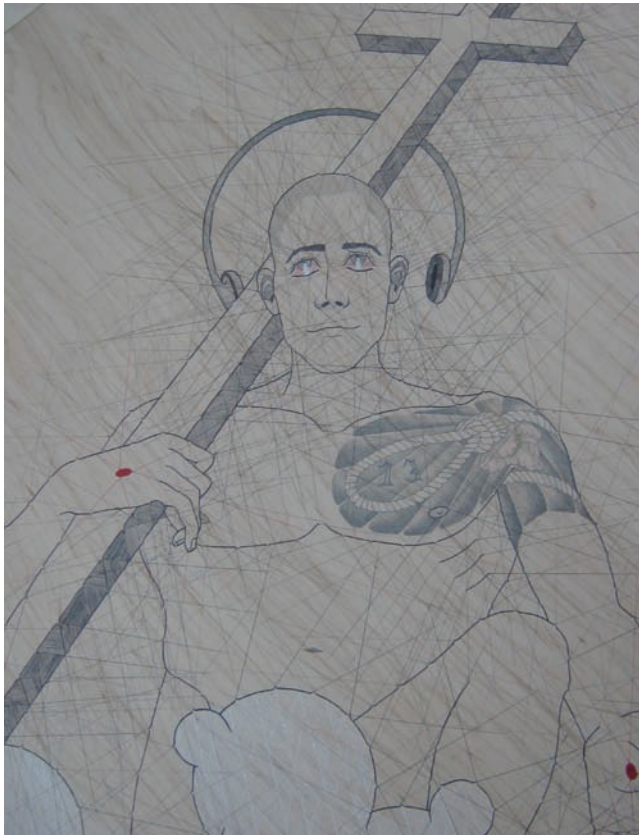


CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Reckoner

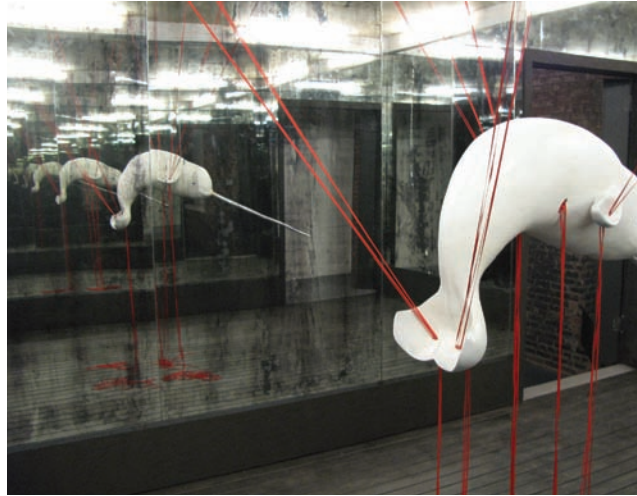
GEORGE BOLSTER TALKS ABOUT CONSTRUCTING HIS INSTALLATION *RECKONER* AT MASS MOCA.



George Bolster. *Reckoner*. Installation view. Mass MoCA.



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A great deal of change has occurred in the way people practice as artists, since I first left college. One of the most pronounced ways is in how artists actively lead their early career themselves. Sometimes this is through formalized artist-led spaces such as Transmission in Glasgow and Pallas Heights in Dublin – which lead the way in introducing new artists, as well as more ad-hoc artist-led / curated projects. I have led a number of these such as 'Urban Gothic' ⁽¹⁾ or 'Multiplicity' ⁽²⁾ and have featured in the artist-led projects of others, such as 'Darkness Visible' ⁽³⁾. These temporary groupings can often be reciprocal. In a way it is inevitable generations of artists tend to identify with each other then form allegiances, be they aesthetic or social, as a form of support. Being an artist can be immensely isolating, so becoming part of a community encourages discourse, reflexivity and exchange.

Upon graduating with a BA from Chelsea College of Art and later an MA from Central Saint Martins my first sensation was bewilderment. Some fortunate graduates were invited to work with galleries direct from college. The others had to create their own opportunities. For me open submission exhibitions were a key way of getting work shown initially. There are a number of these in Ireland such as the Claremorris Open, EV+A and Tulca. It is really crucial to enter these (even if you don't get selected) because you are exposing the work to professional curators. They might not select you for the show you have applied for, but may remember the work for another project for which your work is more suited. I was struck by artists' work when I was selecting Tulca last year, some of which might be suitable for another project. Curators talk to each other, ask each other for advice and recommendations. So while it can feel like there is no point to entering these competitions, there is.

The best advice I could give someone starting out is what not to do. One of the biggest mistakes one can make (and I have made it plenty of times) is to not be clear about what you want to make / or have made. Knowing in your head does not mean communicating that knowledge to another person. Putting a chunk of art theory or

mangled half-hearted explanation of your work does not do you any favours, be clear and concise, rather than confuse or baffle.

Another key way of introducing your work to others is to curate exhibitions. This creates new networks and develops existing ones as additional artists are added into the mix. To reach out to others is very important otherwise things can be, and will remain very insular. So be brave and ask those you don't know to work with you. Soon you realise you have created your own community, which banishes in some measure the post college void and soon others will approach you.

Two years ago I visited Shellburne Thurber, an artist friend in Boston. Wanting to show me the beauty of the Berkshires and knowing that I was going to show there in a year's time she suggested a drive out to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, or Mass MoCA. Like many exhibitions, my inclusion in this exhibition came through a series of occurrences. Firstly, I entered an open submission for a drawing exhibition in NY; this was where the curator who was part of the adjudication panel saw my work initially. I had no knowledge of this and was unsuccessful. By accident a few years later, an artist whom I had worked with who passed on my contact details in a discussion about my work. The curator contacted me asking what my fantasy project would be. Through a series of conversations outlining my aims, this project became one of the cornerstones of the exhibition 'These Days: Elegies for Modern Times'.

They didn't expect me to arrive for another few months for a site visit, so I called ahead to see if they would like to meet at that point instead. The curator agreed to meet and showed us around the museum. Shellburne thought it hilarious that I seemed to know so little about the scale of the Museum and was looking forward to my reaction. When arriving at Mass MoCA, it is easy to confuse mass as an abbreviation for massive instead of Massachusetts. There are some 36 separate warehouse buildings that house a variety of functions. We were shown around the exhibition 'Eastern Standard: Western Artists in China'. During the tour I first saw the gigantic room allocated for my installation. It was difficult to appreciate the scale as it was near

dark for the screening of a film piece by British artist Catherine Yass. We were then shown around the in progress installation of the career retrospective of Sol LeWitt's wall drawings for which an entire building had been renovated and dedicated. As someone who makes drawings, it was just amazing to see the 100 wall pieces in various stages of completion, being made by the drawing team assembled by the LeWitt Foundation. It had a scale and commitment that made me realise my proposed installation *Reckoner* was now actually going to happen in a real place not just the fictional vague one in my head. Artists get so used to hearing "you can't do that" or "the budget won't stretch that far" when someone says "yes, do exactly what you want", it is a terrible shock.

Planning for *Reckoner* began almost three years before I actually installed the piece itself; making, began seven months beforehand. The most important asset in the initial stages of the project was having studied technical drawing at school. It allowed the team at the museum to know exactly what I meant to make as I was based 3,500 miles away in California at the time. As soon as they had the drawings of the installation, they made a scale model of it and figured out how it fitting into the existing much larger room in the museum. We then worked together to change the entrances and exits to comply with building codes and disability access.

Awareness of deadlines and accountability are high priorities when making an installation piece on this scale. It was even more important to have as much of the technical specifications worked out before even entering the museum, as mine was only one of four new commissions being included in the exhibition. The realisation of the project meant managing and making simultaneously: at Mass MoCA there was a curator, fabricator, two technicians, in my studio in California I recruited an assistant and four interns. Not working alone, as I have always done, was quite difficult. Being detail oriented became hugely important. Every single facet and potential problem had to be factored in. Having curated a number of artist led group exhibitions, I had become adept at planning. Through these projects I was able to see both the artist and curator's point of view in the realisation of a show. It helped me hugely in time management for the installation. Not being responsible for fundraising for the piece to be made was a wonderful change. The museum did everything and were delighted that Culture Ireland came on board. Writing funding proposals is something that until then had been impossible to avoid.

This was a very complex piece made from a range of components. Firstly, came the construction of the shell for the room then a sink like structure under the room for recycling the water from the tears of the drawn Saints. After the antiquing of the mirrors at an external glass merchant, the construction of magnetic walls with iron filings, the suspension of a completely drawn-on wooden waterproof ceiling; and hanging a Narwhal sculpture from it by ribbon – there was just the matter of installing a concealed sound system to play the Radiohead track *Reckoner*. All these elements were untried technical feats to be dealt with. Working with a large team was at points really daunting. Especially when everyone is tired and you start to feel you might be completely obsessive. I have to say that I learned so much from the team at Mass MoCA who were fascinating, unfazed, friendly and amazingly skilled individuals.

My idea of the completely immersive environment happened exactly as I had envisioned it. The audience entered the room to see a Narwhal reflected into infinity. Each progressive reflection being further distorted by the antiqued glass. They then looked upwards prompted either by being hit by tears or by their eyes following the ribbons upwards, through this involuntary action, they saw the highly wrought figures of saints drawn amongst clouds on the ceiling. The Radiohead song *Reckoner* played in an infinite loop, whilst the audience was imperfectly reflected over and over in the mirrors.

As part of the commission, I gave a talk to the Museum Trustees before the opening in April. I left for California to begin work on my first commercial solo exhibition for Chung King Project in Los Angeles. I am looking forward to seeing the piece again next month having had some distance from it. Once work is on show it is hard to gauge how people have reacted to it. I have since moved to New York and often I run into people who have seen the piece. Everyone calls it the crying ceiling. They are sometimes religious and mostly not, though all seem to find it encompassing in some way.

George Bolster

Notes

1. 'Urban Gothic' (travelling) Cafe Gallery Projects at Dilston Grove, London, UK 2006; Quartair: Contemporary Art Initiatives, The Hague, Netherlands 2008 and Broadstone Studios, Dublin 2007.
2. 'Multiplicity' (travelling) Fota House, Co. Cork 2004; Context Gallery, Derry 2005; Roscommon Arts Centre, Roscommon 2006 and Market House Gallery, Co. Monaghan 2006.
3. 'Darkness Visible' (travelling) Galway Arts Centre, Galway City 2008 and Limerick City Gallery in conjunction with Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick City 2009.