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The Highlights

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INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL DELUCIA

By Luke Stettner



LUKE STETTNER: The Internet and magazine culture has completely changed my perspective on art viewing. It's a bit of a quandary because I do not want to give up the immediacy of access but this 'browsing' temperament is really softening my critical eye. My first impressions often come from photographs of works rather than first-person experiential viewing. This is still typical in an academic setting, but with most galleries having the artists' works on their websites and more artists having personal websites it's becoming a common tool for viewing, judging, and purchasing artwork. How do you feel your website supports your work? Is it simply a means for exposure, or do you view your website as an extension of form?

MICHAEL DELUCIA: Initially I intended for my website to be kind of a work in itself. But I really slammed into a steep learning curve in Web design, so I scaled back my ideas and am slowly building it up from a site that started out pretty basic. It's interesting what I've learned through it about how my work is perceived. It's helped me to understand what people need to see in order to get the work and how to play with that. Initially, I presented the work in a way that everything would look synthetic — even the real objects. My intention was to blur the line between what was real and what was computer generated. However the reaction I got was frustrating because everyone thought it was all photoshop collage so it was really easy to dismiss. So I changed to a more straight forward approach which actually is a bit more unexpected for some of the work. Having to wonder whether the work is real or not generates curiosity and has since pointed towards ideas that I hadn't understood about the work before.

LS: I was really interested in how you chose to document and present your work on your website (specifically new work). While the peripheral glimpses of your studio in some of the photographs didn't reveal much, they made me feel closer to your process. This is a superficial observation but it brings us to a curious subject that doesn't get enough attention — how art is photographed. This is increasingly important, as an assortment of images are easily accessible on the Internet. Often these images are all we have to define meaning and artistic intent.

The photo-documents of the work on your site range from snapshots to the familiar white box environment. In some cases the documentation misrepresents the work. Some works take on illusionistic properties different from how they would be experienced in person. For example, *Rhombus Prism* appears to be multiple sheets of foamcore leaning in harmony disguised as a continuous arrangement, when in fact it's a freestanding form, which I realized after seeing the piece in your studio. This totally shifted my understanding and interpretation of the piece. Interestingly, I remembered *Push Broom Construction Plane* as freestanding. The synchronicity among the brooms animating forward (or left to right) was so strong that I didn't really study the photograph carefully. When I saw the piece at the Rivington Arms show (*Agro Bongo*) I was really disappointed. The work was cornered, propped up and fastened to the gallery wall. Oddly, I had envisioned the brooms in a constant momentary lapse. The way the work was depicted online gave me an expectation of the work that I was having difficulty letting go of. How aware are you of the 'image' of your work once it's photographed? Do these disparities excite or frustrate you?

MD: I would say that I am interested in making the viewer aware of assumptions that they might have about what they see. Documentation of sculpture is always problematic, because part of the whole in a sculpture is time. That equates to the experience of being there with it, which is completely lost in viewing a photo of a sculpture.

On my website I am trying to depict the physical sculptures as honestly as possible. There are details and drawings available that help paint the picture more clearly. I think what you are reacting to is that the character of the forms and arrangements are suggestive of an abstract state. Contemporary imagery has evolved to include the abstract alongside the 'realistic.' This makes it easy for all of us to jump to conclusions about what we see in an image.

I would say that perhaps the artwork isn't actually the object itself, but more like a shadow of an idea cast in objects. In the case of the push broom piece, the brooms are like the host for a simple abstract principle. When I saw the orange broom in the store the first time I was reminded of a drawing that I once saw, which depicted light rays being refracted upon hitting the surface of water. The organized parallel rays of light hit the surface plane on an angle, and they were diverted and diffused by it. So in the way that the abstract idea of how light behaves needs the medium of a drawing to be understood, the abstract relationship of lines and plane finds its way into our physical world via the necessary function of a broom. So I'm just trying to make that clear. The fact that these relationships could freestand in your mind is enough for me. They can in reality so the two walls in the corner of my studio help and actually become part of the piece. Also there is something about the first impression of that piece that is strong and that I don't understand yet. I have shown it in a few configurations — in the corner or

leaning against just one wall — and almost everyone builds an affinity to the way that they saw it first.

LS: Up until three years ago you were modeling your work by hand with clay. Your current work is heavily influenced by a computer application called Rhinoceros. The Rhinoceros website describes the program as able to translate with no limits on complexity, degree, or size. The differences are conspicuous (and humorous), but a significant shift I see is moving from a skilled practice to a learned practice. Do you see it this way?

MD: I'm not quite sure what you mean by a skilled practice or learned practice. I have skills that I have learned for various processes and mediums. More important to my work is that I have sensitivity in the ways that I manipulate the medium. There was a lot of learning involved both in modeling clay and in modeling with CAD. I consider 3-D CAD (Computer Aided Design) to be a medium for sculpture just the same as clay is. You can think of the Rhinoceros application as a set of tools to work with that medium. There are lots of different CAD applications that do essentially the same thing but for me are not as nice. You could make the analogy that Rhino is my preferred brand of chisels. I like Rhino because it is relatively transparent. It is basic enough for you to understand how it works, which helps me to embrace CAD as a medium rather than as a tool. Other applications try to simulate real situations or design their tools so that they are analogous to real tools. I feel that this adds unnecessary constraints to the workflow and limits your awareness of the true properties of the medium.

LS: Has working within an infinite interface like Rhinoceros changed your perception of actual space?

MD: Its not quite infinite but yes. This also happened when I modeled with clay. The medium required me to look at the subject in a more rigorous way than is natural, so I gained a more holistic understanding of objects and space. It was as if only after learning to model could I truly see the world in three dimensions. I would find that as I looked harder and longer, the subject would change and become more and more deep, to the point that the clay couldn't hold the information that I had gained. So I had to make sacrifices and eliminate the non-essential. The result, although representational, was completely abstract, and the final form was almost truer to the clay than to the subject. This process of abstraction was very gratifying to me, but I found that this experience was not communicated to the viewer.

So I sought other ways to do this, which led me to modeling with a computer. As I became fluent in manipulating that space I understood that it was real and not 'virtual,' as it is commonly understood to be. The exception is that obviously I cannot physically enter it with my body. I can, however, enter the space mentally. I can use it as a place to think and to experiment. It is a very immediate and fast way of trying ideas, and that is very gratifying. But the rules are different, and some things that work in that space don't work in the natural world. This suggests that the natural world has limits that have been brought to my attention through working with the computer. In my recent work I have been pursuing the grey area, where things either work in both realities or neither or almost work in one or the other. It's interesting, because when I

intend to make objects that will cross the barrier between the computer space and the natural world (or the other way around, like with the public fence installations or the block rhombus) many fail or become uninteresting. On the other hand, some gain power, like *Rhombus Prism*. That one really challenges your ability to perceive it because of the conflict between its physical material and its computer generated form.

LS: For a young artist fabrication is idealistic and expensive. Do you find yourself getting frustrated with the practicalities of seeing work beyond its design phase? *Block Rhombus* might be a good point of reference for this question. You told me that it just wasn't practical to buy all the blocks, transport them and install them. And you also said that the piece toppled over in Home Depot. This must have been an important realization in the advantages of working with Rhinoceros. That the work can sit within a liminal space, in that the piece literally holds up as a 2-D rendering but not actualized in 3-D.

MD: I feel that economy is essential to sculpture. Ideas can get so out of hand and quickly require sky-high budgets. To realize those kinds of ideas usually requires compromising the integrity of the piece. The ideas I go for are the ones that require less capital and come together almost on their own. (and by capital I mean time, energy, and resources, not just money). If the investment is relatively small on my part then that can mean that the objects are loaded with their own vested potential and the return can be proportionately great, which is what counts.

I worked for Jeff Koons between my undergrad and grad studies. I saw things happening there on a colossal scale. I loved his work and am still very compelled by it in many cases. But as I was on the labor end of it I learned that I was a much different kind of artist. Having to make some of those works really hindered my opinion of them. I felt that the buck was disproportionate to the bang. I grew to really appreciate his early vacuum cleaners and basketballs in that sense. His new public works could be a different story. They seem like they might reach a lot of people, which could swing it back in his favor.

LS: It seems the chain-link fence works to your advantage in two ways. The most obvious is its two-sidedness, which directs and controls your audience interaction with the gallery or open spaces. And the second is as a system for stacking, organizing, and animating imagery through its inherent patterning. Does the patterning reference the grids that you're familiar with in CAD drawing?

MD: Yes. I was drawn to the chain-link fence because it is an object that has a lot of abstract qualities that are curiously in opposition to one another. These disparities hold the object in limbo between two states: One of banal reality and the other of pure abstraction. It's made of steel, yet it's transparent and light. It's a vertical plane that prevents you from crossing into another space but lets you see in — similarly to how a painting lets you view the world it's describing but can't let you enter. The computer screen for me is a similar barrier. I need it in order to see my work, but the visualization is limited in comparison to my sensitive ability to conceive it. The fence breaks up what you see into blocks of color as does the pixel grid of the screen. As I was discovering the limits of viewing my work through a small screen I was sensitized to those problems, and

consequently I recognize those problems in objects like the chain-link fence. Other experiences like that have helped me to recognize similar potential in other objects.

LS: I'd like to know more about the development of the rhombus piece in relation to your interest in geometry and working in vector space.

MD: The rhombus piece was one that didn't die when I brought it out of the computer. I found Styrofoam to be a material that related the form to both the natural world and to the workspace in the PC. It's composed of lots of little beads, which are like molecules I guess. It's very porous and bright white — almost light emitting. It relates to imagery on the screen in that way. Also, it's not very dense, which makes it difficult to hold a precise edge. That's nice because the computer screen couldn't draw a precise edge either, because the screen resolution wasn't high enough.

It started as a drawing that the computer couldn't really draw very well on the screen. There were too many edges on a slight angle, which meant that the lines were less than one pixel apart. What you saw instead was a really glitchy moiré pattern. So I found a material that translated that problem into physical space. The foam gave it a higher than normal contrast and really makes it hard to look at. Even though it's there in the room with you it's hard to see specifically.

LS: Let's take a quick but pithy trip through the last century, beginning with Duchamp's readymades, pressing forward half a century to Robert Gober's meticulous re-creations of plywood, and even further toward the present, to Jessica Stockholder's prismatic pillings of consumer plastics and paint. Here we have three very different uses of product appropriation. Your *Push Broom Construction Plane* and mop pieces dissolve all these archetypes in what seems to be a desire to transform the function and meaning of an object. How do you see your work in relation to these artists?

MD: Almost every sculptor now deals with found objects in one way or another. It is this generation's figure in clay. In a few years we'll look back and realize that this time had certain parallels with the salon. The academic bronze figures have become academic object sculptures. In that sense I guess I'm trying to use objects as a medium through which to learn and push off of, as some of the founders of the modern movement did with the figure. What is definitely unique about this time is that the acceleration of technology is steeper. This expands the field of artistic perception and leads to a widening of what we can consider reality. As an artist, my hunch is that there is great opportunity in that and I feel obliged to explore it with rigor.