

Matt Browning at the Whitney Biennial



Margo Vansyngel, 13 Mar. 2017

Sometimes playing hard to get works. Case in point: Seattle artist Matt Browning. Since graduating with a degree in fiber art from the University of Washington in 2007, the conceptual multimedia artist has been carving out more time to study for an MFA at University of British Columbia, intentionally leaving less space and time to show his work. Which makes it all the more surprising that he was selected to take part in the prestigious Whitney Biennial exhibition in New York, which opened yesterday.

"It's been weird," he says dryly. "I had to buy new clothes for all these openings."

Although he doesn't claim to be an academic, Browning has a scholarly streak. On a bright Monday afternoon in a Capitol Hill bar, drinking beer and coffee simultaneously, Browning delves into Deleuze, critical race and gender theory and describes our Post-Fordist condition in a soft-spoken waterfall of thought. I ask what he's working on right now and he launches into his recent attempts to melt beach glass and pennies to create "weird gestural spheres" as a thought exploration into currency, chains of production, sacrificial metals and negative energy. "This is a recent process, and I'm still wrapping my head around it," Browning explains. "So this won't be on view at the Whitney." Instead, he says, the work he'll show is from a series he started a few years ago, a set of 10 wood carvings that look like a grid of interlocking chain links.

City Arts: Why carving?

Matt Browning: I started wood carving a long time ago, and I'm particularly interested in the technique of Whittling Whimseys, a trick style of carving that was popularized during the Great Depression and often employed by folks who were out of work and traveling, producing objects for amusement or in exchange for meals. The chain links came out of that. These were the works that I laid out on the table and hung on the walls of my apartment when the curators of the Whitney came to visit me last summer.



How did the curators find you? You have no personal website or gallery representation.

I was fortunate enough to be recommended by someone. I don't show much and I'm not an active user of social media platforms and certainly not as a means of promoting my work.

That retreat is also visible in your work and exhibitions. You once moved all your sculptures into a corner of the gallery. How will you be unassuming in a massive institution like the Whitney?

The works have ways to hide right where they are. I'll break up the sculptures in groups of one, two, three, and four instead of a long series of 10 works. Also, they're works of 18 inches square that'll go on very tall walls. The scale itself implies some self-effacing. The form does too: For many viewers, the grid is so legible that you move past it more quickly.

The 2017 installment of the Biennial is billed as "edgy art in tumultuous times." Do you fall into that category?

It's a funny sales pitch for the show. But yes, I think my work has always spoken to current conditions—it just doesn't scream it. Even though my work doesn't overtly contain political imagery, it's related to contemporary conditions of labor and even epistemological questions. How do we know the things we know and how does that affect our economy and exploitation?

How do you convey those ideas through the carvings?

The sculptures have two modes: a collapsed and an expanded presentation, or showing and shipping mode. For me, this ties into contemporary problems in our labor markets, with humans becoming a less and less important part of the global supply chains. It's also about the ways in which we shift in and out of expressive modes as professional performance in our neoliberal society. I also think about the carvings as an open-ended edition. That means their singular value is unclear. If ever there will be someone buying it, they'll never know how many will be made. So, in a way, much of my iterative works trouble both classical and neoclassical conceptions of value, from fancy prices to the law of diminishing returns. I also think my work does take a counter position to a certain neoliberal expressive mode, if only due to the fact that they are unassuming and serial, and to the fact that I've tried to de-emphasize showing my work. I'm interested in the totality of production, and less in exhibition.

Why do you want to de-emphasize showing your work?

I immediately started exhibiting work right after graduating from the University of Washington, perhaps at the expense of studying with others. Shortly after, I started to feel like I wasn't covering what I found interesting about art. So I scaled back my shows and started doing more group study—both within TARL [an "unprofessional collaborative group" started in 2009 that mounted projects and exhibits at locations that occasionally included Browning's Seattle living room], but also as a member of Autonomous University, a reading group in Seattle that I'm a part of. Starting to tutor at Path with Art and doing a residency at Banff Centre also made me realize I wanted to pursue studying, and maybe even teaching. The people I've met there have spurred me to get my MFA at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where I live during the week. I should graduate in late summer after a major paper and group exhibit. For me, teaching is a way of existing within the art world. In addition to being incredibly rewarding, teaching is a great way of reducing the urgency to sell your work.

Although you haven't been focusing on exhibiting, you're now included in this big deal exhibition. What do you think it'll mean for your career?

The effects of being in the Whitney show that I can imagine beforehand are likely the least interesting things that might come from it. Of course, I'm thrilled, and it would be disingenuous to say that I don't want these things to happen to my work. What I'm mostly excited about is that all the artists in the exhibition are very close to each other in age and have been making work to varying degrees of professional visibility for more or less the same amount of time. I think this could lead to interesting friendships and intellectual relationships, or even art historical accords that could be drawn in the future. It could be the start of interesting conversations with people or the beginning of a group effort. Maybe it'll be a misunderstanding of the work or even the beginning of nothing. At least it'll give me the excuse to be in New York for a week.

Photos courtesy of the artist.

by [Margo Vansynghel](#) March 13, 2017