

CHRISTOPHER REINER

Born in 1969 in Annapolis, Maryland

Lives and works in Honolulu, O`ahu and on Kaua`i

Sculptor Christopher Reiner thinks that perhaps it was being the perpetual new kid in town—growing up, he rarely finished a full year in any school—that led to his becoming an artist. Head down so as not to be noticed, or make what might have been considered challenging eye-contact, his gaze had no place to turn but to what was on the ground, or otherwise overlooked. He found little things, like bottle caps, that could be assigned some meaning. Little did he know then that the capacity to look at the world sideways is the source of tremendous creative capital, but he has come to appreciate the ways in which thinking outside the conventional has become integral to his work.

Reiner first came to the islands in 1978, when his father was involved in establishing fast-food franchises. His creative bent was neither encouraged nor discouraged as he made his way through school; he drew a bit, but was much more interested in taking things apart and then putting them back together again. Function trumped aesthetics; how things worked was more important than how they looked.

After a two-year period out of high school, when Reiner was involved with a

girlfriend who played Alice-in-Wonderland at Disneyworld in Orlando, and drawing extensively through and after the end of their relationship, Reiner entered the Ringling School of Art & Design in Sarasota, Florida in 1991, initially majoring in illustration, but soon shifting to three-dimensional work. He graduated in 1995 with a BFA, having produced a thesis exhibition that already began to focus on the social and ethical aspects of technology, and the intersections of human and machine cultures.

Reiner returned to the islands in 1996, settling on Kaua`i to work as a designer of furniture, a profession he continues to pursue. Having been in charge of the wood shop at Ringling, he worked with architects as a detail craftsman, perfecting his skills in cabinetry. Along the way, he found an aesthetic niche through an affinity with an unlikely mix of sensibilities: a high modern (“form follows function”) imperative, a love of 1950s retro style, and a calling to become, as he notes, “...a steward/historian for wayward objects doomed for bulk pick-up.” From this he has developed the concept of “Obtainium,” a new addition to the lexicon of art. Though

the term might seem to suggest some newly-discovered space-age metal, this actually refers to “...found objects, rejected history...to be ever entombed in human unwanted. I am inspired by their potential stories and moved by their beauty. They become a homogenized whole, bringing their own bits of history to each piece, a wise seasoned whole.”

Reiner made his mark early on through the creation of award-winning, one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture that were really functional sculptures, often making use of found or recycled elements. Despite the humble nature of many of his materials, Reiner works with a high degree of craftsmanship, seeking continual refinement in the assembly and finishing of the pieces he creates. This applies not only to the custom furniture he continues to produce (having recently moved his shop from Kaua`i to Honolulu) but also to *TOSS*, the series of smaller-scale sculptures he has been developing since 2003.

Reiner’s sensibilities as an artist suggest a kinship with other inventive spirits as disparate as Jean Tinguely and Rube Goldberg. Both Tinguely’s kinetic (and often self-destructive) sculptures and Goldberg’s drawings for extraordinarily elaborate apparatuses designed to achieve

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a totally mundane or goofy end result were, in their own ways, wry commentaries on the seductions of technology. Reiner follows in this vein in asking us to consider what it might be like to live in a world in which nothing is left but left-overs, and the verdict is not yet in on who will prevail in the "man vs. machine" debate. Beneath the playful surface of Reiner's work lie some serious questions, as mechanical metaphors point the way to metaphysical pondering.

Reiner defines *TOSS*, the *Transportation of Situation Series*, as "...a group of 'vehicles,' modes of transport for happenings and situations that occur in daily life both introspectively and globally. These vehicles carry us through life's circumstances. Life is motion, vehicles are motion...moving to the next interaction that life casts our way..." Reiner, who continually trolls for materials that he can reanimate or reinvest with new purpose, may or may not begin with a working sketch, but will have a core idea, from the rituals of courtship (*The Astorian Propositioner*) to the rhetoric of political campaigns (*Smoke and Mirrors: a campaign*

caboose), from the interpersonal to the international. Each "vehicle" incorporates not only a central theme and context, but is furnished with bits and pieces that amplify that theme. Reiner is both a master craftsman and a playful wordsmith, often using puns (working off the dualities of meaning, as in the "jeans/genes" that provide an important detail in *A Vessel's... Vessel, Vessel*) to echo and reinforce the idea of multivalent fragments of the material world.

Sometimes it is not only the odd juxtapositions of elements, but their relative scale that is crucial. In *Rigged with Good Intentions*, a very tall mast, carrying six transparent square sails, sits atop a bowling ball hull—hardly a seaworthy design. As Reiner notes, "...Lots of sail area means you may fly at a clipper's pace, but if the boat doesn't float your intentions are sunk."

Reiner has a keen sense of the absurd and is able to hone in on human foibles with a perspective that is sardonic but not without affection. *Small Talk*, for example, explores the seemingly inescapable circularity of meaningless social conversation. The repetition of round forms provides ample symbolism. An old tea-kettle forms

the body of the apparatus, set on wheeled legs and surmounted with rotors, so that if it moved it would simply travel in aimless circles. The kettle is inset with porthole windows, and if one looks inside, a small chair made of a speaker rotates to observe a ticker tape of small talk traveling across the inner walls.

If Reiner can regard individual human folly with a touch of tenderness, he is much tougher when it comes to hype and hypocrisy manifested in the national or international arena. *Mediacracy* (Reiner's inspired conflation of "media," "democracy" and "mediocrity") takes the institution of news-reporting deftly to task. In *Foreign Affairs 'O' Phone*, the take-it-or-leave-it stance of a certain current administration is brilliantly encapsulated in an old rotary-dial phone, transformed into a catapult ready to discharge a message in a bottle.

Reiner's vessels and vehicles are both containers of meaning, layer upon quixotic layer of past and present, and imaginative modes of transport through the dizzying convolutions of life. We may not always know where we are headed, but we surely know that the ride will be wonderful.