

Looking Glass Gallery

Tuesday, January 19, 2016

On Frailty...

On Frailty: The Marks of Steve Storz
INTRODUCTION

I met Steve Storz in the spring of 2008. I was still married, and my wife had decided she wanted to move back to Taos where she grew up to reconnect with her father. Even though I had never lived there, Taos was already familiar to me. I knew about the town's historical importance. As an artist, I felt living in Taos was an important stop along the road of the American artistic pilgrimage. Marsden Hartley and D.H. Lawrence had always been important to me. Living there, I felt like I had a real connection to Taos's part in the history of Modernism after only reading about it years ago. Taos is a very unique place, mythical and real all at once. I was eager to meet the interesting artists who were supposed to be living there. And eventually I did...I met Steve after prowling around the galleries in town and stepping into the Parks Gallery where he worked. My wife's father's concha belts were on display, and we struck up a conversation about Taos and Modernism and what it was to be an artist in 2009, and I felt an instant liking for him. I saw that he had vision, and I figured his work had to be compelling. When I visited his studio, I was more than surprised, I was floored. Here was a man who had built his house into what looked like a bunker assembled from bits and pieces of cold-war era military-industrial ephemera. It wasn't a hoard so much as a complete and total place of outsider art weirdness. And in terms of its style, I hadn't seen or met another artist plumbing the same military-industrial depths as American artist Lee Bontecou...but with such different and intriguing results. I hadn't even considered it a possibility. I knew then that it would be interesting to write about his work. But it took me seven years and another couple of moves to finally grasp just what was so compelling about his work. It also helped that I recently plunked some cash down for a decent laptop. There is a style to this piece. I believe that writing about art demands a kind of poetry, and I knew in writing this piece about Steve's work, I wanted the freedom of that approach. Because above all else, that is what Steve Storz's art demands: to do what the hell it wants to do.

Steve Storz's art leaves a Mark. The Mark is the driving force behind his obsessively rendered abstract drawings and his mechanized sculptures, and the Mark is the thing that haunts him. His Mark bears witness to the vagaries of sensation and touch. It scurries across surfaces and builds impossible organisms from its searching density. In his Mark we see splays of rich blacks driven across paper. We see white Marks skim and shift around those black Marks like the light of a lantern creating unexpected illuminations of shape in the dark. Traces of this Mark stubbornly gets on the sides of fingers and the edges of hands, fleshy in tone and fading. When you unknowingly wipe your eye, there it is tracing the passage across the eye, from brown to white to flesh, his inadvertent Mark. Looking at Steve's work, you imagine his Mark getting into your lungs, sitting silently and unseen in subterranean pink, pulsing rhythmically. You imagine it staring out at you from the white of a bandage, dry as a bone. You sense it living in the blood as an imagined red of unrealized corporeality. This is the life of Steve's Mark, at once visible and absent. Its visibility leaves a graphite trail, a charcoal flourish, a grey, dusty abrasion, a drip of yellow ochre, a veneer of red oil, a milky spatter of come. Its absence traces its furtive touch around the retina and down into the depths of the nervous system. This work is *uncanny*.

By digesting this Mark, an exchange has been made between you and the work. You have the feeling that it remembers you. Even after you have covered the memory of that exchange with the dross of living, the ghost of it remains, gently insistent like the ghost of a scar. Occasionally this Mark is wet, sloppy, sexual, and seductive. Sometimes this Mark is agitated, excited, and nervous. Sometimes the black Mark shakes in terror creating violent forms and the visual impact of his Mark's passage through a form is at times unsettling. In looking at this Mark there is something of the experience of a thorn pricking the skin because of the way his Mark inserts the memory of sensation so insidiously. This Mark touches you from the inside.

This experience of sensation is key to untangling the mystery of Steve's masterful mixed media paintings, drawings, installations, and mechanized sculptures. The work defies you, and as a viewer you recognize in that defiance an urge to turn away, and so the work pushes and pulls you, building a world of abrasive textures around isolation and intimacy. It is a compelling feeling, and one of the strongest aspects of Steve's work. The Marks that we leave, the traces of our lives, can't be reassembled to create a new life or recreate the old one that birthed it. The stubborn melancholy inherent in this art arises from its insistence that we are just incomplete traces. We are never downloaded to something directly, not in any real sense. We are endlessly translated into sheaves of partially understood information, bits, and ephemera. The decay of that Mark, evident throughout Steve's copious use of non-archival practices, is an important aspect of this work. As an artist, he constantly struggles with the knowledge that the Marks of a life do not translate into the fully lived experience that is the marvel of being alive. We process through traces and pass through and this passing terrifies the artist. This terror seems to speak out of a cavity, and out of a desire to unfurl that cavity's ghost onto the picture plane through a constantly evolving exploration and exorcism of the Mark.

Paper is Steve's preferred receptor for translating this unwieldy process. For him, it is the perfect trap to catch the dry remainders of wet interior spaces, and for this reason Steve often favors mixed media approaches over any sole medium. For Steve, the dry, receptiveness of paper offers its own internal counter to the way that Mark translates touch, and the surface of paper echoes the drive of his Mark making with its silent landscape of ridges, waves, whorls, and hexes. Where the Mark lives pointedly fixed within its material limits, the white of paper receives endlessly. For Steve, white is an infinitely permissive space, across which his lines loop and scrawl, shifting in mid-passage from the sensually descriptive language of calligraphy to the aggressively raw vocabulary of expressionism. These lines tangle together to create dense forms that simultaneously inject themselves into paper's sacred spaces and expel themselves forcefully into the void. The Mark transmits and telegraphs across this space, and it does so with all the agony of a bundle of nerves suddenly set loose from its physical housing. The artist recognizes that this silent complement of white absorbs the Mark perfectly and thereby gains a life terrifyingly unimaginable that is doomed to fail every time it touches the surface. It is a magical moment that gives the work its otherworldly grace. Its perfect beauty and its sense of infinite potential makes the artist waiver uncertainly, again and again, each time the Mark meets paper. Because of this union, there is nearly always a frenetic quality to his touch. It is as if the artist is afraid of bearing so much possibility.

There is real pleasure in the way Steve insists on combining materials that resist union. His drawings freely mix oil pastel and acrylic with graphite, charcoal, dirt and floor dust and lint, urine and sweat and come, combinations of excretive materials that create surfaces that are sticky, slick, pilly, watery, stained, dry, dusty, and crumbly. For Steve it is as if this Mark's contact with paper is such an infinitely ecstatic experience that only the sensual vocabulary of sexuality can begin to describe it, thus, there is a peculiarly sexual bent to all of his artwork, simultaneously uplifting and degrading. Colors often accumulate in layered and

sludgy shelves that threaten to crumble as they race across the picture plane. There are raids of color, skirmishes of color, dashes of color, but never enveloping blankets of color. This experience of the Mark is always a decidedly pointed and particular experience. These are materials that seem to tie themselves to the deserts of New Mexico where Steve Storz makes his home, to the frailty of being alive, and the processes associated with erosion, the water cycle, and the dissolution of the body. There is a wonderful demonstration of strength asserted in the way his forms are bound in knots and lines, skeins and twists, like a desire to take an idea of a body and give it material resistance to its inevitable slide into entropy and eventual decay. You begin to realize looking at Steve's work that there is a great deal of love and tenderness for those around him. This isn't the kind of touch that is self-limited. The particular of the individual is lost, but the spirit remains, and the constant presence of tentacles in his work seems to suggest that he is constantly searching for a nearness to this greater spirit of humanity.

The work rejects the deceptive simplicity of flattery, ennoblement, and the enshrining of vanity that is *the beautiful*. Steve recognizes that the artist must contend with the history of power and violence and the role it has played in the grossness of our fates. All of the potentially ugly harm inherent in this kind of pursuit Steve has taken upon himself rather than direct at the viewer in an excoriating rage favored by the younger artist. These are not polemics. The work, especially the more figurative of his explorations, seems to act as a memory marker for the effects of a lifetime of internal struggle searching and violence. At times it feels like Steve is creating avatars and markers that stand at the edge of some wild, blasted field...their foreboding nature acting as a warning to those who would venture beyond this space into the unknown. Steve does not renounce the terror of oblivion. He asks the viewer to make the long look with him. Steve tells the viewer over and over with the frantically spreading Mark that he has made this bitter journey along with every other artist like him and nothing good will come of us if we insist on paths that ignore our frailty.

This exploration of our physical frailty takes logical extension in his sculptures. Steve sees our bodies as an imperfect physical housing and his sculpture translates across electronic and mechanized mediums, shells essentially. He sees these physical manifestations as defenses against history, against decay, and perversely, as perpetrators of decay. They encase as much as they defend. One marvel of his sculptures is their relationship to his drawings: they exist as shadow parts to the material forms, another kind of shell, and playing with forms in this way allows the artist to insert and withdraw representation as it suits him. Seen in this light, the drawings in relation to his sculptural work seem more like blue prints. You could read the drawing and interpret directions for the construction of his material forms. Those drawing instructions, because of the limits of the body, ensure that the physical forms of his sculptures replicate in the same world of changing and degrading possibilities. Cables, tentacles, sutures, spines, threads, ropes, wires: for Steve, these forms are the language of linking and binding, and by extension language itself is explored as a binder of human form and life...language as a sling, as an unfathomable script, as an absurd play, drawing some people in and rejecting others...

Where all of this leads is to an invented organism, invented across the realm of the paper, invented to contend with the distortions of history, the cruelties of age, the discontent of our condition, but especially the accelerated and tremendous scope of war and its remnants and fallout. (there are angles that continually manifest in his drawings that echo the feel of military industrial hardware, to the psyche of that machine mentality) He is keenly interested in interpreting visually its weirdly disfiguring impact on our collective psyches. For the artist, a blindly groping invented biology is preferable and more honest than the vanity of a blind society's well-proportioned self regard. This kind of work calls out human life for its vanity and asks the viewer if this mess of goo and dust is worth the trouble.

