

## **Hugh Russell**

b.1962, Cleveland, Ohio, lives in Lake Forest Park,  
Washington

exhibited in *Biennial V*

top left to right

*Curl*, 2010

*Singing Bowl*, 2010

*Press*, 2010

bottom left to right

*Partial Depth of Angst with Bliss in Moving*, 2010

*Stalker*, 2010

*Ship Inversion 1*, 2010

ink on paper

While working in my garage/studio on Kaua'i I re-discovered my past journal collection. Inside was a diary of past dreams, ideas, and plans for sculptures inspiring me to re-draw and reconnect. This set of drawings was selected from a series of 24.

## HUGH RUSSELL

*Born in 1962 in Cleveland, Ohio  
Lives in Kilauea on Kaua'i and in New York City*

Soap might seem an unlikely subject for art, but it makes perfect sense in the work of Hugh Russell, whose holistic vision of the world stresses a strong sense of interconnection, where "every piece of something is alive." Such vision sees the magic in the mundane, and transforms with a second look what might otherwise be visually and physically discarded.

Russell knew early on the capacity of his own creativity, but it was not until after a period of service with the U. S. Marines (1983-89) that he entered Kent State University for formal study in art. He began as a painter, but what he sensed as its limitations contributed to a shift in focus, moving through hybrid works combining painting and three-dimensional elements into sculpture and installation. Russell earned his BFA in sculpture with High Honors in 1992, and entered the MFA program in sculpture at Yale University. With his years of service in the Marines behind him, Russell experienced Yale as a kind of "art boot camp," another stage of basic and rigorous training which he not only survived but in which he thrived. In particular, Russell's intellectual and conceptual orientation was cultivated at Yale, and provided an important counterbalance to the more impulsive and intuitive aspects of his eclectic persona.

For his MFA Thesis work, completed in 1994, Russell created a half-suit of armor, which he himself wore for the exhibition. This wearable sculpture presented an extraordinary image of insulation and vulnerability, a concrete metaphor for the dialectic through which a person might navigate and negotiate relationships with the world. This work, entitled *Protection and Enhancement of the Creative Self*, as well as casts of his torso in which were embedded fragments of compost, signaled a growing interest in narratives centered in and around the body, an interest which would resonate in other series of work, including the photographs of soap.

Other works provide additional clues about the artist's perspective. The unlikely combination of rose petals and pieces of armor fabricated by the artist became a potent statement about strange beauty and the tension between the ephemeral and durable; the *Tri-drawings*, silhouette images of three small soldier figures, were created with carrot juice and rust, one instance in which the artist's predilection for going against the grain, for avoiding facile solutions, was clearly evident.

Since 1997, Russell and his wife, artist Rosa Silver, have spent several months each year in Kilauea on the

island of Kaua'i, where they are developing a small permaculture farm. This year they have chosen to make their neighbor island home their primary residence. The contrast between New York City and rural island culture could not be more radical, but Russell appreciates both the minimal social distractions and the opportunity to work with a different perspective. Experience in landscaping and carpentry learned from his father and training as a sculptor seem to fuse amicably in this ongoing project of creating an environment for life and work.

To more fully understand the way in which Russell works, and the way in which he thinks about his work, it helps to know that he is a collector as well as an artist. Moved more by a spirit of conservation than acquisition, Russell, who believes that everything relates ultimately to the body, has (perhaps in part to quell the fear of losing something of himself) become a collector of categories of things which relate in some way to a sense of intact corporeality, and which provide a tangible if highly idiosyncratic forensic record of existence. As the artist has noted, "I am obsessed with documenting my life. Collecting personal evidence has become a daily routine for roughly the

*(continued on page 9)*



**RUSSELL** (continued)

past 20 years. There can be a delicate line between fanatical obsession and creative expression. It is hard for me to throw anything away, especially ‘unnoticed’ beauty.” Earlier, Russell collected dirt from places visited around the world, and stones which served as talismans. His current collections now include personal lists, Chinese fortunes, and concert tickets—slight memorabilia. But the collections also include bloodprints of injuries endured while creating artworks, the *Naked Naturalist Poses* (a series of photographic nude self-portraits, taken from the rear at various inspiring sites around the world), and two more recently-begun and related collections which are included in this exhibition: mats of hair from his shower drain, and photographs of his personal soap use.

The drain catch series, begun in 1994, includes the actual accumulation of hairs, skin and soap residue which collect on the shower drain; when dried, each is a tidy and tangled mat of fiber, which Russell has carefully kept in chronological sequence in folded sheets of paper stacked in a shoebox. For Russell, the drain is a

kind of metaphysical filter, a mediation between two worlds, and the residue it catches a reminder that nothing ever really disappears. Even the simple process of exfoliation becomes a metaphor for a kind of temporal connection to past and future, as the body renews itself from within and releases itself at the interface with the world.

The soap series, begun at the end of Russell’s work at Yale, provides still more evidence of the artist’s articulation of body narratives, yet with an intriguing kind of indirectness. Here the artist provides us not with immediate artifacts, but with images which serve more as a kind of abstract and associative trigger. The series documents an ongoing process in which Russell would successively mesh an almost depleted fragment of one bar of soap with another new one. Thus, for example, *Blue Corn on Frankincense* over time evolves into *Frankincense on Lavender Glycerine*, thence to *Lavender Glycerine on Lemon Oatmeal*, and so on. Bars of soap are small, but Russell has photographed them in large-scale color images, and they are transformed into luminous, subtly colored sculptural forms. There is, moreover, a

strange kind of intimacy between each two layers of soap which echoes the connection between soap and skin.

As Russell has noted, there is a fine line between the expressive and the obsessive. This work suggests too that there is a fine line between routine and ritual. What is strangely compelling about these photographs and the process of loss and renewal they document, is that Russell’s devoted, one could even say affectionate, preoccupation with process—one way to define ritual—inspires our own reflections on acts of being-in-our-bodies which might otherwise go unremarked.

Russell’s collections are thus part of the larger body narrative in two different ways: each element can be the trigger for experiential or somatic memory, and they also, in their sequential and cumulative presence, speak about the passing, recording, and capturing of time. What rests at the intersection of body and time is mortality, raising questions of what ends or what remains. It is precisely the simple and daily acts of practice which Russell makes visible that ultimately allow us to ponder that junction more thoughtfully.