

COMBING THE SKY: Notes on the Art of Dave Richards

In the late 20th century, there are as many ways of being an outsider as there are methods for putting together a press release. Anyone who has waited on the sidelines long enough, who once enjoyed fleeting success in seasons past, or who has built up a surplus of gripes about how the art world purports to run itself qualifies as being an honorary outsider for a day. At the present moment, being in the center spotlight doesn't even disqualify one from claiming outsider status, since everyone knows that true genius – no matter how toasted and lionized – is always misunderstood.

Chicago's art scene for more than a quarter-century has been characterized by what we might dare refer to as the over-determination of the outsider, in terms of an archetype towards which trained artists aspire. From the authentic inner visionary qualities in the work of Joseph Yoakum and Henry Darger, or the high-minded woodsiness of H.C. Westermann, to the pop-culture outsider appropriations of the mid-sixties Hairy Who phenomenon, the groundwork has always been in place for a new addition to the outsider discourse to take root and flower in the City of Big Shoulders. However, since the art establishment justifiably prides itself on its well-honed techniques of promoting outsiders within a mainstream context, the whole issue of outsider consciousness seems ripe for being shifted to an insider/outsider dialogue that is at once subtler and more accurate in terms of its relationship to the "real" world of galleries, collectors, museums and curators.

I find this background helpful while circling the topic of Dave Richards' work, because it seems to me that Richards has gradually (and perhaps unintentionally) uncovered a means by which the label "outsider" can be revamped into a posture that serves to both enthrall and liberate the respective roles of artist and viewer. On the other hand, we perceive several stylistic traits in Richards' work that smack of pure outsider consciousness: a hermetic and even obsessive relationship to materials and techniques; repeated references to a *deus ex machina*, or cosmological structure into which human consciousness is subsumed, a highly evolved state of whimsy (as opposed to frivolity); and a midway positioning between abstraction

and representation in order to extract an uncanny sense of evocativeness from his forms.

On the other hand, Richards clearly frames his work within a lexicon that is visually part of the Western art tradition. His interest in both drawn and erased surfaces, his strangely obdurate yet penetrating palette, his crisply symmetrical compositions and his remarkable gift for cutting and arranging flat, low-relief forms into complex assemblage constructions – all go toward underlining the fact that, regardless of whatever inner sources one may propose for Richards' work, his is not a pictorial intelligence that concerns itself with primitivism, escapist fantasy or pop-culture kitsch. It is also worth pointing out that among the most intriguing aspects of Richards' oeuvre are stylistic qualities – his involvement with infusing his work with a half-unfinished look, for example, or his deep-seated distaste for bright and/or shiny surfaces – that appear to have been plucked from the sky, historically speaking.

In terms of discussing subject matter, Dave Richards is a very difficult artist to pin down. His slightly goofy titles – Pocket Pool, Wheel of Fortune, Stupidity and Madness – only go some way towards defusing the work's unflinching seriousness of purpose. Yet we are hard-pressed to articulate what exactly these things are, especially since the figurative and abstract elements within the work seem to blend together almost aggressively, lending the work a self-imposed muteness that leads us to suspect that the artist would prefer to keep us guessing rather than let us in on his secrets. In gazing into Richards' constructions, I am frequently put in mind of astral diagrams or sundials, since the emanations of obliqueness one receives are checked by a sense that whatever formula the artist is using, he employs it in a mesmerizingly accurate manner.

It could be that the category we are looking for here has something to do with "psychic landscapes," the sort of framework employed since Surrealism largely to describe hippie art or such other manifestations of the Psychedelic Age. In Richards' case, I would bend the idea a bit to embrace autobiography. Certainly it does not require a great deal of discernment to single out the underlying human tones of pain, even loneliness that infuse this work. A still more potent sense of

identity is provided by the struggle between the generally unassuming nature of Richards' picture-constructions (their "take-me-as-I-am" flavor) and a more latent sense of communicative urgency that one picks up without quite knowing from where.

Codified, obscure, laden with feints and riddles, one wonders if Dave Richards' pieces form the inner map from places he's been to that we can never hope to visit. Even as parts of them unfold, other parts wrap back up into themselves, leaving the viewer stranded on the brim of quick fulfillment, yet still caught in the throes of expectation. It's a soliloquy, perhaps, valid only after the point where one has leapt the chasm of the knowable and proceeded without a flashlight. If it comes at all, illumination hinges on how much we all risk together in daring to be misunderstood.

Dan Cameron