



KRIS DOUGLAS IN CONVERSATION WITH  
DAVID LEFKOWITZ



Fig. 1  
The Lefkowitz boys  
circa 1976

KD: How does this exhibition reflect your overall artistic practice?

DL: When I was first approached about showing at the Rochester Art Center, I wanted to figure out how to present examples from several bodies of work from the past dozen years or so in a way that would cohere not just as a survey but as a kind of walk-through conversation among the different artworks and galleries about the ideas I've focused on over that time.

In a nutshell those include an exploration of the overlap of direct sensory experience of the world and the multiple layers of mediation through which that experience is filtered, the imaginative re-use of residual by-products of a global consumer economy, and a deconstruction of/meditation on the exhibition space itself- the pleasures and pitfalls of the white cube. I think the exhibition has managed to do that pretty well.

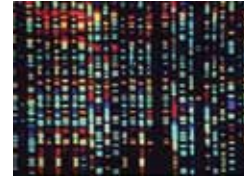


Fig. 2  
Computer rendering of a  
fragment of the human  
genome  
2009  
Photograph

KD: The title – *Other Positioning Systems* – this, to a certain extent, is a play on global positioning systems, or GPS. When you address “position” and “system” this becomes a summation of many important conceptual aspects inherent in your work—the represented, the located, the created vs. the real, etc. Can you describe your ideas surrounding the “other” method of positioning and/or systems?

DL: I chose the title to assert options to counter the presumption of authority of GPS and other totalizing structures. I am simultaneously fascinated, bemused and appalled by what I like to refer to as the ‘pretense of comprehensiveness’ that seems to permeate all sorts of enterprises in the developed world, from the Modernist project in art, to the mapping of the human genome (Fig. 2), and back a ways to the unfulfilled dream of the creators of Esperanto, which was designed to be everyone’s second language (and makes an appearance in a series of paintings included in the exhibition).

These efforts all share a desire to understand everything (and a belief that such encyclopedic knowledge is possible), or find/impose common rules that apply to everyone everywhere. I’m not sure that this urgency toward mastery- toward control over nature and culture, is a uniquely Western phenomenon, but it has been a prevalent conceit here for quite a while.

The coordinated satellite mapping of GPS is another instance of this impulse. It made a certain kind of sense to propose that the work in this show, and the exhibit itself, point to the holes in that whole.

KD: I believe your large- scale work in the atrium (*Aesthetic Response Primer*, Fig. 3) encompasses many important concepts addressed throughout the exhibition. Please describe your intent with that work.

DL: In a way, the piece serves as an illustration of the major themes of the exhibition, as it embodies conundrums of representation a viewer encounter throughout the show. There are probably more, but I can single out four that occur to me:

*Conundrum #1: 3-D world of direct experience vs. 2-D world of representations*

One half of the diptych features an image of the earth seen from space illusionistically rendered in all of its spherical splendor. The other shows a flattened map-like abstraction of landforms and oceans surrounded by a painted ornate frame. What is the relation between the world we inhabit and the conventions we use to describe it? This question informs much of the work in the show, especially those pieces that hover between image and object-like *Plan, Vista, and Debris Pile*.

*Conundrum #2: language vs. image*

The aforementioned images each appear underneath a single letter written in upper and lower case, the globe by Oo and the picture by Aa. What is the correlation between the letter and the image? The visual reference to a children's vocabulary book implies that the image should begin with its accompanying letter, but the connection isn't so straightforward- the strongest connection between the O and the earth is not a phonetic one, but rather a common shape. 'A' could stand for 'art', 'abstraction,' 'atlas' or something else.

That sign/signifier dilemma has become a cliché of postmodern theory, but ideas often become clichés because they are particularly resonant.

*Conundrum #3: Sign vs. 'Painting'*

The format of a banner, the scale, and the bold graphic classroom-map composition read less as "work of art" than "informational signage." Queries about the social status of a given artifact come up

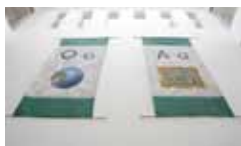


Fig. 3  
*Aesthetic Response Primer*  
2009  
Latex on canvas drop cloths

again and again in the work. OK, so there are lots of aspects of the piece that do read as 'painting,' but the banners function primarily as clunkily graphic giant flash cards.

Admittedly, this is not a particularly radical gesture anymore, and this venue is clearly a 'center' for 'art', but the point still merits attention, as assumptions about the differences between high and low visual culture remain in play for the foreseeable future.

*Conundrum #4: individual part vs. pair or group*

Though the two parts are literally separate physical entities, and could even be seen as stand-alone works of art, placed together they have a meaning that is more than the sum of the parts- when spoken together the utterance Oo(h) Aa(h) has become a conventionalized form of a visceral response to all manner of visual spectacles- from fireworks to artwork, and therein lies the title. Questions about the autonomy of the discreet art object resurface numerous times in the show. One can even think of the whole exhibition as a single installation.

KD: If you were forced to choose, which is more important, or of more conceptual value, the "Oo" or the "Aa"?

DL: It's impossible to choose and that is precisely the point. Meaning grows out of the relation between the two vantage points.

KD: What experiences in your background influenced your choice to become an artist and make the type of work you do?

DL: That's hard to answer in a few sentences, so I won't even try. I've thought about it a lot, and have contrived a Personal Master Narrative, a mini-bildungsroman, to explain to myself how I came to do what I do.

Very early on I recognized the problematic nature of the relation between perception and reality, as this picture of my brothers and I easily hoisting what appear to be enormous boulders (Fig. 1) suggests. I saw that the connection between appearance and truth was not always straightforward, which makes the veracity of any and all images suspect.

I think that awareness, which of course I would not have been able to articulate back then, has served as a spark for all my subsequent work.

While I retain that kernel of skepticism as my modus operandi, I have to admit that I have totally bought into one of the boilerplate myths of The Artist- as bricoleur/chemist who cobbles together meaningful artifacts from base materials. Many of the artists I most admire, from Kurt Schwitters to Robert Rauschenberg to more recently Tim Hawkinson and Tara Donovan fall into this category, and I have managed to maintain that romantic stance throughout my studio practice.

But I digress. Those original doubts about representations developed in part, I believe, from growing up in Nashville, Tennessee in the 70's. There was a wide disparity between my experience of the place and the popular image of Music City.

I found Nashville stimulating, diverse, and filled with mysterious wonders like a peculiar full scale ersatz Parthenon made of conglomerate cement, the murals depicting the struggles and aspirations of African Americans painted in 1930 by Aaron Douglas in Fisk's Jubilee Hall, the Station Inn, an unassuming hole-in-the-wall bar that happens to be the world epicenter of bluegrass music, and a great "Children's" Museum, sadly long since dismantled, housed in a dark, musty Victorian castle-like structure. It was really a combined natural history/ethnographic/technology museum - the kind of wonderful makeshift attempt at institutional authority that David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology pays homage to.



Fig. 4  
Postcard  
circa 1960



Fig. 5  
Wide World of Sports Little  
League View-Master  
1970  
Photograph  
GAF Corporation



Fig. 6  
Archie Campbell on  
Hee Haw  
1970  
Photograph  
CBS-TV



Fig. 7  
The Kingston Trio "...From the  
Hungry!"  
1959  
Album Cover  
Capitol Records



Fig. 8  
Herb Alpert and the Tijuana  
Brass  
Photograph

This lived Nashville looked nothing like the Hee-Haw (Fig. 6) version my family would watch on Saturday evenings after Wide World of Sports (Fig. 5).

My first conscious exposure to "art" of any type was through pop music when I was probably 7 or 8. Nerdy as it sounds in retrospect, among the records my parents had around the house, I was particularly attracted to Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass (Fig. 8), and the Kingston Trio (Fig. 7). Looking back, I find it telling that I was drawn to 1. a Jewish guy playing mariachi music, 2. three WASP-y fellows pilfering (and many would argue, watering down) folk music from all over the world.

In both cases these artists were culling from the history of musical forms and adapting them to create a mongrel, albeit white bread, sound. It's easy to criticize this type of hybridization as cultural imperialism, and certainly there are plenty of instances where the appropriation of the art of a culture by a dominant group is blatantly opportunistic and exploitative, but I think that plenty of cross-pollination goes on in good faith, and is really the only way that new forms develop.

It was only later that it occurred to me that perhaps I was predisposed to view the world this way, for I owed my very existence to a mild form of cultural "hybridization," as my mother came from a New England Protestant background and my Jewish father's family includes rabbis who led congregations in Dallas, Texas and Shreveport, Louisiana.

I recall very early wondering how any one set of beliefs could be absolutely true. This devout agnosticism has played a role in that instinct towards skepticism, and strongly affected my attitude to visual art. I think it also made me feel right at home in the postmodern discourse I encountered in graduate school in the late '80's- but I'm getting ahead of myself.

KD: What visual art first got your attention?

DL: As most kids do, I drew a lot growing up (Fig. 9) but I certainly didn't self-identify as an artist then.

I had a French teacher in Jr. High who took two weeks out of our language classes to introduce us to the periods of art history she loved- impressionism and early modernism. I liked the art well enough, but what was really intoxicating was the idea of the "artist"- a person who devotes his/her life to a creative endeavor that is at once a response to the world and an effort to reshape it into a form of one's own. That initial exposure led to research on my own throughout high school and college.

An encounter with correspondence artist E.F. Higgins during a summer high school program at the Atlanta College of Art got me interested in Fluxus, and I participated in the mail art network for awhile (Fig. 10). I loved the egalitarian spirit of the phenomenon. An art world in which a 16 year old could exchange work with the likes of Ray Johnson was pretty enticing.

As I learned more about the history of art I came to realize that I had a problem, and one closely related to my initial skepticism about the reliability of images.

I was strongly attracted to radically divergent models of artistic practice. My first exposure to Marcel Duchamp (Fig. 11) was revelatory, especially learning of the readymades- found objects selected for their anti-aesthetic qualities. I was struck first by the recognition that the social context of presentation of a work of art is a part of its meaning, and second, by that avant-garde iconoclastic impulse- seeing art as a challenge to the status quo, a critique of an accepted model of reality.

At the same time, I felt a strong pull towards the tradition of representational Western oil painting from the Renaissance through the 19<sup>th</sup> century- and



Fig. 9  
Representative Early Work  
circa 1972



Fig. 10  
Stamp Out Postage  
1978



Fig. 11  
Marcel Duchamp  
*Fountain*  
1917  
Sculpture/Glazed Ceramic with  
Black Paint  
San Francisco Museum of  
Modern Art



Fig. 12  
Thomas Eakins  
*The Champion Single Sculls  
(Max Schmitt in a Single Scull)*  
1871  
Oil on canvas  
The Metropolitan Museum of  
Art, New York



Fig. 13  
*Lunchbox*  
1985



Fig. 14  
Lefkowitz and Grubb  
*Topo Lines*  
1984  
Carleton College campus

a more conventional definition of 'transformation,' the metamorphosis that skilled rendering can bring about- making something "come alive" through the tools of great illusionistic painting from Raphael to Vermeer to Eakins (Fig. 12).

As much as I found Duchamp's apparent calculated indifference to technical facility as an end in itself both appealing and amusing, I also retained a grudging respect for visual evidence of rapt attention and hard work over time.

KD: You are describing two diametrically opposed paradigms of Art. Which did you choose?

DL: Both, actually. At some point I came to realize that I could use that internal conflict- I could harness that ambivalence about the nature of the impulse to make art. I saw that questions raised by that dialectic could become (or already were) the foundation of my creative process.

Even in college I was exploring that tension. My statement for my senior thesis declared that I would "use found objects as surrogate canvases" (Fig. 13), and I collaborated with fellow students on some interdisciplinary extracurricular projects that addressed the human imprint on the landscape (Fig. 14).

And I have been happily grappling with those paradoxes of human perception ever since.

KD: Materially, much of the work in this show does hearken back to the historical Western tradition of oil paintings on canvas or panel. As someone interested in the impact of technological changes, such a choice could be characterized as nostalgic or retrograde. Why make representational paintings when so many other, more accurate/precise imaging technologies are available?

DL: In painting, the residue of a physical process is visible. Making a painting or drawing requires

(and viewing encourages) a consideration of the construction of an image in a way that photos and digital images don't necessarily do. You can download almost any image off the web with little or no consideration of how it was composed, cropped, assembled. A photo's visual integrity, its 'facticity,' is usually assumed. It shouldn't be, but who has the time or inclination to question the veracity of every image you encounter? I've tried. It's exhausting.

The fact of a Painting explicitly asserts a translation, an interpretation- a subjective filter between the image and the thing/scene depicted. Of course that mediation happens in a photo too, but its not felt as instantly. It naturally follows that the same phenomenon is operating in the pieces made from less conventional materials - Styrofoam, twigs, sheetrock - how the image is constructed is as important as the thing represented.

KD: Why are the problems of representation still so absorbing? Haven't we explored this territory enough?

DL: Actually, emphatically no. The quest for what's 'real' or 'authentic' remains elusive. In fact, technological change that makes the virtual more palpable, more life-like, complicates the problem more than ever.

KD: Is verisimilitude a worthy goal as an end in itself?

DL: Not for me, and I find it curious that 'keeping it real' is such an obsession in this culture. Take video games, for example (Fig. 15). That impulse to create increasingly complete immersion in a plausible virtual world is often touted as the goal of game designers, but that's not bringing the experience closer to reality. It's appealing to an artificially heightened sensory experience. Everyday reality by comparison is relatively boring and/or messy. The allure of the virtual is no surprise, but it's not due to its mimicry of the real. That tension between the



Fig. 15  
The Sims 2: Bon Voyage  
Expansion Pack  
Japanese Garden Screenshot  
2007  
Video game  
Aspyr



Fig. 16  
Redoubt (detail)  
2002  
Colored pencil on cardboard



Fig. 17  
Rene Magritte  
The Human Condition  
1933  
Oil on canvas  
National Gallery of Art,  
Washington DC

real and the ideal, and what we even mean by those terms, permeates all aspects of daily life.

KD: So if the virtual is so suspect, why *draw* those cardboard structures (Fig. 16)? Wouldn't it be better to actually build them?

DL: An acknowledgement of artifice, a recognition of an illusion as such, is, for me, part of the satisfaction of the experience of art. That self-conscious appearance of reality-the simulacra, be it illusionistic painting or a miniature architectural model is 'better' than direct immediate experience. Why? I'm speculating here- but I think it's because it's singled out, made 'special', it becomes an object of contemplation. It's also non-threatening-it's framed, contained, or of a scale in which we, the perceivers, are in control.

KD: You touch on the frame. As we see in the first gallery of your exhibition, you explore the impact of frames—frames around works and concepts. Please talk about the frame as a device in your work, and the interplay between the theoretical framing of an experience and the literal framing of the work.

DL: Both the literal and painted frames in those works serve as metaphors for all contextualizing gestures. That's why I also knocked a hole in the wall- to indicate in a not-so -subtle fashion that the gallery is a frame too. I really love Magritte's painting "The Human Condition" (Fig. 17) which depicts a landscape painting on an easel in front of a window revealing the selfsame view. I take from that the recognition that human consciousness itself is a frame- as hard as we may try to pursue a direct immediate unadulterated perception of our environment, there is no such thing as a pure unmediated experience. We are always filtering our view through multiple frames.

KD: There is an element of accessibility in your work that is striking, whether its through humor, or recognizable imagery, and it arguably runs counter

to your stated desire to 'disorient the viewer'. How intentional is this approach?

DL: It has become a trope of contemporary art that its role is not to assert some timeless verity, but rather to pose questions- about the nature of art itself, or the ways images can be manipulated, etc. Art is about 'blurring boundaries' and 'challenging certainty,' or as Inigo Manglano-Ovalle put it in an interview about his show here at the RAC, art 'initiates a discursive practice,' it's a "way to catalyze discourse."

I completely embrace this definition of Art's role in the culture. I have no interest in art that I perceive providing a definitive answer - confirming what one already thinks or believes - that's why its so easy to dismiss someone like Thomas Kinkade (Fig. 18).

..and yet, if I'm honest with myself, I am less inclined to engage with work that so deviates from the familiar that it is alienating, antagonistic. – but the second I say that, I have to catch myself- What do I even mean by 'familiar?' familiar to whom? Antagonistic to whom?

Once that question is posed a can of worms is opened –a can full of class, culture and status distinctions that really complicates trying to pin down criteria for a definition of Art.

Maybe it would help to share an example from my own experience. It may be shallow to admit it, but there is a lot of be-bop and avant garde jazz that I have a hard time appreciating. But I love John Coltrane's interpretation of 'My Favorite Things' (Fig. 19) and I think it has something to do with my familiarity with the melody that provides the underlying architecture for the improvisation. Because of that prior exposure, the challenges to that structure make sense to me on an intuitive level and I can be completely absorbed by the music.



Fig. 18  
Thomas Kinkade  
*Nanette's Cottage*  
2009  
Oil on canvas  
Privately owned by Nanette Kinkade



Fig. 20  
*Plan*  
2008-09  
Styrofoam



Fig. 19  
John Coltrane  
*Blue Train*  
1957  
Album cover  
Blue Note Records

The kind of transformative experience I'm interested in generating *does* requires a degree of familiarity- with certain materials, visual conventions, and representational imagery in order for the deviations from those visual/experiential norms to be palpable. That sounds formulaic, but it doesn't feel formulaic when I'm working. I'm not conducting market research to determine what segment of the population recognizes this or that imagery. I gravitate to certain forms or conventions, especially ones that are so ubiquitous that they are often overlooked. Such an approach provides certain parameters within which I find a lot of room to experiment, play.

KD: There is a material modesty in your works. Humble, inexpensive, everyday items are used. Why? For instance how would the work *Plan* be changed if instead of found Styrofoam you used a less available high-tech material?

DL: It would be a different piece altogether. You've touched on one of the most important features of this work to me- the specificity of these common throwaway materials is essential to the meaning of the work.

I think of all the work in that last largest space as examples of a kind of conceptual "reclamation project," a reverie of scavenging. They come out of a recognition of the potential for meaning when otherwise discarded scrap materials of our exchange-based economy are reclaimed, retrofitted, and recontextualized. I'm testing the capacity for metaphor in the lowliest of materials.

For instance, in *Plan*, the Styrofoam cityscape, these particular found forms and the striking affinity they have with architectural elements dictated the arrangement and subsequently the meanings of the piece. In the hierarchy of things, styrofoam packing inserts are literally peripheral to something else. They surround and support other, necessarily more important things. They are inherently contradictory

objects on several levels. First, they are usually quickly relegated to the status of garbage, yet they remain pristine and white-the antithesis of trash. Their appearance and seeming abstractness qualify them as peculiar stand-ins for ideal, platonic forms. Here they are put to use as surrogates - models for more significant forms - namely architecture. By placing them on the wall in a grid they bear a striking resemblance to the kind of models one might find in a planning office. The sheer scale of this particular installation further extends the illusion of a fragment of a vast metropolis because the individual parts are subsumed into one's experience of the whole.

KD: You have written that in your "most idealistic and ambitious moments I see my role as asserting the capacity of human creativity to transcend conventional ways of viewing the world and by extension, acting in that world." How might altered thinking about the world translate into behavior? Are you saying that there are ethical, moral, or ecological considerations here?

DL: I like the way you've stated the question-including ecological concerns on a par with moral and ethical choices, and yes, I do think those issues are in play, but it's tricky, as I could just as easily have said, that in my darker, more cynical moments, I'm engaged in a meaningless, self-indulgent form of navel gazing when I'm working in my studio, drawing pictures of cardboard boxes on cardboard boxes!

But my natural tendency runs contrary to a nihilistic view. I tend to stubbornly accentuate the positive, often in the face of overwhelming evidence against such a stance. I do think that art *can* provide a space that encourages a greater attentiveness to the world. Whether that leads directly to individual behavioral modification, and/or social change I am very uncomfortable asserting categorically.

Not only would it be insanely presumptuous of me to declare that exposure to my art will automatically

inspire good works or improved personal hygiene, but it would fly in the face of my critique of the Modernist paradigm.

If my work can be said to have a political agenda, it's a fairly diffuse one. I'm not interested in using art to advocate for specific causes, even ones I feel passionate about, but by drawing attention to paradoxes of perception and how context determines/alters meaning, the work functions as a critique of oversimplification, of uncritical acceptance of a given proposition, and of rigid ideological adherence, positions that are all too prevalent in present-day political discourse. I'm pro-nuance, and I believe that raising questions that can't be answered in a sound bite can be a radical gesture in the current media climate.

As an artist who believes that how we view the world has an impact on what we do in it, part of me hopes that the conversations generated by the work could spark a more active engagement with the world, or at least the hoarding of Styrofoam and cardboard for re-use instead of landfill filler. I'll be by to pick it up tomorrow.