

July 2012

James Rains: This text has been edited down from a longer conversation that began with a discussion of your performances, but you often speak about your object-based works—which this show at A Pallazo focuses on—as themselves "performing." I wonder if you would explain how these walls are meant to function?

Brendan Fowler: The walls come out of the crash pieces. People were asking how I made those and I wanted to demonstrate something without giving it all away—we can get back to the crashes—and so I made the first wall, Fall 2009 Wall (Flowers in Terry/Cindy's Garden 1 and 2, Fall 2008 West Coast Tour Poster - D L, L, E, D, 3 Screen Flower Print, 2 Screen Flower Print, ANPQ 25 Copy Blocks), for a show at Rental in 2009. It was designed to show how the frames were made, how the backs were assembled to provide an innate armature for the other pieces. It was just assembled by screwing frames to each other, in an alternating face to face configuration. It leaned against a pillar in the gallery, and when it was there it functioned like some kind of compromised public display and also a real barrier, a real wall. By this time I had already made several heavy duty plywood-backed "production flats" for my home and studios and I became curious about integrating these construction methods into the picture walls.

At this point you adapted from these "production flats" a structural outer frame made from construction grade lumber, two-by-fours, which you established as an equal framing device to that of the more traditional picture frames it was supporting, reframing a series of other frames within a larger single piece. How did you arrive at the addition of drywall?

It was so close to that already, formally, structurally, and so eventually I just made some with the plywood and drywall attached to one side. It was a funny hybrid object, sort of a "normal wall" built around one of my photo/sculpture walls. But the fact that it was plywood backed immediately located it in the gallery/museum/institutional context—this is how you build walls if you are going to be hanging art on them. Now it was part busy display, part minimal object, with a pristine eight-by-four-foot "wall" just waiting.

Did you know right away what it was waiting for?

Well, the most obvious thing probably would have been to hang one of my own pieces on it, but I thought this would confuse legibility, like, is this one big piece? At that point the clear demonstration—actually, really the purpose, the intent of this work became the idea to hang

someone else's work on it, which begat the exchange I'm still wrestling with, which is how to get someone else's work onto it to demonstrate this.

How have you tried so far?

Well, the first time I showed these was last year at Untitled. It was my solo show so the wall sections meant to hold someone else's work were left blank, but this just looked like a gesture to do with minimalism. Then, in December of last year, Untitled had Matt Chambers and I do a two person booth at Art Basel Miami. We made it kind of like a maze with three separate entrances, and my eight-by-four-foot

walls holding his eight-by-four-foot paintings. I think it worked, formally, but the works kind of disappeared onto each other. Neither of these shows was as legible as I would have liked.

Why didn't you hang more obvious works on the walls?

Right, right, I left out the most important thing about these pieces which is that I don't decide what goes on them. I will design them, build them, assure their stability and weight bearing capacity, and then they are turned over to another deciding body, whoever is receiving them or curating the context into which they are entering, the curator, artist/curator, collector/curator, collector, whoever. This has become the whole point of these works—well, not the whole point, but a big part. Above all they are about creating more potential, literally, more display space to be used as the recipient decides. This could also be the potential for less open space, as well, or it could kind of be whatever you make it to be.

Have you seen them activated to your liking yet?

Well, that's the thing, as well, is that it is not about my liking. It's about me making them and handing them over. In fact, the extent of my "liking" is just that I would like to see them activated at all. I appreciate very much the installation that Matt Chambers and I made for Art Basel Miami, although, as I said, I don't think it was so clear. Since then, the Hort family hung a Mike Kelley on one for their public collection viewing, which was an amazing surprise and honor. It was just after he passed, and I had never gotten to meet him, but of course he was a hero of mine. And in a recent group show at Shane Campbell in Chicago, on one side of a freestanding wall configuration of mine Paul Cowan installed one of his scented wall paint pieces—it is like a very pale green that has been scented with vetiver—and a half of a Dan Rees squished monoprint/diptych painting was installed

over that. On the other side there was a Chadwick Rantanen pole. I didn't determine any of this and it was really exciting to see so much happening there, especially the Rees on the Cowan on the Fowler, given that those are both projects that deal with installation variables, agency, and this sort of non-collaborative arrangement /exhibition design/curation /non- collaboration collaboration as well. All of those parameters aside, even, I loved seeing the support on support on support.

So, from this conversation we're going to produce a text for the magazine ANNUAL, as well as the press release for your show at A Palazzo, in Brescia, Italy. In addition, you have mentioned that the text from the press release will appear in some of the works within the actual show, is that correct?

Yes, I'm still trying to imagine it myself, but the show at A Palazzo is largely planned around these walls, which was A Palazzo's request. However, since it is a solo show, it becomes a lot about demonstrating how these wall pieces work without anyone else's work to demonstrate. This text is going to appear within the show, probably printed over photographs which will hang next to blank white canvasses on the walls. The white canvasses are placeholders which I am not authoring. I am showing them almost like a "your art here" advertisement. After having a year of studio visits in which I would explain, like, "imagine an Amy Sillman painting here" and people not getting it, I started hanging blank white canvasses: "okay, so imagine that this was a so and so painting or something." There is an idea here about legibility at the cost of legibility, and I want people to understand it if they are there in person or looking at it in reproduction, on the internet.

So do you see this as a cynical position?

No, I don't think it's cynical at all, I think it's functional. The show is about space.

Is the show about the internet?

No, it is about looking, navigating space, experiencing a space, and the practicalities of looking, one of which is that the internet opens up a lot more potential for people to see the show, at least in reproduction.

As well, it is about what happens after the show, what happens to these walls and these things, demonstrating the beginning of possibilities, potentials for non-collaborative juxtaposition—this request, really, for this collaborative non-collaboration. These pieces are going to be here for these months and then the exhibition ends, at which point they will spend a lot more time in other spaces,

other institutions, homes, other galleries, storage, probably. They were created for the occasion of this show at A Palazzo in Brescia, Italy, but they will spend far more time somewhere else, or they will be destroyed somewhere, which is likely, as well.

But why the plan to imbed this text in the objects? This is literally what the press release is for.

It is, but it is also what the work is for. There is obviously an array of access points to this text. You could be reading this in any context right now, or in several different contexts, anyways. It could be an email of the press release from the gallery, or a website—their website, A Palazzo's, or another art website that posts press releases—it could be one of the pieces in the gallery, or that piece in another gallery, or in some other building, someone's place, it could be in our piece for ANNUAL or a different magazine if the piece is reproduced somewhere else.

And so how are the crash pieces meant to function?

Well, they came out of this idea of a still of the collision when all of the players are improvising, playing free and then hit on the same note, [hits hands together] Boom! That moment frozen in time. I have made a bunch of them over the years because I am still curious about the format, I'm still trying to understand it myself, how it works, what it does. I have come to see that they are kind of slapstick, sometimes I think they look like if Conan [The Barbarian] was set in an art gallery in the 90s. I'm not sure how they fit with other work in the world. In person the scale is sort of strange; they seem fixed and yet feel much more tenuous than they actually are. They are obviously very, very "fake," as in they look like something which happened but clearly didn't, or couldn't have, but is there nonetheless. I think they also look like flowers.

You have spoken a lot about flowers as being symbolic of an exhaustion of content, are these pieces exhausted of content?

I think of them as complications of content. The content is there—the titles always afford you more information, more context—but it is maybe sometimes defeated by its formal state.

The content is repurposed; a photo of a mirror reflecting the color black is now functioning as a mirror itself in some of the works. A two-by-four-inch in one photograph is leading your eye into a neon lighting fixture in another, but you have to really look to discern where one begins and ends.

Yes, but the second example you mentioned is a basic principle of collage. The first example, the repurposing of the mirror, this is an idea that I really care a lot about; it is something that I am trying to work with intentionally. We're proving points, demonstrating possibilities within the materials, like if you place a dark image—a dark surface—behind a very reflective sheet of plexiglass it creates a literal mirror. This is not a problem, this is a tool repurposed from other tools. There are also keys, my studio keys, the keys to the site of production, they appear in this new work in a way that precludes and negates other images, covering and locking the images beneath. The keys become locks.

You said a moment ago that the crash pieces are “fake,” how so?

They are what they are, but they look like they got here one way when really they got here another way. They imply this incident as a point of origin, the “crash” we keep referring to, but there was no crash. Rather, there was a very long and involved process in the studio by which they were conceived and an even longer process by which they were constructed. I don't want to say that my project is insincere by any means, but I have been thinking about these works on a continuum of inter-sincerity. I think they kind of exist between the poles of “sincerity” and “insincerity.” The images are very real, literal documentation.

Of course, implicit in the act of making an image we have some degree of mediation, but they are not “staged” photos—aside from the mirrors, which I think read as studio photography anyways, almost as graphics. The images are meant to be as honest to this problematic idea of a document of real life as possible, whereas their arrangements into the sculptures are only real in that they are really there on the wall.

Was this your point in making them in the first place?

No, it wasn't. I can say that other concerns prompted this work in the beginning. But I have grown curious about this idea of inter-sincerity as I have become more aware of it and my own natural inclination towards it. I don't totally understand it, but I am trying to learn about it.

(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)