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, in partial fulfillment of
the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Athens, Georgia

2017

Abstract

My name is Jonathan Nowell and the following words are in service and defense of my thesis as a master of fine arts candidate in the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia at Athens. I was unable to purchase a thesis paper online that could faithfully characterize my essence so these words are authentic, heartfelt, and agonizingly constructed. Part Manifesto, Part Freeform poetic filler, *Fixin To* serves as a raw, if not supremely incomplete index of thought orbiting around my work as a visual artist.

I began my work as a graduate student in the fall of 2014. It is now the spring of 2017. So much has changed since I began graduate school in 2014. I have grown in ways I never would have expected and in the weeks leading up to graduation I am just now recognizing this. I have grown as an artist and more importantly as a man. I still believe in manhood after all, despite the dull sway of the institution to neutralize masculinity. I began this process with a mouth full of chewing tobacco, unmarried, jacked up on amphetamine salts and filtering a steady stream of ontological arguments in preparation of a grand battle of intellects that never came and I'm glad.

I work out of necessity. The need to express ideas and extend my consciousness through materials, objects, and images is ever-present. As an artist, I see the opportunity to create a phenomenological experience which is not only directly proportionate to my individual understanding of the (infinite) Universe, but also bound to the natural and ostentatious terms by which it is informed. The consequence of this desire often represents itself in confused, cryptic, and offhanded ways. I find each artistic object to contain sentiments of utility and innovation as well as rebellion and pretense. A form of consolidation must exist for me to process any manifestation of my intellect or to gain leverage over the complexity of an idea. By observing the built environment and participating in its proliferation I strive to posit a unique system of operations whereby history, physicality, and real confusion come together to form something poetic and satiable. A dialogue ensues wherein existential and or ontological

The seven-acre garden that flanked the shack was a veritable picture of Eden. It had everything; grapes, watermelons, fig trees, peas, peanuts, everything. At the front porch of the shack was a high fire gas kiln Poppy built and the back became his workshop/ tractor storage with the most amazing oil soaked dirt floor imaginable. The shack was where we would load up the truck to go fishing, round up crickets from up under the board , then clean the fish under the plum tree next to it when we got back, feeding the eyeballs and guts to the cat.

My interest in art began in carving, but was always tied to the vernacular structures I found myself up in and dreaming about their evolution. I would take solid blocks of clay and carve away at them with knives and hammers, usually reducing the mass to nothing. As I got older, my inclination to sculpt advanced. I spent my time at school excavating a drainage ditch that ran across the playground separating the fields from the equipment, landscape from structure. Several yards deep, chipping away at the golden banks of the dirt with an assortment of modified scissors, my assistants and I managed to quarry an expanse so substantial that eventually the boy scouts were brought in to construct a wooden bridge across our operation. My aim was not to conjure something, it seems, but rather to commit to an action and remain faithful to it day after day. I was playing out in my mind the mythology of the sculptor, getting rid of the weakest parts of the mass in order to arrive at what is most essential.

I have always been fascinated by structure. A dock, a fort, a bridge, a tractor, a sentence, an institution; any and all things reliant upon a system of parts adhering to a functional or static logic in order to exist is of varying interest to me. Whether it be fleeting or persistent, I jump at any opportunity to build, equip, or retrofit something.

Sometimes, most times, this proclivity serves to hinder my progress as a free agent in the world and enters in at inopportune times. In Le Corbusier's seminal essays "Vers une architecture"(Toward an Architecture) he provides three reminders to architects. He categorizes these reminders into Volume, Surface, and Plan. Of Plan he states:

"The plan is the generator. Without plan, you have lack of order and willfulness. The plan holds in itself the essence of sensation. The great problems of tomorrow, dictated by collective necessities, put the question of 'plan' in a new form. Modern life demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan, both for the house and for the city."

Furthermore, as my interest in structure has led me to pursue various occupations in the building trades, and attempt various construction projects of my own, I have come to the realization that all impressive feats of architecture or art were only made possible by use of some external (usually temporary) means of armature or staging in order to gain access or leverage in a rarified spatial context. Brunelleschi's dome(The Duomo) was only made possible by inventing a three-speed hoist with a system of gears, pulleys, screws, and driveshafts, powered by oxen turning a wooden tiller. It used a custom rope 600 feet long and weighed over a thousand pounds. His design featured a revolutionary clutch system that could reverse direction without having to turn the oxen around. He went on to create a 65-foot-tall crane with a series of counterweights and hand screws to move loads laterally once they'd been raised to the correct height. Even so, I am less inclined, if not only less able, to speak about technology or building science as it pertains to my work. Instead, I am more interested in the static, matter-of-fact-ness of structures and platforms, like the staging designed by Michelangelo in order to access the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

As a carpenter, I loathed putting up and breaking down scaffolding. The repetition of it was excruciatingly predictable, boring, and essential to completing the job. It sometimes required weeks of inching along the perimeter of large Victorian homes inspecting and repairing soffits and fascias. The actual carpentry involved in most of these tasks is usually very minimal, the labor consists mostly of hauling, erecting, stabilizing, ascending, and descending the scaffolding and in most cases ignoring basic safety concerns in order to speed up work. The rare consolation to this phase of historic home preservation was the moment an irregular hole in a soffit board was discovered and needed to be patched, at which point I would eagerly intercede and commence to roughing out the most carefully rendered peanut shaped pieces of Douglas Fir ever to be whittled at such heights. During my time as a sub-contract laborer I became very familiar with not only the guts of a house and the language of a trade but also of the sacred geometry and truth claims of the “pipe staging” commonly used in construction in the United States. For the longest time I would get so frustrated with the fact that no matter how well the crew would try to brace several flights of staging, the whole of the tower would sway, sometimes over a foot or so over axis. I thought to myself “if this scaffolding wasn't so shitty it would be solid and therefore stable and therefore fit for honest and careful work. Over time I came to understand that the sway was actually a sort of clever biomimetic solution to the temporal nature of the staging. Because the pipe staging is meant to be moved frequently and adapt to the terrain underfoot it is necessary that it be flexible, like a human body, and to trust in its design. This trust lends itself to good work, to concentration even in seemingly questionable or windy circumstances.

I saw this parable made manifest most visibly during a brief stint installing stained-glass windows in a church sanctuary. Each fused-glass section we installed weighed nearly fifty pounds and was valued at about \$10,000 per the \$90,000 total job cost. Under the tutelage of Bob, the installation foreman, I learned the ways of scaffold-yoga and the balance of imbalance. Each panel had to be piggy backed up six flights of single-wide pipe staging by hand. Through a series of succinct and methodical maneuvers we successfully installed the glass and were able to view it as a completed artwork. I learned to trust my hands, strength, and concentration and in the end it payed off.

In the Fall of 2015, bogged down with the fruitlessness of my experience as a graduate student in art, I sought to use my time and resources to facilitate the design and fabrication of something useful and therefore clandestine within the strictures of academia . By building a deer stand I was able to spend the months leading up to hunting season with intense mission and purpose. Every detail, from the fabrication to the hardware, the portability to the safety and functionality of the stand captivated my imagination. During the construction of the piece I was able to consider not only the practical implementation of this piece of equipment but also its implications within the realm of human emotions, perception, and the broader sculptural landscape. In essence, the tripod deer stand, entitled "Power Structure" can be seen as a pedestal. Definition1. the base or support on which a statue, obelisk, or column is mounted. 2. a position in which someone is greatly or uncritically admired. Similar to the ancient function of the pedestal, the deer stand serves as the means through which the subject or action, in my case the hunter, is elevated to the place of privilege in order to project

upon the landscape an enunciation of society's moral authority . A hunt is mostly waiting. Thoughts of the hours spent lazing about scaffolding come to mind. The tripod is allowed to sway. Designed with this concept in mind, it features three distinct anchor points welded to the side of the main platform. The anchors allow for steady attachment of ratchet straps that can be tethered to nearby trees and or ground, providing the necessary amount of stability while remaining light weight and flexible. All kinds of preparation, planning, and tracking goes into skillful hunting, but the act of hunting is mostly a refusal of self. The hunter just waits and witnesses, hopeful for the opportunity to act. When the opportunity to act is afforded, an irreducible charge of truth and beauty leaves the hands and mind of the hunter. Life is taken and life is sustained. This is performance art in the highest sense of the term. In eschewing the milk and water pseudo-philanthropism of dialogic art, the action of hunting encapsulates the multitude of experiences of human life at multiple critical interstices while feeding a family and reinforcing positive objective truth . Alas, dualities of thought emerge and art happens. The art critical dialogue is confirmed or subverted depending on the will of the viewer.

Its nice to have something to chip away at. I guess that is what whittling is all about. A way with words. Away with words. Tombstone Delilah never noticed negligence . It was practice for something more essential, something less transmuted. After all, all the blood is filtered through the eyeball. Something an artist would say. New ways of applying pigment. Skin in the fight. Invisible barriers to invisible success. Things to think about after you run out of things to consider. Ive heard it called potential. The chilly stillness that I have been craving. And places to go. And people to love. And believes in

God. The sweetness of the truth as it leaves my tongue hovers bitterly in the air around your non-believing.

Hunting Season came and went. days and weeks up in the trees just to gain perspective in the purest mechanical sense. It seems so unattainable at this point. My vision is blocked in so many ways, but I've never broken a bone.

I am becoming.

What am I being?

On being. Time. Remembering through making.

Making out of a surplus. Material Surplus. Doubt Surplus. Idea Surplus. Built Surplus. Love Surplus. Confusion Surplus. Eternal Surplus.

The cause of all suffering. Innate Love for the center of the earth.

The scrapes on my hands take the longest to heal. I remember this about my grandfather. His hands possessed a terrain so interesting that it caught my attention as a young boy. He took me fishing. He'd be putting a worm on the hook and id be little asshole and jerk the hook and it would catch in his hand and I learned patience.

I learned sculpture as a way of living. Its better to grow things. To cultivate all things for the betterment of a given set.

Fixing a broken thing. they call it bricolage. But if its going in the museum its gotta be fancier than that. Its gotta be cherry carved with fine swiss steel, mounted on a steady tube, derived from the departments old forklift. Welded to a thing and then cut off and ground back. Chosen for its sturdy constitution. Its gotta be stolen marble polished over 30 percent and the marble pattern matched to the cherry log. The giant Kombucha bottle embedded as good as it can be serves as a codex and as a guarantee. I definitely didn't find it that way. I didn't have somebody else put it there. i knew it would be funny and that I could distract you with it. I could make a gravity bong with it and i didn't not do that.

Eternal tarpaulin. Nouveau Riche. Pretense and prejudice. An uphill climb, where it hurts. And you never get there. The law of diminishing returns. American Serrengeti. Freestyle nanny state. The gi bill got us here. Now were on our own. Blue flame. You could teach yourself if you were brave. You could watch all the youtube clips. Save up until you could afford it. Not buy stuff at the gas station. My friend went to war when he was seventeen.

I want to be the kind of person who does push ups.

I want to be the kind of person who appreciates pleasant things and doesn't ache.

I want to carve a marble arch to the house and the stairs and the roof and the angles and the layers. I want it to fit in with the landscape and not be too far from some good timber. Some good trees to climb up in and check out the wildlife. Ill sit up there a while and think about the things we ought to be doing. Sort them things out and then notice something moving. During hunting season this will result in an adrenaline high and a breach of the layer that separates the living from the eternal.

I want plenty of space to make things. I don't know where those things will go but I want a very flat wooden floor for one thing and a very flat concrete floor for welding and other things. Put everything on casters so we never have to choose. never have to commit. I want a well positioned roll up door big enough to back most trucks in and pneumatic air lines that drop down next to the electrical. It would be nice if the ceiling was old timber framing and painted white or old iron trusses painted light blue. A wooden porch that wraps around and stuff growing all around and in between. A swing. A place to carve giant logs with a chainsaw and a place to park several atvs.

Now I need some money. This has been real cute and all but reality waits just around the corner of the next few weeks. My research. Well, I can take what I have learned about making things and become an expert. Know one can take away my knowledge of the material.

I need someone to handle my emails and to advise me on where to place my efforts. I will work in the free market for a time, long enough to gain the capital necessary to invest my earnings. Then I will take a percentage of those earnings and put them back into art. I will hire an accountant but i will do all the yard work. I will make

things that are not art for money and try my very hardest to make the client happy and to increase there trust in mankind and in humanity which are the same thing.

Big large timbers. Ones I could never find and probably could not afford. These sorts of things are handed down or awarded to those who set out to dismantle an old building. This is something i have noticed.

Reading Faulkner from a tree stand and nothing came into range. Finished two beers and had to pee. The hunt was over.

Dinners ready boo. Thats what she calls me. And I jump up immediately.

The work became relational, better yet, it became approachable, better yet it became transcendent. Ive gone too far. This is curbed through radical physical exertion. I run to the studio. I figure something out. I run home. I drive to the studio. I pick up dumbbells and squeeze. I remember where I left off. I sand the thing and sweep the floor.

This idea of

Attached is

This idea that

Attached is

Ive attached

And the sun came out

And it was a metaphor

A harsh transition

An Arch

A hidden city

A confluence of influence

Marshland

Horses in the Ocean

Pigs on the Beach

The Fat Man in the woodshop who cant reach the on/off switch and blames the world and waits for someone to come by and save him.

The Fat Man in the office who stands up to work but sits down to eat and hides behind children, the fat man in all of us.

Come back to your breath. Focus on your breathing. Stop breathing. Start back breathing. Do this several times and then do something else. Read a page. How does it feel to meditate?

Misplaced precision 2017. Oil on pants on cotton duck. Game winner decoys. Truck bed liner, Slipcast ceramic. Objective Utility device. Archiform prophecy. bean Pole. Me Bacchus. Optional Structural Device. Towards a new architecture. Bohemian. Liturgy.

Everything I know about myself. a few other things. False culture. Moving forward. Welding. Sewing. Shelf design. Sculptural attachment. Stone method. Obelisk Archetype. Shoulder Mount. Barrel Chest. Straight Lines. Static stump. Repeat.

Need to go fishing

Bring a cane pole
and some sausage
grease hinges
be thorough
make a stone
dark soil
am reborn
Bathed in natural silence
Cleansed of differing opinions
Black powder in the distance
Listless spectral glitter
Highway 15 on the way home.

Im embarrassed of the poetry. Embarrassed to be seen. Make work your identity and you can hide for a lifetime or until you're too old to remember and everyone is dead. Lately I've been listening to lots and lots of podcasts. Nearly a decades worth of chatting consumed over the course of twelve months. Hours upon hours of the human voice soothes my yearning for community. It leaves me with loads to talk about but the desire not to do so. I heard about a tribe in Guyana who never talk to someone from farther than a couple feet away. They speak very softly and its not because jaguars are in the area. Or maybe it is.