Kirshner, Judith Russi.
“Vaults and Sailors”
Mousse.
Issue no. 50 (October-November 2015): 112-123.

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MOUSSE

VAULTS AND SAILORS

BY JUDITH RUSSI KIRSHNER

RICHARD REZAC’S SCULPTURES ARE NOT SIMPLY FORMS WE ENCOUNTER IN SPACE. THEY ARE FORMS THAT *CONFORM* TO OUR BODIES: OBJECTS OF A SIZE WE CAN EASILY DUB AS “DOMESTIC”; OBJECTS THAT SUGGEST A USE, THOUGH ABSTRACTLY; OBJECTS TRIGGERED BY THE LOGIC OF WHAT SURROUNDS US, A LOGIC BASED ON GEOMETRY. JUDITH RUSSI KIRSCHNER MET WITH THE ARTIST TO TALK ABOUT HIS RECENT OUTPUT AND ITS GROWING MATERIC COMPLEXITY.

Richard Rezac (b. 1952) lives and works in Chicago. Since the mid-1980s he has primarily made object-sculptures that are essentially abstract in form. His sculpture is reliant on a deliberative process, which allows for the ongoing redefinition of each piece, however subtle. All of his sculpture originates from drawing, with the aim of synthesis and simplification. He has received the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, among others. Since 2000, he has had 20 solo exhibitions, including at the Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; Feature Inc., New York; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles; and James Harris Gallery, Seattle. His sculpture is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Dallas Museum of Art; the Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Detroit Institute of Art; and Yale University Art Gallery, among others. He is an adjunct full professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in both the Painting and Sculpture departments.

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Above - *Untitled (12-08)*, 2012

Opposite - *Circum*, 1992

Courtesy: the artist; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

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JUDITH RUSSI KIRSHNER Let's begin with your current show at Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie in Berlin. How did the idiosyncrasies of the space impact your choice of pieces, and their placement, given that the show covers a long span of time—more than twenty-five years—of your work?

RICHARD REZAC It is indeed an unusual space, and to some degree a challenging one. It's divided into three rooms. The furthest room is more typical of contemporary art galleries. The first two rooms are very active architecturally, with dark wood wall paneling. To place wall sculpture onto a paneled structure is something I'd never done before, and I treated it as a challenge. Across from that was another wall of glass cabinets, and so the reflection from the glass was also something to accept and accommodate.

JRK The first large room holds *Circum* (1992), which is the earliest piece in the show, as well as a very recent work, *Untitled (13-06)*, from 2013. What metaphor would help someone understand the way that you place objects and sculptures in a particular space?

RR I felt the need to address that space in a way that was less about storytelling and more about the particulars of the architecture, and the relationship or space between things. That's an interesting observation about the work entering a space, and then participating in, activating, enlivening, or posing a presence. "Dialogue," I suppose is the best word for circumstance and relationship to a kind of figure, or enlarging the figure to the setting, and the unity that then occurs—even if it's ambiguous. Or abstract on some level.

JRK As you chose the works for this show, did you consider whether your practice and career are characterized more by continuity, or more by rupture?

RR Much more continuity than rupture. I work slowly and deliberately, and the process is in stages, so the creation of any one work can be seen as a microcosm for twenty-five or thirty years of the way I've made sculpture. There are slow transitions from one emphasis to another. Early on, my work was simple, and with a single material. Now it is complex, and sometimes I use up to six or seven materials, with color. But the difference was hardly noticeable to me from one year to the next.

JRK At the risk of being too detailed, how would you describe your conceptual process in reference to this evolution from more simple to complex?

RR I always begin with drawings. The blank sheet, and the endless possibilities that it offers, have always been of great value. Now, I can say that *in theory*. In practice, when I'm involved with a set of ideas, previous ideas do find their way to the page pretty quickly. No drawing starts from nothing, but at the same time I hold out as an option a sort of abrupt turn away from what I did before. Once an idea or image is fixed on a piece of paper, it's at that stage that I begin the translation toward a three-dimensional object.

JRK It is interesting to hear you use the language of an abrupt turn, because you've made pieces that very much ask the viewer to do an abrupt turn. Would *Untitled (15-02)* (2015) be a good example, a kind of visual brainteaser?

RR Yes, in *Untitled (15-02)* the side view tells you more. The front view is a collapse, and in a way it is deceiving. One form overlaps another, and you might question whether there are one or two forms. Generally, the three-quarters view of my sculpture is the most revealing. Just as a three-quarters view of a face tells you a great deal: volume, character, features. A profile or a frontal view tends to limit the totality. That's probably true of almost all sculpture.

JRK So you are determining, or suggesting, a place for your viewer to receive the most information. This seems like a very generous position. Does it apply to every single piece, even those installed on the floor?

RR If you're standing, looking down at a floor piece from above, you're inevitably getting a three-quarters view. With the wall pieces, it's a different perspective.

JRK You have written eloquently about the visual language of geometry being applied to human scale. One of the aspects of your work that I find unique in terms of (as you say) continuity is this human scale.

RR There's an inherent modesty that comes with that. There's an intimacy, or (to some degree) a close familiarity with the body in the size of rooms, the materials that are handled, the tools—certainly tools held in one's hand. All of those things reinforce a given size. There's the fact that I've always started each work with a drawing, and sheets of paper come only so big. Nevertheless, it seems to be the natural state of affairs that there is this resemblance to the body in the making, and then in the viewing within a room.

JRK In this age of inflated, shiny, sculptures that embrace the spectacular, is there something in your work that rejects this approach?

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Curtain, 1997.
Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

Pacific Sailor, 1997, “Circum” installation view at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Photo: Nick Ash

Lancaster, 2004, “Circum” installation view at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Nick Ash

Next spread - “Circum” installation view at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Nick Ash

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RR The experience of one-to-one looking, where something is small enough that people are best able to look at it one or two at a time, is different than looking at a monumental public sculpture in a plaza, where a crowd of people can look at it and talk about it. When I was in art school, the forms of art that struck me most deeply were ceramics from Korea and Japan. The pieces are human-scale and functional. Also, Native American works from the Pacific Northwest had a great resonance and they were also primarily functional. Geometry was everywhere in their design, and obvious symbolism. I grew up in a part of the country where I didn't have any exposure to that.

JRK Where did you grow up?

RR In Nebraska. During the summers in high school, I worked painting county bridges. On that flat landscape, with its creeks and narrow rivers, the bridges are fairly diminutive, and most are wooden. That experience, and the position of an upright structure in a flat landscape, became important to me. I revisited that notion in *Lancaster* (2004), which is like a handrail you'd see primarily in interior architecture. There's a delicacy to it. The peculiar aspect is the doubling, or the two layers, since it is parallel to the wall. It's not exactly a gate, but it seems like one you could walk through.

JRK It does have an initial “come hither” appeal, and then when you get close, you cannot enter the work. I wonder if you could talk about the scale and why it's important. On what part of one's body do the pieces correspond? With *Lancaster*, it's waist or belly height.

RR As we look and move around in life, we identify with the positions of things we live with. A bed, for example, is horizontal and low, and a window is at eye level. All of those things have a certain carryover logic when I make a sculpture. In some cases, wall pieces are a little higher than you might expect. In the cases of *Circum* and *Untitled (13-06)*, they're low, like a basin, so that you're looking down, almost surveying the top plane, which is the primary view. In the case of *Lancaster*, it needs to be on the floor so that one can comfortably reach out to touch the rail, as one would reach a banister.

JRK The sculpture *Untitled (12-08)* (2012), is unsettling in a way that reminds me of *Untitled (13-06)*. One might, at first glance, say, “these two elements are exactly alike.” And then when one looks more closely, what seemed comprehensible becomes unstable and incomprehensible.

RR Another word I would use is *logic*. When I'm making drawings, in the back of my mind, I'm aware of logic as it exists in geometry. When geometry is altered, edited, fragmented, we can still sense the logic, but it's incomplete, and that carries over often into my sculpture.

I always intend to make work that has a set of levels, or complications, so that there are at least two or three readings.

JRK I would disagree with you here, and say that there are more like ten, or twenty! It's almost in inverse proportion to the scale of the work. It seems impossible to retain all the metaphoric readings of *Pacific Sailor* (1997), since they proliferate. Could you tell me a bit about the title?

RR In this case, I knew ahead of time that I wanted to make a work that had this figure, in this case represented by these four hemispheric, circular forms. Near the center, is a portrait of my wife's father, who was a Merchant Marine for about twenty-five years before he married. For me the, the silver, nickel plated surface is the field or the area of the Pacific Ocean, where he primarily sailed. The image in the middle is a figure, namely him. It is a map, a sea chart, so its important that the nickel plating be reflective as water is, and that the rim be left a natural bronze, a dry earthen color. So the color carries as much symbolism as anything else.

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Opposite - *Veil*, 1987. Copyright: the artist. Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

Above - *Untitled (08-02)*, 2008. Courtesy: the artist; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

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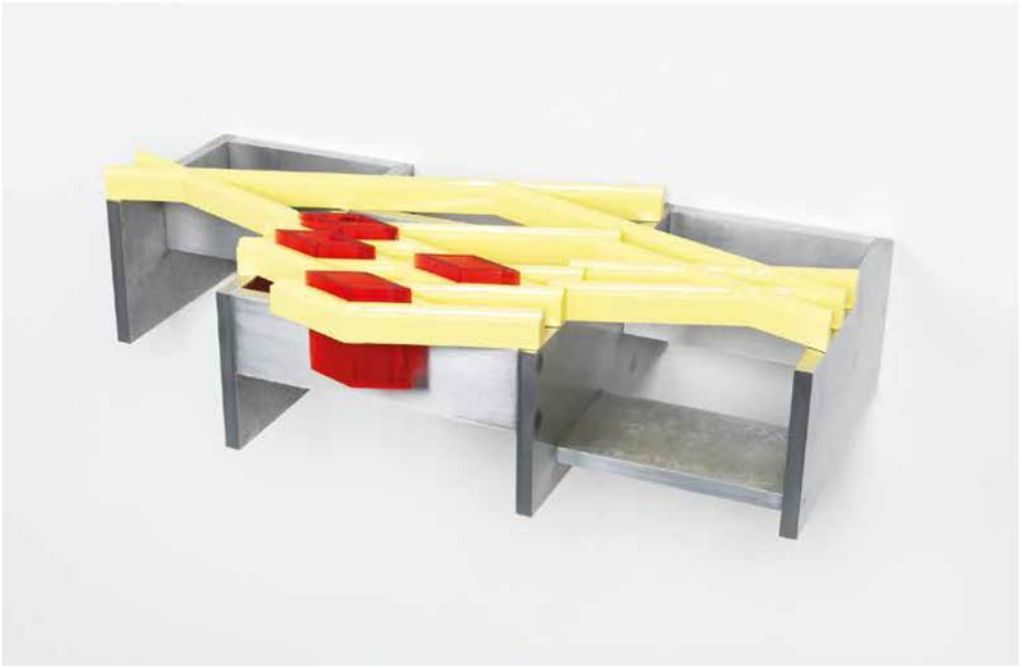
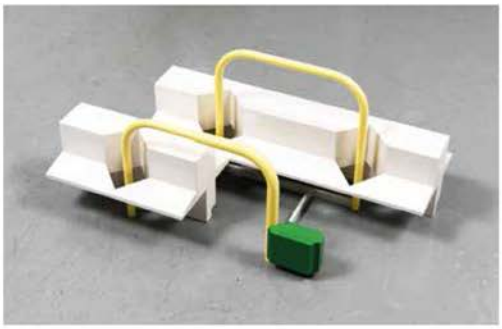
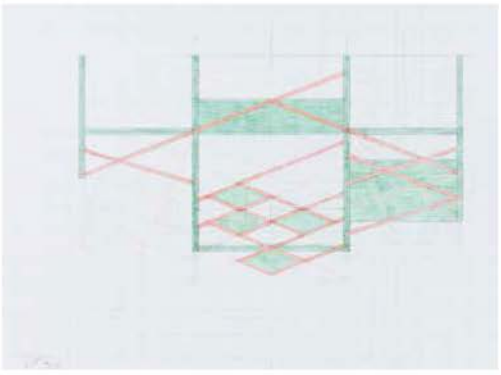


Untitled (13-06), 2013.
Courtesy: the artist; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;
Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago





Clockwise from top, left -

Untitled (15-01), 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

Untitled (13-07), 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Untitled (10-02), 2010. Courtesy: the artist

Study for Untitled (13-06), 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

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JRK In a moment when so much artwork is made outside of the studio, I wonder how the studio space informs your work.

RR For me it is a refuge, a quiet place for concentration. I have a very limited set of tools, and every tool I need is there. It's the only place I could make work.

JRK What do you mean by a "limited set of tools"?

RR I have a couple of power tools, but otherwise I work with hand tools. The speed at which I fashion, or shape, or reduce a material, or make a mold for casting—it takes a fair amount of time. Along with that process, there's the ability for me to make changes, however subtle. Certain processes, foundry work and welding, naturally take place outside of my studio.

JRK How far do you allow yourself to move from the original drawing?

RR When I've finished a drawing, I often use it as a pattern or template, just like an architectural drawing showing elevation and plan. As much as possible, I use the drawing to build the sculpture up to the point where, when it becomes three dimensional, if I discern problems that need changing, that's when I depart from the drawing.

A drawing can only serve so much, and then the life of a sculpture is in front of me as it's being made. Sometimes I'll create a sculpture that is extremely faithful to the drawing, and when it's finished, I'll realize that something is missing. So I reengage with the sculpture on its own terms, and carry out some kind of surgery, or add an element to it.

There have been some works that went so far adrift that they were incomprehensible to me; they were never completed, or understood to be works of mine.

JRK When did color appear in your work, and why did you decide to introduce it?

RR I've always thought about color as a material, and less as a phenomenon that is on the surface. Every material, whether it's cast bronze or aluminum or plaster or wood, has an inherent color. Up to a certain point, I choose materials knowing that the color, whether it is light or dark, or has an active wood grain, is necessarily an element of the technique or the process of making, but also determines its final quality.

JRK Your work, like that of Martin Puryear, invites the viewer—maybe even *encourages* the viewer—to find volumes that are visually permeable. In other words, sometimes the internal and the external do not match.

RR I've begun to have a tendency to use color in more complicated ways so it is isolated from another set of materials, in which case the color announces itself as one thing, and is adjacent to a reflective aluminum surface. Then there was a middle stage of work, between *Circum* (1992) and *Vault* (1995), where the color wrapped around the entire form. It was a muted color, a pastel color, a soft color, and you didn't know what material was underneath. To me, that was an important development toward enlarging my choice of materials, and consequently the experience of people looking at the work.

JRK When did you start suspending sculpture? The notion of hanging volumes seems counterintuitive, for instance in *Vault* (1995).

RR For me, it was quite practical. When I came up with the drawing for *Vault*, it seemed that it would look defeatist if it were on the floor. If it were on a pedestal, you would lose the feet; you could see the top of it, but its delicacy would be violated by the points on a hard surface. One option then was to suspend it above one's head, so one could see it from below and appreciate in essence what in the drawing was the plan, the primary diagram. And if you stepped away, at three-quarters view you could see both underneath the work and the side. You could never see the top, but then the top is an echo of the bottom, and you pretty much understand that.

JRK I'm very taken with some of your language that suggests a subjective and emotional depth that challenges the concentration on the logical and the rational. I am thinking that you borrowed Leonardo da Vinci's classic proportion and updated it for us. I know that it's somewhat obvious to say that your sculpture *is* "humanist," but on multiple occasions, it reaches to the extremes of that figure limned so many centuries ago.

You were talking before about the influences and references from the Pacific Northwest, and from Asian ceramics. How do you calibrate what is remote with that which is near and close to you?

RR I love to travel, and when I do, inevitably I find myself in the city's art museum. I find my way through virtually all of the departments. I am curious about different periods, cultures, forms. Ceramics has long been a great love, whether it's ceramics from Europe or America or Asia, modern or ancient. One of the great things about a wonderful, profound vessel is this marriage between the form and the glaze, and the sometimes accidental instances

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in which they are perfectly suited, that action of nature. Sometimes with my bronze castings, I'll originally intend to burnish and plate them in nickel, but they come out looking like a slab of clay that has a kind of ash glaze, and I cannot change that.

JRK You also spent a great deal of time in Rome, when you were a fellow at the American Academy.

Untitled (15-02), 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

RR My reason for spending the year in Rome was to look closely at the architecture of Francesco Borromini. And in Turin, at the work of Guarino Guarini. Especially with Borromini in Rome, in comparison to, say, Bernini, there's modesty, again a smaller scale, a limited use of materials, and a sculptural aspect. It was a fulfillment of a ten-year-long desire to see as much as I could of Borromini and the Baroque. I still think about this period on a regular basis. I would say, too, that the ancient Roman architecture, in its disheveled, incomplete state—and the dynamic and high suggestiveness of what those buildings were when they were intact—was a great realization.

JRK You bring the very specific into the general, and the highly eccentric—almost comic—into the formal. I'm always amused by the additional messages in something like *Untitled (99-01) pews* (1999). My subjective reading allows one to see hearts, butterflies, and other poetic allusions at the cross sections. Occasionally the eccentric and the aesthetic almost overpower the geometric core.

RR I am interested in a form of beauty, and making work that has an aesthetic, or gracefulness. I think it's also true that we are so familiar with and surrounded by geometric forms, it doesn't take much slippage away from what I make to reach an identification or an association with something that we have encountered before.

JRK I think much of the meaning of your work occurs in the slippage, where the abstraction serves as ground, but the works often suggest something that we understand from daily life. Is there function implied in these pieces as well?

RR There's use, to the extent that architecture invites existing, within it. The scale and the delicacy and the material send an immediate signal that you don't want to handle or sit on these objects. But their forms do suggest, at least in the abstract, use.

JRK It seems from your description that you have reinvented Borromini for your own use, which I like very much, that assertive, anti-influence tactic. Is it the case that you have embraced more of your own biographical references in your recent work?

RR Yes, certainly more than in the past, there's been a willingness to incorporate memory, recollection, and identification. It still is occasioned by what I think of as very abstract sculpture. I do not make, nor have I ever truly made, representational work.

JRK I ask about the biographical traces because it seems to me that throughout your career, the baseline is about abstraction and geometry, yet you complicate each of those conditions. When you have something like order in *Lancaster*, there is another barrier where one cannot enter, invitation and refusal. I wonder if that incorporation of duality, opposites, or binary conditions is purposeful?

RR It is about the use of contrasts to create and compound the dynamic, the relationship of parts. They need each other for unity, but at the same time they can be seen in isolation. That's a simple exercise in expansion without creating chaos.

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Untitled (99-01), 1999, “Circum” installation view at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Photo: Nick Ash