

Reflection: The Art of Jevan Watkins Jones

A garden is a complex of aesthetic and plastic intentions; and the plant is, to a landscape artist, not only a plant - rare, unusual, ordinary or doomed to disappearance - but it is also a color, a shape, a volume or an arabesque in itself. Roberto Burle Marx

When Marcel Duchamp created his first Readymade from a snow shovel in 1915, which he titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, his aim was to create an art which moved beyond what he felt to be purely visual and instead sought to intervene in the “real” world. In doing this, he liberated the very idea of what constituted art. A few decades later the German artist Joseph Beuys asserted the concept that “everyone is an artist”, in order to establish the notion that creativity exists in all people and should be brought into all areas of human experience.

Upon these two central ideas of the twentieth century, that everyone is an artist and all substance and action has the potential to be art, a clearly defined understanding of who is an artist and what constitutes a work of art appears to have evaporated. Yet a sense of art being something special within society remains. This elusive feeling is captured in what unites all artists; the desire to generate a shift in our shared perceptions of the world, which in turn creates a pause in the noise of life so that we might find the magical in the mundane and awaken within ourselves a feeling of what the nature of existence really means to us.

This enables us to view art as a process of philosophical meditation which results in the yielding of an object or action, be it a painting, sculpture, film, installation or performance. The very best of these result from the removal of the artist’s own ego at the point of production and involve only the most minimal intervention with the subject matter itself. This detachment enables the work to act as an exploration of, and comment on, the culture it emerges from. We see this exemplified in works such as *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, which involved his turning a urinal upside down and *Bicycle Wheel*, where he simply fixed the wheel of a bike upon a stool. This same lightness of touch is found in the paintings and screen-prints of Andy Warhol, where pieces such as *Electric Chair*, *Marilyn* and *Campbell’s Soup Cans* are presented as two dimensional versions of Duchamp’s Readymades.

These same issues, which focus around found objects being displayed as finished works of art are central to the artistic practice of Jevan Watkins Jones. With works such as *Tracking Down the Man Inside* and *Chair Leg*, we find ourselves presented with objects the artist has humbly selected, apparently at random, and decided to offer as completed works. But this minimal approach belies a much more subtle and complex process which is founded on the practice of drawing. Just as a painter might begin a thought process with a series of sketches before applying the first brush of paint to a new canvas, Watkins Jones spends time drawing the visual world he finds around himself. This is a process he usually engages with sitting on the ground, looking up. It enables a period of meditation on the material of existence, which once absorbed, leads Watkins Jones to quietly notice beauty in the otherwise unobserved and overlooked.

Watkins Jones does not draw what he presents as found object, but uses drawing as a stepping stone to a deeper understanding and engagement with the physical world. The objects he selects are usually in the final stages of decay, when they are taken to his garden studio and carefully placed on a bench. Here they will rest for many months before either being assimilated into his oeuvre or discarded completely. This long reflection removes any sense of his individual taste as it allows the objects to assert their own authority; it is an engagement which places the artist as a mediator between the corporeal world and our observance of it, and is one which requires a refined aesthetic sensibility. Like all great art, this requires the artist to participate in a directly emotional response to the subject matter, for he must first find a resonance within it, something which the artist attempts to rationalize only after the event. It is this profound emotional interaction which we as viewers respond to in a direct and instinctive way, developing an intellectual understanding only in the wake of what we feel.

Throughout the 1950's, Joseph Beuys produced thousands of drawings which helped him to develop his own artistic agenda. He explored the metaphorical and symbolic connections between natural phenomena and philosophical systems, and reached the conclusion that humanity, with its desire for rationality, was eliminating "emotions" and in doing so, was managing to erase a fundamental source of energy and creativity, something he believed we each hold inside ourselves. For Beuys, who later declared himself a shaman, art occupied a magical realm, a place where we are able to find a connection with our raw emotional selves. This reveals artistic practice to be a mediation of the spiritual for both the artist and the viewer, helping us to unlock things we sense yet cannot easily articulate in words.

When we look at the work of Jevan Watkins Jones, we are presented with this same sense of magic. Objects which have previously functioned within the world have now been discarded and begun the process of decay. Yet here they are, arrested for a while, offered up so that we might wonder over the cycle of life. They occupy a world in opposition to the noise of mass media advertising, video games and movies, whose purpose appears to be a perpetual distraction to that which is really important to life, that which we find is available for free, like friendship, tenderness and love. They are cast as the shadow to birth and remind us of our own mortality, a reflection which recalls how precious life really is.

Robert Priseman 2012