

August 28, 2025

Em Rooney: I think a lot about Robert Frank's Americans when I photograph out in the world, especially when I've driven across the country in a car, because of how many photos he took from the driver's seat. As a result, a lot of his photos are of people in their cars. I like thinking about these within the context of "street photos" because the photographer is more protected in a car, as is the subject, than if they were just facing off on the street.

A lot of cultural knowledge can be gleaned from how people drive and how their cars are maintained, or utilized. I have so many photos from the American Southwest of people selling things out of the back of their cars, with the hatch up, making roadside pop-ups for produce or sunhats or whatever, especially on the American-Mexican border.

I was in Marfa in 2022, and my favorite piece from the Chinati Foundation, the only one I really still think about, is Robert Irwin's piece, *untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016. Afterwards, I read *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, which is a series of conversations between Irwin and Lawrence Weschler. In the book, Irwin narrates his personal history. He discusses contemporary art in Los Angeles, specifically his involvement in the Light and Space movement and how his life as an artist evolved through the various ways he supported himself financially. And one of the first ways that he made money was through competitive swing dancing, specifically the Lindy Hop.

Eric Veit: Wow.

ER: Then he started working on cars. It was just like the culture, the sort of working-class, lower-middle-class culture that he was a part of. He relates working on cars and competitive dancing to a craft ethos that was part of that particular zeitgeist. His relationship to finishing (walls, rooms, installations) stems directly from the work he did on cars, which I love thinking about.

EV: There certainly has been a shift from thinking about the artist as primarily a maker or craftsperson to thinking about the artist as primarily a thinker and researcher. The seeds were sown 100 years ago, but I feel like a shift happened around the time that we were coming of age as artists, and there was this transformation from the artist as studio-only to potentially post-studio. This idea that all the work that needed to happen could happen outside a studio, and you just needed to fabricate it or get it made by an actual craftsperson. It's an important investigation of what art can be and a very necessary one in the whole arc of history, but at this point, because we've academicized and institutionalized that mode of making, we have now begun to see what happens when you graduate successive generations of artists from schools that don't really know how to make anything. We've begun to see what the loss of touch looks like in art and it's something that I feel like I talk about with a lot of people that are not just in my generation, but throughout the art world; as technology and AI become more present in our life there's less and less human in the world.

In thinking about Robert Irwin as an example, there's so much nuance and poetry and non-analytic thinking in his type of making as opposed to translating everything through language before it becomes a physical thing.

ER: He's reticent to talk about the work in overly conceptual language. And he differentiates the California art scene from the New York art scene in relation to this sort of elitist intellectualism that was happening in New York.

EV: Yeah. He insists upon the craft and the felt experience of his work. The emotional and experiential. It's interesting because LA is still anti-intellectual. But maybe not in that same way.

ER: I was at David Ireland's house in San Francisco last weekend. Have you ever been there?

EV: No.

ER: David and Robert were definitely contemporaries, and actually, Ireland was connected to the light and space movement, which I didn't know before going to his house. He lived in the Mission, 500 Capp Street, for something like 30 years, and now it's a museum. Liz brought me there because it's been one of their favorite places. He spent the entire time that he was living there turning it into a living sculpture. But not in a kooky artist kind of way. Instead of tearing out the walls and repairing all the plaster, he lacquered the entire house—ceiling, walls, and floors. It almost looks baroque, like marble, but it's actually just all these different types of lacquer because it happened over, you know, a lifetime. Liz got a book in the gift shop called *500 Capp Street: Treatment Compilation*, and there are these spreadsheets that document what types of lacquer he used, what the dew point was outside, application time, the temperature, curing time, what kind of tool was used to buff, etc. Then all the windows have their own treatments. He pulled the molding out of all of the windows, so you can see the cast iron weights that control the window mechanism, and suddenly the windows become a powerful sculptural element of a much larger sculpture. Some of the windows are covered in copper plates so no light gets through, and some of them are covered in colored (mainly yellow and blue) film, so the light throughout the house is filtered. The chandeliers are really simple, with colored light bulbs attached to long brass fixtures. One that wasn't operational while we were there was just two propane torches blowing towards each other.

EV: Sounds amazing.

ER: It was making me think about Irwin's (*dawn to dusk*) piece and how each artist is utilizing preexisting architectures. That's why Robert Irwin is my favorite piece at Chinati because it wasn't just plunked there. He responded to a preexisting building. He transforms this abandoned army hospital with simple carpentry and some less-than-simple engineering. There is this connection too, between the exposed weights in the windows at 500 Capp street and the crank system Irwin devised to control the tension in the screens that divide the hallways in (*dawn to dusk*).

I think there is something similar in the way you combine found and made elements.

EV: I have always been really interested in admiring beauty as it exists in the world. Or maybe not even aesthetic beauty, but the beauty of something that's not technically beautiful, you know.

ER: Mhm.

EV: So there's a tension between admiring something and creating a space for the thing as it exists, and then editing it and transforming it into something else. A lot of times when I am making something, the most interesting things are unplanned.

ER: If you could come up with a number, what do you think the percentage of found versus constructed is in your work?

EV: I mean, it depends. I have no idea. I have no idea how to answer that question because at what point is something found, and at what point is it so manipulated that you call it constructed? If a painter is answering that question, are they like all my paint is found, or is it all 100% made because they made the image? One of the works in this show is pretty close to a straightforward painting, a panel with oil on linen that was adhered to the surface of muslin with enamel. So, to most people, they would probably consider that 100% constructed.

But certainly, in these smaller sculptures, the starting points are all die-cast aluminum vehicles that have been variably intervened in. Like this classical ice cream scoop nailed to the top of a small VW bug. In that instance, it's basically a combination of two readymades. Another one is a model of a Ford SVT F-150, which was a racing version of their most popular truck made around 2000. So many car companies have racing divisions to prove that they can make an engine that's really muscular and fast, even though they sell you one that is one-fifth of the power, because obviously nobody really needs that horsepower just to drive around town. So that is the body of the truck that I just basically stripped everything from. And then at the very end, I nailed a few smashed pennies onto the hood. So it's like a type of adornment. But most of the process in that one is removal, even though it started as a found thing. In a way it's also readymade nailed to readymade. But the readymade is extremely altered, extremely stripped.

ER: It's so satisfying sounding as a process, something that's subtractive. That's one of the things that's what I love about the windows at the David Ireland house. They are readymades—subtracting so that you can see what's inside—in doing so it becomes a whole new thing.

EV: Yeah. It's interesting how we have additive and subtractive processes. The most familiar subtractive process is something like rock carving. Like Michelangelo's *David*. But these days, most of the sculpture that we have in the world uses additive processes, for whatever reason. Maybe it's just because we have so many things already, you know, we don't need to carve stuff out of stone. I do think about those two forms of making as

interesting conceptual polarities. What does it mean to remove? A lot of these car works I've made started as toys. And that's where a lot of the obvious content starts from. People look at them and they're like, oh, cute. And children love them because they can tell that they're for them. But there's a transformation, and they hopefully don't look quite right, and regardless of how you choose to define it as an artwork, you could run across it on the street and be like, what is this? This is interesting.

A while ago a gallerist I know told me that if you find an artwork on the street you should be able to tell whether or not it's art and if you can't tell, well then it's not art. Kind of an extreme position for someone in their thirties to take and I'm not really sure how much I even believe him but it's certainly a reactionary position to take against how most people who are currently practicing art were taught, which is that if you call anything art, that's enough to make it art. Which is the foundation of so many research-based practices of the last decade that rely solely on historical narratives within existing objects. I've always been interested in the middle between those two poles or perhaps the edges, the peripheries, the boundaries of art. I have always been interested in how people define it.

ER: I was thinking a lot about this recently because I just went to go see the piece at Sky High again a couple days ago with my nephew and sister and I was thinking about how when I was in grad school I made this video of, you know, how sometimes they put up netting around scaffolding, both for shade and protection when people are working on the sides of buildings? In Philly, but really all over, when those projects lose funding but the scaffolding stays up and the netting ages and tears. People kept talking about my Sky High piece like it was a piece of jewelry or decoration for the building and, of course, that's not untrue. But more than anything, I was thinking about making something that did sort of confuse the viewer, in their relationship to looking at the building. I wanted it to look like a shred of something that would have been there for some other purpose but has slackened with time and exposure to the elements or something that has been sort of discarded. I was really thinking about the netting on scaffolding when it turns to shreds blowing in the wind and how it becomes an accidental adornment at an architectural site. Even if it's the result of economic depression, right?

EV: Beauty just happens. That's what's so nice about it. We put so much effort into building our spaces and making them do things for us and lighting them in beautiful ways. But then sometimes just before I enter a room, before I turn on the lights, even though the room obviously needs light, but when there's enough daylight that you can still see what's going on, I'm like, wow, the most beautiful thing is still just the sun barely lighting this room. We do so much. But then, still, nature is the most beautiful. Like it's the highest. And there's nothing that can be done about it.

ER: Yeah. Totally. Except maybe to find subtle ways to accentuate it. I just put up another huge mirror. Chris is always, like, how many mirrors are you going to bring home? But for me it's just figuring out a way to bounce light around the house.

EV: This is your deep photographic identity showing.

ER: Yeah, Also my love of plants, you know, I'm always just like, if I put a mirror here, then I can add a plant here, you know? It brings me so much pleasure and satisfaction to see how much a mirror changes the natural light in the house. It completely transforms it.

I still think that like that piece that I made in Millerton in that show Carlos curated that we were in together—the cross that was in the carpentry barn was like one of the most satisfying things that I've ever made and installed. Because of the way the light hit it but everything else in the space was dull from being covered in years of sawdust. It was so subtle. Invisible because of its scale and context but super visible because of the way the aluminum caught the light.

EV: It was the best possible location for that work. Nothing else would have looked good in that space. And then you also completely transform the barn, and all of a sudden you're like, wait, what is this place? This is a spiritual place? This is God's house? Who is God in this context? All by placing a welded steel cross in a dust-covered barn.

ER: It's so rare as artists that we get invited to respond to interesting architecture or space. I thought about that piece in the creation of the Sky High piece. I wanted to make something that looks like it should be there, but also is kind of invisible, but also glimmers.

EV: These are the types of practices that people were very obsessed with 50 or 60 years ago now, that had people driving down the New Jersey Turnpike going off about experience. But we've just been so pushed towards the idea that the only space that art can exist in is the marketplace for so long that it feels impossible to have it another way. Plenty of people in the art world say they are driven by experience but often it is the experience of scale or awe of luxury as opposed to phenomenological, emotional, or spiritual experience. Most Americans are hyper-skeptical of art and I don't really blame them because most media covers the financial part of it. Americans really use money as the sole arbiter of value and we've lost the ability to think about art simply as culture. And so when you do that thing where you just put a cross in a barn, you're just like, oh, wow, amazing.

ER: I know, it is so interesting to think about how little trust there is anymore. Not to go back to San Francisco, but I saw a Kunie Sugiura retrospective at SFMOMA. In the first room there were these massive photo emulsion prints on canvas. They were these really detailed textures like a dahlia, sand or a field of grass. I thought they were beautiful and also so hard to pull off because working with liquid emulsion is so technically challenging. But then when I saw that they were from the 70s, I was like, oh, this is something totally different. As the exhibition unfolds and you see how expansive and complex her practice is. I am such an open-minded looker because of teaching you have no other choice but to not be jaded. Even still, I thought thank God these were made in the 70's and 80's because if these were contemporary works of art, it would have been such a hardcore eye roll. I'm not impervious to thinking about contemporary artworks, first and foremost, in relation to the market. I was only able to view and appreciate them

in their historical context and to create value around them in that way.

What do you think about Robert Grosvenor?

EV: Oh he's great. I read an interview with him a while ago where he was talking about making the large scale car pieces, and he was talking about the removal of things. (Which is actually a reference for the F150 work in this show). But he was just like, I like taking things away because I just like the shapes. Tons of ink has already been spilled on cars in America, their symbolism, their role in the development of this country physically and ideologically, their ecological as well as social devastation because they trap us, atomize us and contribute to the anti-socialization of our cities. I like that Grosvenor could just essentialize all of that and be like this is a car, but this is not a car. You focus on the design. So therefore you focus on the car as a streamlined extension of the ego. Which is different from the extension of the ego that happens most often when people do aftermarket decoration on their own cars. The initial design expresses the broad ideas that exist in culture that are most often unspoken and implied. And I think that's kind of what Grosvenor's car works are about. The unspoken or sometimes even subconscious values brands are selling through these shapes.

ER: I fucking love his work. I love thinking about the car works, especially in relation to the things that aren't cars.

EV: Yeah because if it was just cars, you'd be like. Um, okay.

It's funny because when Naoki was here in 2021, we went to Karma's bookstore and he was like, oh, I kind of have been looking for this Grosvenor book. I'm going to get it. And then he saw another Grosvenor book and he said I'm going to get this one too. And so there were these two Grosvenor books, one from the 2017 Renaissance Society show and one from Karma. I read the text in both of them and the one from the Ren Society was just amazing. It was really in depth and went into all these different aspects, the more experiential and philosophical components to the practice and what it means to create enclosures and spaces with those weird brick pieces. And then the Karma one was just like: CARS.

ER: Well, there's the difference between Karma and the Renaissance Society.

EV: Yeah. The Karma version of his work was just *toys for adults*. Which is true, it's what's cool about cars. They are toys for adults. Everyone is involved. There's something universal about it in our culture in a way that's very unique to America post 1920. When we were thinking about the show and when we were thinking about it from a distance, we were both like: cars, that sounds like a cool motif to focus on. It's been a recurring motif in both of our practices. So why not highlight that, but take it and put it somewhere else? And this is what I think we're both saying about Grosvenor too, is that it's interesting as a component of a practice, but it's not necessarily interesting if that's the only focus. It's nice to identify it within a broader context. When I think about a car as a metaphor and then think about how I use that metaphor in my work and then what you were just starting to say with the Robert Frank photographs, there's so much that

we could talk about. We could be engaged in a conversation about cars in America for a whole day.

ER: I was thinking about the aluminum foil I'm using for these frames for our show and all of the aluminum foil pieces I've made were actually inspired by something you made in my studio when you and Elyse were here for a visit in 2020 or 2021 when my studio was in Great Barrington. You, like, bunched up a bunch of aluminum foil and turned it into an apostrophe or like a comma.

EV: Oh, really?

ER: Yeah. And I kept it as a studio charm. We were talking and you were basically just doodling with your hands. I like thinking about it especially now that we're having a show together because you've just done such a good job caring for my work over the years and you're such a good maker and have such a strong understanding of material things and you were just doodling. Thinking, listening and using your hands while you listened to make this perfect little aluminum foil apostrophe. I kept it on my studio desk for a long time. And then I made that first aluminum foil piece—*Lover's Year*. That little comma/apostrophe made me think about what an incredible material aluminum foil is. It's the Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt queer party culture outsider, garage artist type of thing. But also so practical, cheap, utilitarian and beautiful. And easy to work with. It's both additive and subtractive. So I was thinking about that when I was working on the frames and thinking about how decoration and adornment connect to both of our practices.

EV: Yeah. I love thinking about adornment. Surface, texture, materiality both physically and symbolically. Adornment can sometimes be relegated to the realm of fashion and therefore be less "important" or simply about appearances. But appearances are also everything.

I do have a recurring thought when it comes to adornment in my work which is that when it comes to connecting things, I really like using visible objects to do the connecting. As opposed to something like glue which is not really integrated—if that's the right word. I would prefer something to be held together with something meaningful, and glue sometimes feels like it's there to perform a task but is hoping to be ignored. Glue is supposed to be invisible: you don't list glue in the materials for a chair even though you use glue to glue the joints, right? And this thought leads me to just use nails. Or screws. Why not use these things that actually puncture the surface and then that puncture is meaningful too. Everything I make I consider in relation to the body and even something as simple as a piece of wood with something nailed to it becomes a type of body with clothing or armor. And when you nail a piece of metal to the surface of a piece of wood you're protecting it but you're also puncturing it. You're hurting it. And this singular action with two interpretations is interesting to me because it all depends on how you're choosing to interpret the subject. If the wood is embodied, the nails are violence, if the wood is merely symbolic the nails are protection.

But yeah in relation to adornment, I think that a lot of art can be read as simply as a

feeling or a tone and it is totally fine to make art like that and also to view art in that way. I certainly don't think this is the only way to engage but I do think it's valuable.

ER: There's something about the relationship that you have to objects and meaning that is specifically cultural. And it's really different from what my relationship to objects and meaning is. It's also different because I very rarely use found things, so I don't have to think about the life of an object before it comes into my possession. And when I do, I don't often think about it in those terms. I think of those few objects mainly as material—things that come into existence and deteriorate. It only has the meaning I've ascribed to it—except for the leather, hides, and bones. I do have a sort of “your body is a temple” relationship to animal parts. There are so many cultural and class-based sorts of perspectives embedded in how people use found objects, and maybe I do feel sentimental about them and that is why I don't use them very often. They have too much weight. It seems like you're really thinking about what the symbolic nature of the object is and what your alterations mean in relationship. And I choose more or less to not grapple with that.

EV: I do think in the way that you're describing. But also I like to think that I prepare my work to be seen without any sort of awareness of the history of the object. I oscillate between wanting to know the exact specific history of everything that went into an artwork and then also wanting to know nothing at the same time. I think that the interesting thing about reading art is that you start with nothing. You see it and you don't know. All you have are your own personal experiences. And then you have the opportunity to know more and more and more and more. Sometimes that information is inaccessible, but maybe you know where the artist got the piece of wood that they used to carve. That information might be important and it might not be important. Maybe it's just interesting. I think that it's always interesting to know more and the best art for me is continually expanded by knowing more.

ER: Yeah, I think that's true for me too.

When I was in LA I noticed that Anna still drives this car that she's been driving like literally the whole time I've known her. It's an old beat up, goldish Honda Accord. And the only bumper sticker that she has on it is “capitalism is a death cult.” It's parked outside of her gorgeous house, where everything is so intentional, colorful, open, and beautiful—like an extension of her art practice. And then she drives around this beater.

EV: How lovely.

ER: Totally. And she gets out of the car with her perfect bangs and her perfect lipstick. Yeah, exactly.