

The Art of Found Objects: Interviews with Texas Artists- Patrick Turk



Figure 73. Patrick Turk, *The Superorganism: Concrecence*, 2012-2013
Found images, clear acrylic, construction paper, Swarovski crystals, 46" X 46" X 4"
Courtesy of the artist
Photograph: Isabel Cuenca



Q. When did you know you wanted to be an artist? When did you know you were an artist?

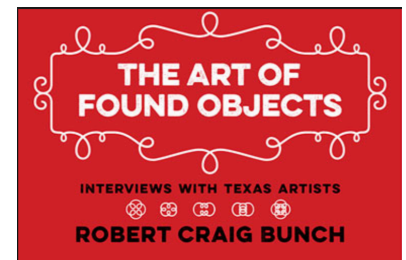
A. I discovered an interest in making art in my early teenage years. By the time I had reached my early to mid-twenties, I feel like I had really begun developing my own voice. It was important to me to be making work that was exciting and impressive. I had developed and discovered some process, in terms of cutting, constructing, layering, and blending methods that I really ran with. I felt like my work was becoming more mature and unique. As far as “knowing” about being an artist, I believe that the desire and intention to become an artist are closely associated with actually being an artist. By my twenties I knew that making art was an important part of my life, and that I intended to keep on making art, regardless of my success with it. When it’s part of who you are, and you are going to make art, no matter what, then you are an artist, At least that is one way to look at it. As we know, it is hard to even answer the question “What is art?” and “ What is an artists?” They are really complex questions, but I think it is possible to think about those ideas in this simpler and more intuitive way.

Q. Radial symmetry figures prominently in some of your collages, either as an overall pattern or in the details. This can evoke the mandala, a rose window, a flower seen from above, or the view through a kaleidoscope. Why radial symmetry?

A. I think it precisely relates to the fact that you have all those examples to associate with the form. For me it is a very intuitive thing. Circles are an intensely integral part of our physical world. They are important within mathematics and physics, and also in natural forms and parts of the psyche. All of this enables us to relate to, understand, and have an affinity for circular forms. The mandala in particular is very beautiful, because it shows repeated images, which create complex and interesting circular form.

Q. Repetition of images is central to much of your work. What challenges does repetition pose? What advantages does it offer?

A. In my work I often use repetition to help me create movement and to abstract certain images. Movement and pattern are very prominent features in most of my work. They help create a sense of cohesion and unity within the piece. Often I am less interested in narrative and more in how we relate to purely visual, abstract aspects [of art]. As far as challenges go, the biggest challenge is acquiring the number of images I want to include in the repetition. I usually buy multiple copies of the books I work from for just this purpose. I don’t like to use photocopies (although I have done so on a very few occasions). I always have to work within the limits of my source material, which pushes me to be more creative, especially when it comes to using repetition as a style or a tool.



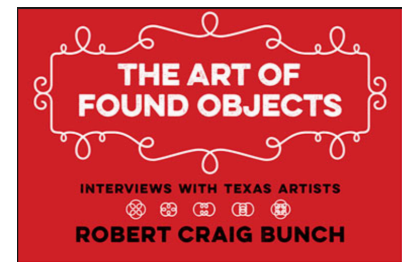
Q. You have strived for, and achieved, very painterly effects in some collages. Why?

A. I initially began working in collage because it was a very portable way to make art while I was traveling for work. As I got more into it I realized that the medium had a lot of potential beyond the typical “patchwork” style you often see. I think my work often looks painterly because it has a surface that is densely layered with transitioning colors and shapes that often blend gradually and create a lot of movement. I am not usually consciously trying to make it look specifically like a painting; it just a visual style that I am interested in.

I am also drawn to work that involves especially painstaking process with complex, maybe even deceptive results. It can be like a magic trick or an illusion; the harder it is to understand, the more fascinated you become with it. Sometimes I make collages that resemble other media, such as drawing or digital art. The interesting thing about mimicking digital art is that while it is easy to believe that a computer can render amazing things with graphics, it is much harder to believe that humans can achieve similar effects by hand. The same goes for drawing. It is easy to pick up a pencil and draw a line, but it is much more difficult to cut a strip of paper as thin as a line, and control it in the same way.

Q. You describe yourself as a self-taught artist. How have you gained your knowledge of art and art history?

A. I feel like my knowledge of art and art history is relatively limited. I mostly just follow artists that I like. I am fortunate to have friends who are also artists, which is great because they expose me to a lot of ideas that I might not discover otherwise. I also use a lot of art books as source material and frequently end up reading them as I cut them up. I have actually learned a lot of interesting things this way. I took art all through high school, so I have some very basic knowledge that comes out of that, especially about process. I really just chose a medium that I liked and then spent thousands of hours experimenting with techniques and materials. I think there are pros and cons to being self-taught versus going to art school. Much of what I learned could probably have been learned faster in an academic setting. But I think being self-taught has helped me avoid the academic clichés and excessive self-consciousness that seem to be a frequent byproduct of a more formal art education. Ultimately, making the work is what matters, not how you get there.



Q. Smaller, earlier 3-D works formed of cut papers encased in layers of resin have given way to larger 3-D works in light boxes with moving elements. What are you trying to achieve? Are these collage, assemblage, dioramas, sculpture ...?

A. The light boxes are the time machines. I'm not sure what you would categorize them as, maybe dioramic collage-sculptures? I think I'm trying to achieve a reinterpretation of space. I want to mess with "normal" perception, our relationship with reality. In these 3-D works I am able to extend the space between the layers of a two-dimensional work into as many places as I like. The planar separation allows the viewer to explore the connections and relationships between the images in a more dynamic way. The relationships between the images become more active, more complicated, when they can be perceived from different angles.

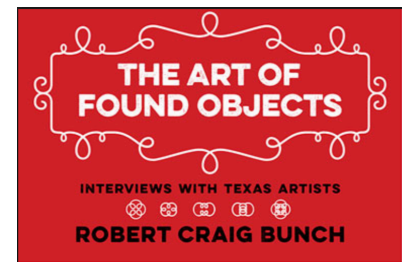
Q. Some viewers may be surprised to learn that you have refused to incorporate digital effects. Why?

A. The actions of our bodies are direct corollaries to our thoughts, our conscious and unconscious selves, and the act of creating art by hand more actively demonstrates this connection between mind and body. Your brain is sending the message, but it needs the body to translate it. Artistic creation, for me, is partly the byproduct of the symbiotic state of being. So I don't know that it's a "refusal," exactly, as it's not that I feel there's no place for digital art; I just don't know how the technology fits into that symbiotic state. For me, the computer would feel like a third party.

Q. What are the classes and some specific examples of source material that inspires you?

A. I'm a little bit obsessed with illustrations, especially the stuff produced from, roughly the 1920s to the 1960s. I love cover art from old pulp books and magazines. It had to define and sell the contents of the books it graced. It amazes me that an illustration has the power to distill the contents of an entire book into one provocative, compelling image. That idea is really attractive to me. I'm also a huge fan of the pinup masters of the forties, fifties, and sixties. I use the work of artists like Virgil Finlay, Gil Elvgren, and Antonio Vargas a lot. I particularly like their rendering of the lines and contours of the human body and their super-luxurious skin tones.

I love anatomical work and diagrams. If the body is a vessel, it is certainly one of the most complex and amazing containers I have ever seen. Studying it makes me wonder: what does it contain, and where does the vessel begin and end? If we use our skin as the boundary it is fairly simple: it contains everything. But as we move inward the definitions and parameters of the vessel begin to change dramatically. The lungs may contain air, but



the blood is what contains the oxygen. Our muscles house bones, and our bones house marrow. Our skull is a container for our brain, and our brains are containers for our thoughts, memories, and experiences. I'm fascinated by all these complex relationships we have within ourselves.

Overall I don't tend to use photography in my work, but I do frequently employ nature photography and satellite imagery, especially for the background or early layers of a piece. The fields of color and texture are especially useful for that.

Q. Which artists have meant the most to you?

A. I tend to gravitate towards visually complex work and involved processes. I like a lot of styles and work from many time periods, but those are the characteristics that seem to consistently appeal to me. A few artists who come to my mind are Fred Tomaselli, Mary McCleary, M.C. Escher, Virgil Finlay, Julie Bell, Tom Friedman, and Hieronymus Bosch.