

Camp Bosworth: *El Otro Lado*

Patrick Kelly, The Old Jail Art Center's Curator of Exhibitions, email interview with Camp Bosworth.

PK: Your current work is primarily sculpture and relief works. You can be as brief as you would like, but what phases has your work been through up to this point? I ask this because in conversations you referenced your past paintings.

CB: I started school at the University of North Texas thinking I wanted to be a painter—an abstract painter in the heroic mode. I had a vague idea of what that was—something along the lines of de Kooning or Kline or Motherwell. I then moved on to my Frank Stella/Kenny Scharf wall-relief paintings. And then moved back to paintings on canvas. I tried once to do a painting a day for a year, mostly abstract patterns. But at around 250, I found I had no interest anymore in those types of paintings.

At that time, the split between what I drew in my sketchbooks and the "art" I was making became greater. When I was not making "art," I was drawing everyday objects, tools, my dogs, cowboys, people on the street, the Dallas cityscape. These drawings eventually went from the back burner to my main focus. By then I was being commissioned to do a lot of furniture and always had a lot of scrap pieces laying around. Those scraps began a series of wood relief paintings. This coincided with my growing interest in outsider and folk art and those artists' direct approach to making art without pretense.

I began to separate the objects from my paintings that most interested me and began to focus on them. I realized I could say what I wanted with just these objects. At this point, they came off the wall and into the round and the sculptures I'm doing today.

I miss painting and always dream of getting back to it, but most of my thinking involves objects and the desire to tell stories through these objects.

PK: Were the subjects of those three-dimensional objects in the early sketchbook drawings those of the everyday?

CB: Yes, I started drawing everyday objects: coffee cups, beer cans, food, and tools. Mostly things sitting around the house.

PK: When did you move to Marfa, and did the proximity to the Mexican border begin to influence the subject matter?

CB: I moved to Marfa in 2001. For the first three years, I was working on renovation of my adobe home and studio and didn't really know how to deal with the space of far west Texas. It was actually disconcerting. The general space, the openness, the sky, the light, and the landscape are big. My life in Dallas had been very urban.

It wasn't until the third year that I started listening to **narcocorridos* and *cojunto* music and reading obsessively about the border and border issues. I started traveling a lot into Mexico at this time, too. That's when my work began to shift.

*[Ballads romanticizing stories, lives and dramatic episodes surrounding drug trafficking.] and [Popular dance music based on polka, waltz and bolero rhythms.]

PK: How so?

Living in Texas, I am highly influenced by the traditions of artisans, ranging from woodworkers and spur makers to guilders and gunsmiths. As a Texan who lives on the Mexican-American border, I have also been unavoidably influenced by narcocorridos, the politics of the border, and the ongoing cartel wars.

I became obsessed with images and objects of the cartels and the border. Our local newspaper would (and still does) run stories about the cartel trade with images of the border patrol's confiscated drugs and money. This inspired my first stack of *Drug Money*. These oversized, carved and painted wooden blocks represent the futility of the "Drug War."

Another sculpture, *La Frontera del Norte*, started as a traditional western spur—albeit oversized. I think that piece shows my struggle or melding of the two sides of my progression in subjects. One side has very traditional Texas icons: a longhorn, prickly pear and a Texas star. The other side represents the narco trade with images of marijuana leaves, AK-47, accordion and a Zapata skull. I started viewing the landscape as cinematic. It still feels lawless and like the Wild West. Just as narcocorridos tell the stories of the drug lords in song, I try to tell them through my sculptures. In scale, my work mimics the cartels' larger than life exploits, and tries to tell the stories of their accumulation of status and power, of the transformation of poverty into wealth, of *campesinos* [farm laborer] into drug lords. Works like *Mi Vida Loca* (also titled *Gun Bar*) demonstrate a melding of both my painting and wood working, and exemplify my ongoing interest in the creation of narratives through objects.

PK: How would you answer someone viewing your "larger than life" objects and imagery as promoting or glorifying the surreal and violent exploits of the cartels?

CB: I don't think I'm romanticizing narco culture or power; I am working through it. It does not mean that I sympathize with these types of characters. Art is an inherent form of communication and my work stimulates conversations about border issues, the narcos, and the war on drugs. Through my work, I'm deliberately challenging questions unique to the border region: corruption, violence, murder, poverty and lawlessness wrought by the drug cartels. I hope to encourage dialogue as an important tool for change.

I acknowledge the ongoing folklore of Mexican history and popular arts within the culture of *la frontera* [the border] by creating recurring and enduring images from

wood. I use techniques derived from Mexican artisanal woodcarving, bas-relief, metalworking, and jewelry making traditions. Isolating the trappings of narco-culture demystifies them, allowing them to be seen apart from their cultural milieu, and diffuses their charge as associated symbols of power and machismo. They begin to move into the realm of Pop. Increased in scale, these stereotypical status objects lose some of their connotations of menace and domination and make way for an appreciation of craft, skill and beauty.

PK: In a sense the work is satirical without being biting so. Do you make a conscious effort to keep it somewhat neutral as to promote and encourage dialogue rather than direct or create judgments?

CB: I don't think of my work as satirical, but maybe it is. I just naturally have a sense of humor and I've tried to make serious art and it winds up humorous. I just can't help it. The work that generally appeals to me is work with a sense of humor, even if it is gallows humor.

My subject matter is dark, but I find it interesting and compelling. The drug cartels are larger than life. My sculptures are large, and large scale tends to make something humorous.

I do not make a conscious effort to keep my work neutral. Heck, I'm not sure I make a conscious effort about anything.

PK: We will shift gears here a bit. You said you studied painting in school. Did you take any sculpture courses that introduced you to woodcarving or did you teach yourself the process?

CB: I did have a sculpture class, but I wasn't interested in sculpture in school. It wasn't until after college that a collector of my work asked if I could make furniture. And, of course, I said YES because I needed the money. I received the deposit and thought "oh shit, I have to figure out how to make this thing." I am a completely self-taught wood carver. My wife calls me a wood carving fool. When I first thought I'd get into carving, I bought all the wrong chisels which I soon discovered were for a lathe.

I'm self-taught through practice, and everywhere I travel I seek wood carving shops and sites. Specifically, Mexico, Bali and Thailand have influenced my work. My sketchbooks are full of drawings from my travels.

PK: At times, most artists I know are forced out of their comfort zones to convey an idea. But through trial and error, true and interesting works can be the product. Aren't you glad you agreed to make that piece of furniture? By the way, how did it turn out?

CB: The furniture piece turned out great, and she still has it and is a collector of my

work. There was a point when I thought I'd do furniture and not art. I'm still very inspired by furniture makers. It's rather a loop though. Things I learn from furniture will find their way into my art and my art will find its way into a furniture piece. I make custom pieces for the house and I've always been inspired by artists' homes like those of Alexander Calder and Wharton Esherick. I love the way they integrate their art with their lives. My goal is to turn our home into an artist environment and to reflect my artistic vision. Just give me 30 more years!

I'm always trying to challenge myself. My most recent piece, *El Otro Lado*, is a giant carved wooden skull. It has been a complex Rubik's cube of a wooden project to say the least. It's a piece I could not have done several years ago.