

## Mark Swords

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“I envy the mind hiding in her words, like an ‘I’ counting up to a hundred waiting to be found ... her way of seeing ... was like a big pocket magnifying glass. *Of course* it would have hurt to have to use it for ordinary looking” —  
Mary McCarthy writing about Elizabeth Bishop<sup>i</sup>

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According to the psychoanalyst Adam Philips, the very thing that can reveal to us the nature of our desires is often what appears to *get in the way*. “The only way to discover your projects,” Philips suggests “is to notice — to make conscious — what you reckon are obstacles.”<sup>ii</sup> A necessary follow-on consideration concerns, then, the kinds of obstacles that we tend, time after time, to find ourselves meeting and even *making*. As Philips puts it, we need to ask if we have a “vocabulary of impediments” and a “personal repertoire of obstacles.” These questions are important in the analytic exchange since they encourage us to think differently about the things that we perceive to be hindering our achievement or happiness; they urge us to newly contemplate the inconveniences that limit our experience or occlude our view or seem to block our path ahead. To “unpack” obstacles, Philips says, is to find (as with Pandora’s Box) “the unusual and the forbidden,” but it is also an intriguing opportunity to identify what it is that constraints do to our desire, and to address the manner in which they might form our desire (or the extent to which they might *be* our desire). And it is in our interest — so the argument goes — to “find or be able to tolerate, more satisfying obstacles to contend with.” In Philips’s view “poor obstacles impoverish us.”

Perhaps as with all psychoanalytic conjectures, these comments on the meaning and value of what is constraining in daily life run counter to our conscious instincts. There is a willful perversity in such efforts to re-frame and re-focus our customary attempts to pay attention to the world and to ourselves. But precisely for this reason it is tempting to bring these thoughts into proximity with points on art — and in particular to propose a loose correspondence with the ways in which the art of Mark Swords has often involved an out-of-the-ordinary fascination with unusual conditions of planned constraint, or with conditions that might, at least, be temporarily perceived as constraining. At various stages Swords has seemed to make

a virtue out of introducing eccentric impediments into the process of art's production or adding such stumbling blocks at the moment of its reception — such restrictions often becoming, paradoxically, the basis of necessary parameters for finding an unorthodox route to creative or interpretative freedom. And though we can trace this trait throughout Swords's richly (and even *perverse*ly) diverse art practice, one curious recent painting comes quickly to mind — and it does so because it does not easily or straightforwardly come into visibility. This is *The Shape of Water* (2012) a surprising and secretive painting that at first glance appears to be back-to-front — and that in subsequent glances still seems almost belligerently indifferent to the prospect of being seen at all. It is hung low, leaning out from the wall a little, with the supporting stretcher turned out towards the viewer — right away confronting us with a visual and material 'composition' suggestive only of raw functionality. If we wish to look at the painting directly, we must crane our neck over the top to look down into the available gap, where we can just about catch an upside-down view of the picture on the canvas. Pinned flat to the wall however, and therefore facing the near-hidden oil-on-canvas scene, is an incongruous brass plate: a slightly warped and weathered metal sheet that is nevertheless sufficiently well-polished to reflect back the painting, finally showing us its concealed content — an image of a bulky, solitary iceberg — but contorting its painted form, adjusting and illuminating its muted colours. The mirrored picture shape-shifts as our gaze slips and slides across the uneven, shining surface — the iceberg becomes something mobile, mutable, luminescent. There is a moment of modestly intended artistic revelation realized here, but it occurs somewhere other than where we first go looking for it; it is in the unanticipated concentration on the features of the at-first-frustrating and obstructing arrangement that an alternative form of discovery is achieved.

But if in this peculiar manipulation of display conventions, Swords creates effects that are enjoyably unexpected in the way that they frustrate (and so then liberate us from) our habitual way of looking, at the prior stage of studio production he has devoted still more energy to proposing elaborate or intricate ways of restricting and demarcating the creative experience — purposefully introducing assorted challenges and novel difficulties, seeking out new obstacles, as he enters into the ostensibly unhindered activity of making art. (Here we might bear in mind the potentially daunting form of *freedom* associated with the belief, most prominently articulated by Arthur Danto, that in the period “after the end of art”, it has become

apparent that “there are no stylistic or philosophical constraints.”<sup>iii</sup>) Indeed, a central feature of Swords’s circumstance of making art recently has been the construction and daily occupation of a specially-designed mini-studio; an uncontroversial project and process for an artist, perhaps, except that this idiosyncratically imagined, oddly compact work space has in fact been built *within* a spacious, well-lit studio located in — and so looking out onto — an isolated and ostensibly ‘inspiring’ setting in rural Co. Wicklow. Seemingly (at least from one ‘outside’ perspective) this is an illogical decision to install a small, cramped, claustrophobic ‘container’ into a wider, freer, open realm. This is a tightening of limits, a strategic production of personally established constraints. Moreover, Swords’s *Shed* (as he has titled this wonderfully bizarre structure) is assembled from collected remnants of discarded pieces from failed or unfinished artworks, mostly by art college students, which have been chosen as the unorthodox, imperfect building blocks of what becomes a kind of deliriously multi-coloured, grown-up wendy-house. Curiously, within the wider studio’s zone of creatively conducive stillness and airy, white-walled ‘neutrality’, Swords constructs a busy patch-work box that is a space of potential non-stop visual interference, of insistent, dizzying distraction. And yet, by asserting, by *choosing*, these impediments, by finding “satisfying obstacles to contend with.” Swords releases himself from the conventional framework for the production of paintings and objects (for there is always a framework of one kind or another). In this strange, intimate, introvert way, he begins to find subjective means to inhabit, and so address, the world beyond a little differently.

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“The Paradox of art’s uselessness is that it can only be upheld if artists allow themselves to be exposed to situations where this very uselessness is put to the test...”  
— Jorg Heiser<sup>iv</sup>

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One of the tendencies of Mark Swords’s efforts to reflect on and renew his personal ‘project’ of making art — and of testing how he might differently enact the role of being an artist — has been a desire to develop non-traditional ‘fine art’ construction skills. As is the case with many contemporary art practices, ‘Craft’ has appeared at various stages of his career as a key feature of his conceptually framed creative labour — but it is a commitment that has no bearing on wider craft traditions, disciplines and

expectations. Swords has chosen to develop certain craft skills, or has chosen to follow particular design patterns, in a manner that involves great complexity of process, but also considerable, willful contradiction in its mode of execution. Such activities also demonstrate, therefore, a heightened sense of the absurd. Two extraordinary sculptural objects specifically stand out in this regard. One is a small-scale, hand-made model of a rudimentary *Loom* (2010) — a simultaneously simple and sophisticated mechanism for the production of textiles that Swords set about learning to make, but instead of using conventional materials, his eccentric choice was to fabricate the loom by piecing together numerous lollipop sticks. We can only guess the stages of this methodical but engagingly wayward thought process: (i) learn a new way of making something (ii) make something that makes other things (iii) make a machine that makes other things that are not art things (iv) make it with materials so fragile as to make the non-art-making machine *useless*. There is a delightful, low-key ludicrousness and intended pointlessness to the outcome of all this off-beat artistic deliberation and laborious studio-based craft. In another lollipop-stick work, however, the experiment is extended, leading to a result that is more grandly outlandish. Here the design to be learned and mimicked is that of a spiral staircase: made in this instance to be a major sculptural presence within a gallery space (this 2010 work is matter-of-factly entitled *Staircase*). It is a more-or-less one-to-one replica of a functioning domestic fitting, but once again, brought into being through the careful layering and interconnecting of countless accumulations of the tiny ice-cream sticks. Step on this delicate winding staircase and it will begin to crack and crumble, and yet, given the precision of its realization, the temptation is there. The piece replicates the functional necessities of ‘real’ life, but it has no practical value. Rather, despite its apparent instrumental exactitude, it seems to celebrate a type of open-minded impracticality.

Perhaps where we find ourselves once again — positioned anxiously at the bottom of this impossible-to-use, precarious staircase — is in a place of combined freedom and restraint. There is a suggestion of stepping up into another space, and yet that prospect cannot be fulfilled. (This is an uncanny, or dreamlike, moment of alienation and difficulty: an almost Gothic sculptural proposition.) And related to this predicament is the fact that the process of making is again one that involves the insistence on a restraint (the dual challenges that Swords sets himself of constructing something that he doesn’t know how to build, and doing this with wholly

inappropriate materials) and a daring *release*. Swords undertakes tasks that are distinct from what might be expected of him as an artist (and especially as a *painter* — a medium which has been fundamental and formative) but that potentially constitute occasions of breaking free. Measured, controlled, singularly constrained: Mark Swords's art is also one that reserves the right to find its own way, to be formed from instinct, to be led by distraction. Swords privileges discipline, but also misdirection and inappropriate action, freely and recklessly borrowing procedures from other fields — diligently misbehaving.

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Some of Swords's works, then, are made with a view towards impersonating the practical things of this world. At times, they are versions of objects that exist ostensibly to serve set purposes, but that nevertheless retain an aura of otherworldly strangeness or outright ridiculousness. The *Staircase* might represent the former. A case of the latter could be his *Mat* from 2009 a multi-coloured woven floor rug made for a specific position in the bathroom, strategically arch-shaped to surround the base of the most basic of home fittings. The piece has an elegantly designed demeanour — its long, thin strips of altering colour could almost make it a speculative item for a *Paul Smith* household goods store — but as a sophisticated craft artifact, this high-end toilet mat is inherently preposterous, its considered stylishness contrasting sharply with the bathos of its expected purpose.

There is an unresolved tension between the useless and the useful in such work, just as there is an always-present, fraught negotiation throughout Swords's art between freedom and restraint. Common across his recent activities too, though, is a further tension (it is important to assert the centrality of 'tension' in itself as an important principle of what Swords is striving to achieve) between clearly arduous activities of painstaking assembly and focused efforts to take apart, to *disassemble* received or previously realized forms. Un-making thus regularly occurs for Swords as the necessary aggressive 'double' of what might be, ordinarily, the more positively characterized endeavor of original, progressive *making* — though switching the putative values of these opposed characteristics might work just as well. There is — to make use of a familiar Gothic reference that has nevertheless been a recent source of estranging stimulation in Swords's research — a haunted, harried, Jekyll and Hyde

quality to this dual condition of the work, or at least a version of this fictional tension which is not grounded in the idea of simple polarized dichotomy, but rather perhaps in a notion of more uncertain shadowplay, a nervy movement of dialectical interchange and a spirit of unsettling duplicity. (For Vladimir Nabokov, Jekyll and Hyde's 'strange case' was not to be understood in terms of an easy allegory of a split self: in his view, this was a reductive moral that negated the power of the tense relation between reality and fantasy: we need to see these ordinary human characters "in a fantastic light", he argued, otherwise "there is no enchantment".<sup>v)</sup>) So much of Swords's work emerges from a strenuous and at the same time playful commitment to back-and-forth processes of piecing together and taking apart: many finished 'pieces' (the word seems suddenly more telling) that seem concluded and resolved are themselves the outcome of surgically un-making something else (and let's go so far as suggesting, to continue the Gothic thread, that there might be a potentially monstrous, quite Frankensteinian dimension to some of these moments of even rather understated cutting-up and re-configuring of received or already-made images and objects). The *Shed*, most obviously, is a marvelously freakish or freakishly marvelous montage-object — the 'marvelous' being, of course, a category of surrealist aspiration, characterized by Hal Foster as involving "anxious crossings of contrary states, hysterical confusions of different identities".<sup>vi)</sup> The *Shed* 'contains' the making of artwork in its function as a micro-studio, but it is the constructed product of break-up and collapse and failure — it is a piecing together of discarded things. Inside this shed, Swords thrives on a continuing dynamic of cut-up/compose or compose/cut-up — creating small paintings, for example, that are then sliced into curling segments and re-arranged, re-patterned, to striking effect. In a typical montage-painting such as *Pissarro's The Cotes des Boeufs* (2012) for instance, first-round results of marking and colouring the canvas with varying degrees of expressive flourish and discretion are then subjected to jolting re-distribution: the canvas is cut into all kinds of neat curvy forms which are then studiously re-positioned. It is as if different art (historical) preferences are being juxtaposed and compressed: as if a set of incisions into the history itself leads to abstract compositions that echo pivotal moments in modernism, but that have their own eccentric orientation. Similar impulses underpin works that begin quite destructively with the unpicking of pre-existing textiles, but that properly come into being through an astonishingly adept method of *re-creation*: individual woolen threads from disassembled rugs being glued together as transformed

compositions. New picture-forms are proposed just as new ways of *making* pictures are found. An old, found carpet is, for instance, unthreaded to then create *In a Cheddar Cave* (2009): a blurry picture made from countless miniature pieces of unwoven wool that shows a scenic cave full of stalactites and stalagmites. This is a scenario of natural, piece-by-piece, accumulation — an extraordinary setting that like much of Swords's art, has developed its distinctive features from the power of the opposing forces in a dual process of slow, steady build-up and incessant erosion.

The term chosen by Swords to capture some of his abiding interests is 'Mosaic'. The word applies easily, of course, to the methods employed in the production of individual works. It is the direct procedure used, in fact, in a recent sculpture such as *Iceberg* (2012) — a thematic continuation from the earlier painting that now presents a three-dimensional realization of the prior mirrored work, but that retains a spirit of playful deception. This time, multiple mirrored tiles cover a model of the object, so that we can't quite see it; rather we get a flickering array of fragmented versions of our own observing selves. This 'iceberg' is a lovely, distracting obstacle: a famous impediment to progress, and one that here isn't easily found or held by our gaze. But if such crafting involves the literal piecing together of a 'mosaic', we can reflect too that this word — this valued *concept* — helps make for us a picture of Swords's body of work as a whole. For his is a determinedly wide-ranging practice that necessarily seems to involve the careful, considered placing of different elements side-by-side. Not all 'pieces' have precisely the same tone or content, some are put in position according to detailed planning, some are the outcomes of instinctual manoeuvres — but all combine as something that achieves a meticulous, measured coherence.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (eds.) *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p.267.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Adam Philips, 'Looking for Obstacles' in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.79. All further references are to this edition.
- <sup>iii</sup> Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.47
- <sup>iv</sup> Jorg Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008)
- <sup>v</sup> See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York, Mariner Books Paperback, 2002)
- <sup>vi</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), p.xix.