

Hull, Timothy, *Deep Histories: Tom Burr, Art in America*, October 1, 2010

Deep Histories: Tom Burr

by *timothy hull* 10/01/10

In the 1990s, Tom Burr exhibited with Colin de Land's seminal American Fine Arts gallery in SoHo, a locus for 1990's Ideas and Identity art. Burr's work was central to the arguments of the time; as he made art that critiqued the transformations of 42nd Street and Central Park as metaphors for the widespread loss of sexualized gay meeting places. 20 years on, Burr's work continues to mine the darker, quieter sides of memory, time, architecture and persona. Through sculpture invoking interior architecture and mixed media collage tacked up like in a laboratory, or a teenager's room, Burr zeroes in on iconic and tragic figures like Truman Capote, Frank O'Hara, Jim Morrison and Chick Austin, breathing new life and associations into history. In recent years, Burr has showed prominently in New York at The Sculpture Center and the Swiss Institute New York, and he continues to exhibit widely across Europe. We caught up with Burr before the opening of a group show at the new location of Bortolami Gallery, where his work is currently included in a group exhibition.

TIMOTHY HULL: I want to begin with Marcel Proust, who outlined three types of memory: one that is subjective and willfully recalled; another, collective, representing memories one subjectively remembers but did not necessarily experience; involuntary memory, provoked by the senses and recalling, in an almost mystical way, a truth from the past. To me, it seems your work exists amongst these three spheres: Do you believe that your work can have a symbiotic relationship to multiple realms of memory?



CHICK CLIPS, 2008. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

TOM BURR: That's an interesting way of looking at the structure of human memory... I do like thinking of memory and recall in terms of levels—ones with overlapping circles. Particularly in regard to what we want to desperately hold onto (as private) and what slips away into that which might be public. There's a messy place between them. It's interesting to think of this in terms of audience, inasmuch as I create work that people have various level of access to—invoking intimate knowledge and a nagging cultural awareness, between subjective and objective.

HULL: Your portraits and the figurative sculptures that you have been working on recently, which you make simultaneous to other media, are barely figurative yet completely resonant of their subjects. Can you talk about the goal of using sculpture in order to evoke a presence or personality?

BURR: Sure, for a long time, most of my work came from a sense of architectural containment—describing or showing the place, the space, or the structure where the figure was or could have been... it was the surrounding of that particular body that interested me and took its cues from architecture or from sculpture that referenced architectural space. And of course, the division of space between people, as in bathroom stalls or movie-house seats. Then I started to think more of who the person may have been who occupied some of these territories—to go after some notion of presence instead of that of absence.

HULL: How does the pursuit of the historian fit into your process?

BURR: Well, particularly early on in my work, I always had on my mind the notion of reconstructing histories through a subjective lens, because that is generally how histories are constructed. It was my interest

to make that very apparent... I was definitely working that way more in the past. Now, because my work has a certain momentum through time, I'm more interested in the mechanics of that and not necessarily historical revisionism or something didactic. HULL: I'm reminded of a remark of Proust's about photographic images that, "a photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality, and shows us things that no longer exist." And so I wonder, how unreliable can memory be? Does photography and appropriation play a special role in the capturing of time elapsed? I don't mean in a literal way. BURR: I've always had a sort of suspicious relationship to photography... I've always felt that it left something out; let you down; or it's flatter than... Where I've used photography it's been rather tentative...



ADDICT-LOVE, INSTALLATION VIEW, 2008. COURTESY SCULPTURE CENTER.

HULL: But you've both utilized photos that you've taken and photos that you've found. What's the difference between the personally created or the discovered photo? Are you tapping different auras? BURR: I think I've always tried to create something of an equivalence. When I take photos for myself I'm trying to claim whatever it is as a sculptural element, like a hedgerow, a public restroom, or a building. Likewise when I find a photo, I'm interested in the physicality of that. I want to use pictures for what they portray, as well as itself as a physical thing. I

want them both working in the same direction at the same time!HULL: You've used this appropriative physicality of photos in works like "*Brutalist Bulletin Board* (2001), and so I am interested to hear your thoughts on the queer aesthetics of the brutalist style of architecture.BURR: The first time I worked with that imagery was for an early bulletin board that juxtaposed images of Jim Morrison with these Paul Rudolph buildings from my hometown of New Haven, which added a heightened sense of my own autobiography. It's important to have multiple parallel reasons to include something in your art so you can't be pinned down to any one. But the idea of Brutalism as an abject, ugly, and bulky architecture was appealing to me, because of its rebellion against conventions. There is a real subversive contradiction there because Brutalism became the dominant style of government and municipal architecture, yet it also had an erotic quality to it. I was interested in that contradiction; the latent adolescent rebellion of Brutalism.



WORN: FOR MR. CAPOTE, 2006. COURTESY BORTOLAMI GALLERY.

HULL: What is the critical difference between your public, site-specific works and works that are found in the gallery setting?BURR: I don't know if there is a difference really. There's a lot of garbage and static that accompanies each part of the process... some works of mine have functioned as site-specific-modular works such as *Deep Purple* [2000] [a scaled-down re-creation of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) painted dark purple] and that particular piece has exhibited in completely different spaces, functioning in totally different ways with each iteration, whether it be in a gallery, outside in a field, or in an urban plaza.HULL: Do you think *Deep Purple* changed in each iteration, or did it impose itself on the space each time it was re-located?BURR: I think it was more the latter, because the work grew out of a critique of the orthodoxy of site-specificity... I wanted it to

be more like a pup tent than a Richard Serra. Yet it definitely imposed itself on each and every space it's been, dramatically drawing attention not only to itself but also to its surroundings. HULL: This may sound like a left-field question... do you believe in ghosts and other psychic phenomenon? What is the nature or role of ghosts in your life or work? BURR: Do I believe in ghosts? Well, I suppose this is a similar question to the one earlier on about modes of memory or history... because I think that ghosts do exist as buoyed by a collective memory or consciousness regarding a person or the idea of a person. Our desire for lingering essences of people is enormously powerful and can certainly take on the trappings of a phenomenological experience. HULL: Did you read Herbert Muschamp's Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* from 2006 on the queer space of New York and the loss of 2 Columbus Circle? I kept thinking about your work, the idea of the collective memory of a gay audience, queer space and architecture. BURR: What I found so compelling about what Muschamp wrote was how disabled a collective memory can be in the absence of the people who can remember it, like the massive gay audience of New York that succumbed to AIDS. So that was extraordinary, to talk about buildings or ideas disappearing as the memory of them dissolves. I've often thought that style is political, so it was an amazing example of a certain applause being silenced for a building that was more important not for its appearance but for the style and people it subtly represented. HULL: How does this politics of style relate to you work? BURR: Sometimes I try to neutralize myself from being too subjective; camouflage has always held a certain interest for me... going undercover. Sometimes people think my work is either too subjective, and sometimes it's totally blank to them. If people don't have a subjective relationship to it, that spirals me into thinking a lot about the nature of subjectivity. It's strange... It seems that if people can't tap into something that they can collectively or personally understand, then they almost see it as not there-like 2 Columbus Circle, or even brutalism.