

Chris Duncan Interview

By Chet Urban (Union College '93)

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Q: *You came into a teaching position not through the regular MFA route but by way of a Guggenheim Fellowship which accessed your teaching career. This is nearly unheard of in this day and age with the emphasis on “terminal” degrees. Discuss a little bit about your unique path into teaching at a liberal arts college.*

A: It's probably impossible now days, I imagine. I've thought about this recently in other contexts too; I think it was just the time period that I was in. It didn't feel like you needed or even wanted to get authorized by somebody. It didn't seem like you needed to get permission from some institution to be an artist. It's probably that I am so retrograde! I look back to the artists of the 50's and they didn't have MFA's, that kind of organized institutional system of producing artists. A lot of them went to art schools and had lot of training but there was more of a sense that if you wanted to be a painter you painted - some of which is probably silly and romantic. You want to be a musician you play. Well, if you don't know how to play anything you don't get very far. But thinking back, you look at Miles Davis when he got in to Julliard and then dropped out and he was like screw this, I know what I want to play and this isn't what I want to play, they're not going to tell me. So, there was a sort of an oppositional attitude...I don't know if I would recommend that to anybody these days, but there are exceptions.

Q: *You were an English major at Colby as an undergrad, what do you see as the role or value in teaching art as part of the liberal arts tradition?*

A: I think the answer here, especially a school like Union, is that we're not necessarily training artists but we're exposing students to things that will enrich their lives. I guess it's a kind of old fashioned idea about a liberal arts education. Once you realize that in life there's more than having a career, making money, or even having a family, you find there are broader, more universal themes to tap into. Looking at sculpture and painting is one way to access those broader themes. It can make you feel more grounded in the world when you understand that these art practices have been going on forever. Different cultures have different motives but everyone makes art. It's nice to be able to draw on that as a resource in the rest of your life. It doesn't mean you have to be an artist or make art but culture is something that can support us. It is a continuum and we are a part of that continuum.

People making art in a class - even if they won't go on with it, I think it's a positive thing. It's like math. Most people won't become mathematicians. Most people who take a bio course won't become biologists, but the study broadens your understanding of the world you live in. Just because you study the arts doesn't mean you can't do anything else. That's a common misconception, which originates in our society's narrow way of defining value.

It's hard to teach people how to be creative, and I don't know if you can but in the arts we try. And sometime you do it by not answering the question or not giving them the answer or telling them the right and wrong way. There really isn't the right and wrong way to answer a lot of the problems we try to pose, which makes it different than some of the other disciplines, at least at an elementary level.

So studio art does fit in with a liberal arts program. Because there's teaching people applicable skills, and then there's teaching ways to work through problems that may not be directly related to anything immediate, but cultivate a flexible way of thinking that will be useful later.

Q: *We have looked at some art over the years together and have discussed a fair bit. Who do you find as a powerful artist(s) that inspires you and your work?*

A: Yeah, we have looked at a lot of stuff together. Well, I was sort of surprised that I still find [David] Smith so powerful. That show [currently at the Whitney] was really strong. Though it does seem more distant and rooted in its time. It's funny, I was looking at [William] Tucker's stuff recently - he was an important teacher and mentor for me - and I realized how much his work influenced me in the past, but I don't think it does so much anymore. The sculpture is very strong but I feel like I'm looking for something else in my own work. Of course that's what's supposed to happen with your teachers.

I still look at the Constructivist work and still get a kick out of it. The stuff is like 100 years old and still looks dynamic and fresh. It still comes across. It was so iconoclastic. It was like throw everything out and do something different. And I like that vocabulary, that geometric vocabulary.

I look at architecture, sometimes early 20th C. things or Bauhaus, De Stijl. And contemporary architecture - it's really exciting in terms of form, as far as social utility I am not convinced, but there are things possible technically now that make for some very interesting buildings to look at.

I still like to go back to Classical and Renaissance sculpture, and certainly there are times when I would much rather look at that than bother thinking about the latest Damien Hirst. It reflects a

conception of human meaning that is worth hanging on to. Certainly in Renaissance sculpture, you see this affirmation of meaning in the specificity and individuality of the pieces, not to mention the technical skill. It's stunning. So much of it is still alive as art. If you still have a work of art still speaking to you after five or six hundred years or longer – that's about all you can ask for.

Q: *Are they artists that produce similar work or work in similar ways or are they diametric?*

I would like to think it is not just people making similar work. I like to look at art in general. I don't know if that's going to change how I approach my own work. I basically work in an additive way. I'm not going to be carving stone; I'm more comfortable building stuff up. I'm not going to be crawling through tunnels of vaseline, but hey, I'll check it out when whatshisname does it.

I just saw a show by Nick Cave who does these sorts of costumes. I am very impressed by his versatility. Not something I am likely to do. I like the work a lot. It was kind of inspirational, so well done, a lot of variety on a basic theme, doesn't mean I want to do that.

Serra is important but I am not going to go out and twist 3 inch steel plate. The color in the new pieces at Gagolian – that was also really impressive. Maybe there's something I can take away in the surfaces he gets.

Q: *Travel has always been a part of your life. You traveled SE Asia through Afghanistan to Europe after college, at Union you have lead numerous terms abroad to Europe and to China, and recently you traveled again to India a few times to visit Ella, your daughter, who finished high school there. How has this travel influenced your art?*

A: China was a big influence for me for a quite a few years after our time there. I really did try to incorporate some of the techniques and motifs into that I was doing and I think I succeeded. Lately, I've been aware that that influence has retreated a bit.

India has been in the back of my mind for a while. The sculpture is fantastic, so sensual, so present, but it's hard to see how that filters in directly to what I do. I have been trying to get at it - motifs, cultural elements and color - in the collages and that has been a way to utilize some of the imagery.

You brought up the idea of the general palette in Asia, not just in the art but the street life, and you're quite right, it's important. It's bright and colorful stuff, a lot of visual energy, sometimes

almost an overload. It makes me want to try and capture some of that energy and find a new ways of working that in. Energy is the bottom line – that is what’s compelling.

I think travel is crucial and I often come back with ideas or images or even principles, and try to translate or incorporate them. You try and put some of your experience into an abstract three dimensional form. It’s not a literal, one to one correspondence – but you try.

Q: *Do you self identify as an Artist or a Sculptor? Does it really matter?*

A: Just artist, even though I am a little suspicious of that term. I don’t think artist with a capital “A” where everything I do is art. But “sculptor” – well, I’m doing a lot of 2D stuff as well. I think it’s more useful to think of yourself as an artist and not narrow yourself down too much and stay open.

Q: *I ask the previous question because we tend to like to categorize too much. But to think of you purely as a sculptor might lead one to minimize your drawings. This is a body of work that has had a huge influence on my work and how I think about sculpture and more broadly art. What is your relationship with drawing and sculpture? Do they relate?*

A: We do tend to categorize too much. You don’t have to put yourself in a box. Everyone else is trying to do that to you. Drawing has been really important to me once I figured out a way to approach it. I like it for a lot of reasons; for one it’s so much faster and more immediate than sculpture. It can be as physical as sculpture, but I can get an idea or a statement out a lot more quickly. I like working with ink and charcoal and paper. Now I’m making a lot of large collages, and the process is actually not that immediate and can be painstaking and tiresome; nonetheless they allow me to bring things in to the mix that I don’t know how to bring into the sculpture yet.

Q: *Are you an artist or teacher?*

A: In the old days I would have never hesitated for a second and even now I just say artist but teaching has become important to me not only as a way of making a living in the field but as a significant part of who I am.