

Glasstire {Texas visual art}

Interview with Hilary Harnischfeger & Tommy White, Part I

October 15, 2012
– Elliott Zooley Martin

Husband and wife Tommy White and Hilary Harnischfeger are currently featured at Front Gallery (brainchild of artist Sharon Engelstein and her artist husband Aaron Parazette). While at first their work appears quite divergent due to their respective media (Harnischfeger: ceramic constructions, White: oil paintings), Front Gallery highlights the artists' shared sense of process, a heavily-worked aesthetic, and an embrace of the sensual.



“Joy,” 2012, plaster, porcelain, paper, pigment, crushed glass, calcite, rose quartz, pyrite

Houston-born Harnischfeger earned a BFA from the University of Houston, 2001, and an MFA from Columbia University, 2003, and in 2007 was awarded the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation Space program award. Exhibited nationally and internationally, she is represented by Rachel Uffner Gallery in New York.

White received his BFA from the Hartford Art School, 1992, and his MFA from the Massachusetts College of Art, 1996. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Award, he is represented by Harris Lieberman Gallery in New York.

Harnischfeger and White live in Brooklyn and Granville, Ohio, where they teach at Denison University. On the occasion of the Front Gallery exhibition, they sat down with Elliott Zooley Martin to discuss their work.

PART I: Interview with Hilary Harnischfeger

Elliott Zooley Martin: Do you differentiate between the wall reliefs and sculptures?

Hilary Harnischfeger: I do a little a bit. They're both built in a similar fashion and they begin with the same raw materials. But I think in a more formal way about the wall pieces than when I'm making the sculptures.

EZM: Let's dive into your process. Looking at Joy, we have porcelain, plaster, paper, glass, and gem stones.

HH: The plaster part often starts with a mold. I have a collection of molds I've made over the years out of failed pieces. They are usually cast from paper sections that I didn't use in a finished piece but that were so time consuming to make that I wanted to keep a document of them before throwing them out. As far as the chronology of the process with Joy, this yellow plaster part is a mixture of crushed glass, mica, and yellow pigment. Before I poured it in the mold, I embedded the pyrite, the rose quartz, the calcite and porcelain fragments. I sometimes used paper to cordon off spaces. Then I packed in the wet plaster. Since I am working front to back with the mold, I'm never completely certain of what it will look like until I take it out.

EZM: So if a past piece doesn't work, it becomes a form or a shape in a future work?

HH: Exactly. It becomes a form.

EZM: Are the porcelain pieces also repurposed shards from past projects you weren't happy with?

HH: Some are from past projects. Most start as thrown pots, usually 6 to 8 at a time. I cut them up and collage them into different shapes. You can see a fragment of a lip, or the thickening of a base. The excess material I'll form on a table or in a corner or press it into one of the rubber molds I use for the plaster.



"Cyclops," 2012, porcelain, paper, quartz

EZM: So that porcelain form jutting out of the upper right was that molded on a frame or a table edge?

HH: That's a table edge. And I'll use books as well. I'll make temporary situations in the studio.

EZM: It's like building a still-life composition and then mining it for some- thing completely different.

HH: Yes. Exactly. I never thought of it like that. But it's very similar.

EZM: Tell me about the porcelain cracks here, on the lower right side of Joy.

HH: Those cracks are from the collage process. The cracks show that this came from different section of slab or pot. I like that crack. The porcelain is forced together in the same way that the plaster is.

I approach color in a similar way in both porcelain and plaster: I mix wet plaster with pigment and I mix the porcelain with color stains before I start building or throwing. The color goes all the way through. This is important because often I'll use the reverse side of things. The color cannot just exist on the surface.

The paper is also dyed. I dye the sheets of paper, layer them, and then wedge them in between the ceramic and the plaster. Then I use straight razors to cut and shape it.

EZM: Do you make the paper?

HH: No. I buy the paper. Years ago, I worked at Two Palms Press in SoHo. We would save cut offs of paper to recycle. So I would save these cut-offs of 100 percent cotton paper that would take the dye and also that you could cut more easily through. There's no extra clay in it. Sometimes if you buy colored paper, they stabilize it with different sizing and clay. The better paper gives you a cleaner edge.

And it can be expensive. Now I do buy it to supplement. But for the longest time I had all these wonderful papers they would save for me. And that was good because I wasn't precious with it. When you have a pristine white \$20 piece of

paper, you are less apt to dunk it and cut it up. It was kind of this idea: I have all this cast-off raw material but it's high quality, so I can do so much with it.

EZM: How did this idea come about? What is a happy accident, having the strips and wondering: what can I make out of it? Or was it that you wanted to build up paper and you went looking for materials?

HH: It was kind of a combination of both. I had been doing these large wall pieces with thinner layers of paper. I had been building up paper but the pieces were more fragile and there were less layers. And then in 2007 the journal Paper Monument approached me to do a portfolio for their first issue. But they wanted the work to be exactly the trim size of the journal.



"Hutch," 2012, porcelain, plaster, paper, crushed glass, agate

So the project forced me to think about the layers in a different way. It was like taking a five-foot square thinner drawing and condensing it into an object. The layers became densely embedded.

And also about this time, we went to Mexico, to a little fishing town along the Yucatan. There had recently been a hurricane. And I was watching the way they were rebuilding their structures while still living in sections of them. The strata or layers of material were visible. It was very much like a stacking process.

Also, my mother is an architect. Growing up, I was encouraged to build models. Not accurate models by any means. But that approach to the paper—building, stacking—that structural approach must have informed my process.

EZM: So you have this virgin sheet of paper, no color in it.

HH: right, it's white.

EZM: And what's the process for coloring it?

HH: I use all kinds of dye. And the paper will sit in the dye for days. Some- times I'll take it out and then stick it in water so that the water leeches some of the color out. It's always different. For Joy I wanted to limit the palette to yellows whereas in other pieces the palette may be more haphazard.

EZM: So you work on a single piece, going through the different processes—working the plaster, dyeing the paper—its not like you have a stack of pre-dyed paper you turn to with different pieces.

HH: It's simultaneous. I combine the plaster and minerals, put it in a mold, add sections of porcelain and paper. It all dries together and then I go back and glue in additional sections of paper.

Some of the paper is functional—where I'll use paper to serve as a dam. I wedge it into the plaster cavities so there are not too many gaps. If there's too much of a gap, it's not as sturdy. Then I add plaster on top and cut down the paper sections to create facets. So before I cut it down, it looks like these paper sections jutting out.

My studio is a mess. You can find paper shards everywhere. EZM: Where do you fire the ceramic parts?

HH: I do these at Denison. I use their kilns and their wheels. They have an amazing clay facility over there.

I had done some basic hand building with clay before. But I hadn't worked seriously with clay until we moved to Ohio. There's a clay culture there. Much of the clay is mined in Ohio because geologically it was a prehistoric swamp. So the land is rich with these clay bodies. And it made me want to try working with clay.

EZM: I remember your earlier work; they were also reliefs with metallic accents.



"Step," 2012, porcelain, plaster, paper, crushed glass, fluorite, quartz

HH: Those were Styrofoam covered in silver foil and resin and glitter. EZM: So these ceramic, plaster, and stone pieces are not so far away. HH: It's not so much of a jump. It's a similar aesthetic but there's a shift.

EZM: Looking at these different rocks, I'm struck by the transparency of some, the density of others. I'm not a geologist..... But how do you choose which rocks to use?

HH: I am not a geologist either. The choice is formal; it's about transparency, sheen, color. I'm especially drawn to the pyrite. It seems slightly different and foreign to me than all the other minerals. The color, the iron, the little cavities, the way it glitters, the irregularity of it, the palette of it is so different.

EZM: And this is quartz?

HH: I think this is rose quartz. My mother-in-law brought it back from Malawi. She was there doing a world aid mission trip. And she came back with plastic bags of quartz for me.

EZM: So do you often receive those types of gifts?

HH: Yeah, I do. And I love it. But I also just buy them like any other material. There are two older women in Ohio who I buy rocks from. There is one woman whose husband was a rock hound; that's what they call them: his hobby was rocks. And he passed away and she was left with all these rocks. She opened a shop and it's organized by color, not by geology or age or region, just all these boxes of colored stones. Sometimes I'll go into rock stores and the salesperson will tell me about rarity. But that's not what intrigues me.

The stone included in Seer is a seer stone; it's a new-age spiritualism reference. It's egg-shaped, it occurs naturally, and then is shaved in half. Some people use it for positive energy. I get asked that about those meanings, if that's why I choose to use certain stones.

EZM: But for you it's not content but formal? HH: It is more formal.

I am also interested in Viennese handsteins. At the Kunsthistorisches Museum they have a special Kunstkammer display that includes these hybrid objects with minerals and

clay. I saw a cabinet of curiosities show years ago at a gallery in SoHo. And the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a lot of relics from that same period. They're in the Northern Renaissance Decorative Arts section, installed with other objects and surrounded by tapestries. They're not considered formal sculpture; they're on the art historical fringe.

The handstein objects are typically presented in this period format. They're usually shown in context, in relation to other objects and collections of objects.

EZM: So in speaking about this idea of collections, do you prefer your work to be shown in a grouping?

HH: They don't have to be shown together. They're so dense; they can function on their own. But I do like what happens with relationships. They don't have a particular orientation. But I like them closer to eye-level. Because the surface is such a huge part of the viewing experience, I like them hoisted up a bit. They could be on a pedestal too.

EZM: The smaller pieces call to mind those Picasso absinthe cups from the teens.

HH: I have images of those in my studio. And the guitar construction, too. That hybrid between painting and sculpture really interests me.

These two here, the smallest in the show, are the most recent.

For this piece, *Pearl*, I threw a pot and then sliced through and re-folded the ribbons of clay.

EZM: So then for *Pearl* you folded the clay ribbon around this rock here?

HH: No, this isn't a rock. This is poured plaster with mica and glass. But it is rock-like. And I am including mica, which is a natural material from the earth.

And this one, *Step*, reminds me of an Arthur Dove sun. That is the bottom of a pot, originally part of an earlier pot that fell apart. The force of the wheel creates these amazing rings and spirals of color on the bases. Of course you could paint it

these colors after the fact. But I like the idea that this is something that was given to you.

EZM: So you like the chance operation?

HH: Very much so. It creates these problems I can try and solve.

Often my palette is more random than for instance the palette for *Joy*. When I'm sandwiching these dyed pieces of paper together, I'm often less aware of the palette. I might have a sense of how the palette will turn out when I'm slicing through the papers, but in some ways the end result is a surprise.

EZM: Some of the works seem to have a facial quality. I'm thinking of *Six* and *Joy*.



HH: They do. When I was building *Six*, I was thinking of it as architectonic. But as I was shoving the paper in and adding elements to the composition, the contours started to become more facial. It almost became an Arcim- boldo.

I find *Joy* to be very mask-like; it's more wide-open, more painterly. Last summer I saw the Menil's *Upside Down: Arctic Realities*, an exhibition including Inuit masks. They were amazing. They weren't totally solid; they had openings. It grabbed me. I think ever since I saw that my work has sort of referenced that—where there are parts that jut forward and create voids or cavities.

I had compulsion before to keep building on top of the composition, to keep filling and filling the cavities. But now they can have these pockets. I think the Inuit masks gave me a sense of freedom, a license to leave spaces open—that you don't have to resolve everything

I less and less clean it up. I used to be much more careful about cleaning up the surfaces. In a similar way to letting some of the spaces not be filled.

Hilary Harnischfeger and Tommy White

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Elliott Zooey Martin is a curator and writer living in Houston.