Conversation Pieces

Jim Drain

Introduction

Jim Drain's long-term installation at di Rosa is the artist's first solo commission in Northern California. The artist's works range from rambunctious two- and three-dimensional textile collages made from reclaimed fabrics to large-scale, immersive public art projects taking the form of vibrant murals, sculptures, or furniture. Drain's signature mode of assemblage uses large welded-steel frames to tether rag-rug-like braided and ribboned fabrics. With *Membrane,* Drain adapts this approach to create a seating installation using vintage aluminum lounge chair frames and vibrant, hand-knotted paracord macramé webbing inspired specifically by the Sebastopol-based artist Alexandra Jacopetti Hart and more broadly by the Bay Area's rich 1960s and 1970s history of craft and handwork. This furniture system is bathed in a pink glow cast from the skylights above (also of Drain's invention) and includes custom, mobile macramé screens that allow visitors to create their own spaces.

Drain's interactive, immersive installation is designed to serve as a long-term, multiuse setting for a range of activities and events as well as an area for lounging, reading, and daydreaming amid di Rosa's idyllic landscape. Made for and completed by the viewer, *Membrane* connects visitors with a lineage of countercultural dreamers who deployed craft and handwork as a means to achieve a more democratic and inclusive world.

In the following pages, Drain and Lawrence Rinder, director and chief curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, discuss the evolution of Drain's artistic practice, the utopian undercurrents of *Membrane,* the outsider nature of craft and its gendered dimensions, and their first-ever meeting in 2001, when Rinder was researching for the 2002 Whitney Biennial. That edition of the Biennial would ultimately feature a number of countercultural projects, one of which was Forcefield, a seminal Providence, Rhode Island–based collective that included Drain and explored the merging of music, performance, film, and installation.

The conversation illuminates a constellation of relationships across time and geography that align Drain and his beginnings with the formative years of the San Francisco avant-garde. To my mind, Fort Thunder, the pre–Civil War former textile factory in Providence where Drain and his studio mates got their sea legs as artists, resonates with the apartment building at 2322 Fillmore Street ("Painterland") in San Francisco, a nexus for many of the artists who form the core of di Rosa's collection, notable for their experimental attitudes and disinclination to participate in the mainstream art world. Indeed, Drain's collective and interdisciplinary back-ground, coupled with his intuitive, irreverent blend of assemblage, craft, and form, resonates in numerous ways with the distinctive spirit of the Bay Area and its artistic legacy.

I am delighted to present this exchange on the occasion of Drain's first solo exhibition in the Bay Area.

Amy Owen, Curator

UTOPIA MUSCLES: Jim Drain and Lawrence Rinder in Conversation

Lawrence Rinder: How exciting that you're doing a project here in the Bay Area.

Jim Drain: I love di Rosa. To be able to do something here is an honor.

LR: We should clarify for readers how we met, which relates to your Providence origins. I met you in 2001, when I was doing research for the 2002 Whitney Biennial. What's your recollection of that visit?

JD: I was pretty anxious. I was around twenty-five years old and living with a dozen other people in Fort Thunder, a pre–Civil War former textile factory in Providence. As much as the door was open to anyone, there was also a sense of, "Are you going to understand what you're walking into?"

LR: And what was I walking into?

JD: At that moment, we saw it as a space for making as much noise and sound as possible at all times of the day and night. One essential rule was that if you lived there, you couldn't complain about any noise. There was also a healthiness to it, in that none of us really did any drugs. And a sense of community that was remarkable.

LR: Was it an aspirational, alternative communal social arrangement, or just seat-of-the-pants?

JD: More the latter. We weren't necessarily aware of historical precedents for utopian communities, but at the same time, we weren't anti-intellectual. Everyone was reading science fiction and listening to plays on the radio.

LR: What held it all together? Everyone was involved in some kind of creative work, right? It was an art and music and interdisciplinary creative space.

JD: The people involved all approached process and material as not requiring mediation. Form and texture spoke for themselves. It definitely wasn't about having explanatory wall labels. It exceeded the scope of language, in a way. Drawing comics was a big part of the culture, but even there, the words might be illegible. Comics and music led and determined a visual language. Like a synesthesia experience where you're hearing the color red.

LR: I remember being completely blown away. There was something a little scary about it, not because it was creepy or dark, but because there was so much of everything. It was overwhelming. But there was an unusual kind of buoyancy to a lot of the work, particularly your work. I don't know if "optimism" is exactly the right word, or "utopianism," but it's something that does mark your work and maybe all of Fort Thunder, as distinct from a lot of youth collectives from that period, which generally had more of a punk-ish sensibility. Where did that upbeat vibe come from? Was it something you all articulated at the time?

JD: Well, we were looking at a lot of Japanese noise. And Japanese culture was always in the air.

LR: And that had a more cheerful tone than US punk?

JD: Yes, I think it was more playful.

LR: It's interesting that hard drugs weren't involved because a lot of the work was incredibly psychedelic. Four of you, calling yourselves Forcefield, ended up contributing an installation to the Whitney Biennial—a project that explored the merging of music, performance, film, and installation in one platform. I felt it was incredibly successful and coherent. And a surprise to many people in New York, because up until that point, you had more or less maintained a parallel existence from the New York art world—maybe *any* formal art world. What did it feel like to enter that world?

JD: It was complicated. We were trying to be discerning about what message we delivered, but bringing what we were doing to New York exposed a lot of vulnerabilities that we hadn't addressed because we didn't have structures in place to talk about feelings or issues. Which was also a strength of the project, I think. With three or four people working, it's a "third mind" situation of the type described by William S. Burroughs and the painter Brion Gysin.

LR: It's like an emergent consciousness that involves—and requires multiple people or relationships.

JD: Right, the authorship becomes truly shared. I'd always thought that the ultimate dream as an artist was to be in the Whitney Biennial. But I was pulling my hair out just a few months before because everyone was working on a record, and it was taking precedence over everything.

LR: But I think that project couldn't have happened without that healthy lack of awe of the Whitney and everything it stood for. It came from another place and other values. So at what point did you and the others become engaged with the machinery of the art world—art critics, the marketplace?

JD: Forcefield considered staying together as a group and continuing to participate in the art world, but ultimately decided no. A couple of them felt like that would be exposing too much, so to hell with it, they'd go back to making music. But I was excited. I realized that my interests with respect to sculpture and installation actually mattered in that world, and now I had people to discuss them with. And *so* many opportunities came after the Whitney Biennial. Ara Peterson and I were invited to do some different projects. We showed one at a group show at Greene Naftali gallery in New York.

LR: And your work was collaborative at that time? Each piece was a collaboration?

JD: Yes. I wasn't yet making my own work. That transition time of working collaboratively allowed me and Ara to figure out what we wanted to do, and at the same time be productive.

LR: When did you start working with the metal armature–knit combo?

JD: I work pretty intuitively, and I had a job at the time doing metal fabrication. I realized I could combine soft and hard. And it developed from there.

LR: When you started to exhibit your work in earnest, did you have some sense of a milieu that you were stepping into? You had come out of this incredibly fertile, but somewhat insular, environment at Fort Thunder. Were you noticing other artists and thinking, "I'm part of what they're doing"? Were there resonances that became conscious for you, and did you make connections based on those?

JD: Christian Holstad was working with afghans and craft. Liz Collins, who was in Providence at the time, was knitting, which was more fashion- and garment-based, but getting interested in installation, which she's very dedicated to now. Cady Noland had such magnetism for a lot of young men at the time, even though her work was the opposite of what I was doing. H. C. Westermann caught my attention, but as an example of where I *didn't* want to go. As in, how do I avoid marginalizing myself even while working with textiles and knits.

LR: Meaning Westermann was too much of an outsider, and you didn't want

to be that, but at the same time you're working with this medium that has limited legitimacy in the art world?

JD: Exactly. I was pretty naive. Today I'm teaching a class that looks at craft history, but back then I hadn't done my homework. Although I definitely knew of Miriam Schapiro and so had a glimpse of Pattern and Decoration work. And Alexandra Jacopetti Hart's book *Native Funk and Flash* (1974) was influential from the beginning, at Fort Thunder.

LR: That is an amazing book.

JD: The craft world is very open, and even more so now, to sharing techniques and processes. It's all about inclusion. Much more collaborative than the art world.

LR: Was this engagement with the space of craft mostly intellectual, or were you actually hanging out in craft spaces and working with other craftspeople?

JD: No, there weren't yet enough actual interactions, and that was a problem. I was thinking, "All right, I know how to knit and people are responding to it, so I'll keep going with it and still engage with this art world." It wasn't until seeing Jenelle Porter's show *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present* at the ICA Boston in 2014 that I realized, "Oh boy, I have a lot of work to do and a lot more to see."

LR: What about the gender dimension? I mean, you were walking into a female-gendered space. Did you feel either dissed by the guys or dissed by the women? What was the dynamic?

JD: Artists like Christian Holstad put gender front and center in their work, and talk about craft in terms of gender. Josh Faught does, too. For my part, I am thinking about gender bending less explicitly.

LR: Right. Is it an issue in terms of reception of the work? People not knowing where to put you? Maybe things aren't quite so categorical anymore, but twenty years ago—

JD: I wasn't overtly wearing women's clothes, but I remember wearing a maternity outfit and thinking, of course it's gendered, but loving that. I wasn't *trolling* maternity clothes. It was more like, "I want to wear this because I like being in a neutral-gender world." Everyone was constantly asking if I was gay. My sexuality was brought up all the time.

LR: People said to your face, "Oh, your art is so colorful. Are you gay?"

JD: Yes. At first I was surprised, but then I thought, who cares? It's none of their business.

LR: Did you have connections to the Bay Area prior to the invitation to participate in this show at di Rosa?

JD: Sure, at Fort Thunder we had friends who moved to San Francisco, and we would visit them as a group. We'd pile into a Greyhound bus and go to San Francisco for a few weeks.

LR: Back in the early 2000s?

JD: Even before then. I remember seeing an early Chris Johanson show at Jack Hanley Gallery. And going to a performance of that group that made a lot of noise and cut off thumbs, Survival Research Laboratories.

LR: What did you think of them?

JD: They had an aesthetic and approach that resonated with that of my art school, the Rhode Island School of Design—namely aestheticizing, almost fetishizing, tools and systems. It wasn't my thing exactly, but it felt familiar. They were being investigated by the FBI, so that was cool. Countercultural.

LR: Were you already familiar with some of the artists in the di Rosa collection? I know that your commission required you to somehow respond to the collection, as well as to the space.

JD: I saw Joan Brown's work years ago in New York, and recognized it as an important precedent for a lot of work in the San Francisco Bay Area. Same with Roy De Forest. Getting acquainted with the rest was great for filling in the gaps in my knowledge of Northern California art history—Bruce Conner, George Herms, Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo. I met Franklin Williams a year or two ago in Los Angeles at the opening of one of his Parker Gallery shows.

LR: I love his art. I think it's unbelievably cool.

JD: It's amazing.

LR: He's the most under-recognized Bay Area artist. He's so good and hardly anyone knows. Luckily the Berkeley Art Museum owns a really killer piece of his. Do you feel a connection to—for lack of a better word—Bay Area hippie design?

JD: Absolutely. It's hard *not* to be drawn to that work. While preparing for the di Rosa show, I was looking at Barbara Shawcroft, who is also terribly under-recognized. Likewise Alexandra Jacopetti Hart and her macramé jungle gym. I'm trying to do my homework and be more engaged with the artists who have been in the field forever yet haven't been sufficiently recognized.

LR: Describe for me your di Rosa project. Is every part of it interactive? Can people touch everything? Or is it a combination of sculpture and stuff you can sit on? I definitely perceive a connection between the macramé jungle gym and these pieces, although your work was already interactive and playful in various ways.

JD: It's all interactive. The light in that space is incredible, so that was the first thing to figure out. I thought those pink skylights would transform it the best. And there was the need for seating elements, so I began experimenting with weaving chairs, not exactly knowing where that would go. Trying different materials, for instance jute and painting on the jute.

LR: Were you working with existing chair armatures, or is everything built custom?

JD: They were existing. I just went on eBay and bought some aluminum lounger chairs! You don't have to reinvent something that is already awesome.

LR: Where did you do most of the work? At di Rosa?

JD: No, in my studio in Providence. It's labor-intensive work, and being a dad and teaching consumes so much time. I have four people working on stuff, so it's all of us.

LR: How do you hope people will feel when they're sitting in the chairs?

JD: The idea was to make them as funky as possible. I told my macramé fabricators to go for a cross between RuPaul and David Bowie. I also wanted them to lend themselves to membrane spaces, so to speak, so that if people want to be by themselves, they can set up that situation. They're kind of triumphant, to me, as chairs, and I hope that sense of utopia comes through.

LR: I read somewhere that you said people should exercise their utopia muscle more. I think that's a great phrase; I'd never heard it before.

JD: It's borrowed from the Dominican American writer Junot Díaz.

LR: The idea is, use it or lose it? And when you exercise the muscle, it gets stronger and stronger?

JD: Well, Díaz was speaking a few months after the last US presidential election. He's also an activist, and everyone came to hear him speak, wondering, "What the hell do we do?" He's a big Octavia Butler proponent, so he said, "We have to build our utopia muscles. Right now we have good dystopian ones; we can imagine the worst. But the future is still TBD, so why don't we build our utopia muscles?" I thought, "Okay, that's how we move forward."

LR: That's a great sentiment. I totally agree. It's hard to keep going but what choice do we have, really?

Works in the Exhibition

Membrane, 2020
Chairs made in collaboration with Tara Watson Humphrey, Sophia Lehman, Muffy Brandt, and Dominick Prospero: vintage aluminum loungers, 550 paracord, beads, acrylic yarn
Dimensions variable

Membrane, 2020
Dividers made in collaboration with Tara Watson Humphrey and Sophia Lehman: para-max cord, Maker Pipe connections, covered conduit, 550 paracord, di Rosa rocks
Dimensions variable

All works courtesy Nina Johnson, Miami, and Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York

About Jim Drain

Jim Drain (b. 1975, Cleveland, Ohio) is a multimedia artist based in Providence, Rhode Island. He was a member of the collective Forcefield, which was active from 1996 to 2002 and was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions at such venues as the University of Florida, Gainesville; Locust Projects, Miami; the Blanton Museum, University of Texas, Austin; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin; The Garage, Moscow; The Pit, Los Angeles; Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York; Nina Johnson, Miami; and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles. Drain's work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Pérez Art Museum, Miami; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the RISD Museum, Providence; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Drain received his BFA in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1998. jimdrain.info

About Lawrence Rinder

Lawrence Rinder has been the director of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive since 2008. Previously, he was dean at California College of the Arts. Rinder served from 2000 to 2004 as the Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator of Contemporary Art at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, where he organized the exhibitions *The American Effect* (2003), *BitStreams* (2001), the 2002 Whitney Biennial, and *Tim Hawkinson* (2005), which received that year's award for best monographic exhibition in a New York museum by the US chapter of the International Association of Art Critics. Prior to the Whitney, Rinder was the founding director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, and served as assistant director and curator for twentieth-century art at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Rinder holds a BA in art from Reed College and an MA in art history from Hunter College. He has held teaching positions at the University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University, and Deep Springs College.

Public Programs

Saturday, June 20, 2020, 11 am–4 pm
di Rosa Days
Site-wide

Saturday, September 12, 2020, 3–5 pm
In conversation: Jim Drain and artist Josh Faught
Gallery 1 Program Hub

Ongoing

First Wednesdays
Residents of the cities of Napa and Sonoma receive free admission to di Rosa the first Wednesday of each month (with ID, no reservations required).

Making Art with Everyone / Haciendo arte con todos: March–November
Free art making for all on the fourth Saturday of each month, 11 am–3 pm, on the Gallery 1 patio or inside during chilly weather.

Seasonal

Site walk weekends:
Take a self-guided tour of di Rosa Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, May 1–November 29, 2020

Nature hikes:
First and third Sundays, 10:30 am–12:30 pm, May 3–November 15, 2020

Outdoor sculpture tours:
Second and fourth Sundays, 10:30 am–12:30 pm, May 10–November 22, 2020

Tours

Public tours:
Wednesday through Sunday, 1 PM

School tours:
Wednesday through Friday, $3 per student
College and university tours: Custom tailored, by request, $3 per student

Encuentros con arte:
A Spanish-language public tour the first Saturday of every month / Una visita pública a la galería en español el primer sábado de cada mes, 10:30 am–12:30 pm

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