

SUNDAY - Raphael Fonseca 2019

In a 2017 interview, Dan Coopey spoke with curator Fernanda Brenner about his recent work and underlined the importance of time in its production and his thinking: "I get very impatient to see my work in ten years, because I am very conscious about how the wicker I use will age and how its color will deepen over time" Coopey explained. In this text, I like to reflect on this idea further, looking at the artist's work specifically from the perspective of materiality and of its relationship to time.

This interest is present in the artist's use of varying materials and display methods in his works from the early 2010s. A series of wall-based sculptures from 2013 feature ancient coins, resting in frames against scans of their surfaces – with varying textured patterns – which have subsequently been digitally manipulated. There is a connection here between a commercially valuable antique object and the ways in which photographic technology can not only document but also create fictions. The passing of time disturbs our reading of an object. Likewise, in 2014 the artist engraved and framed a series of copper plates which underwent a gradual oxidation. The pattern imprinted by the artist on the metal mingled with murky spots of oxidation, abstract forms in which there is no separation between figure and background. We need not wait a millenia to notice the action of time in these works; this seems to be the prime condition for its existence – from the strangeness of an archaeological object to the association between matter and chemical reaction, from the functional material of coins to the minimalistic flat metal panels.

Since 2015, Coopey has been working with basketry and through his experimentation with this traditional technology, new lessons about time are both learned by the artist and shared with the public. At his exhibition Lalalaha at Belmacz in London his woven objects were supported by wooden pegs, hung at varying heights across one wall, each of these 'baskets' painted with a watercolor wash in varying palette. The sculptures differ from the traditional utilitarian character of ancestral weaving practice however in that, fully enclosed, they are not woven for the purpose of transporting goods or produce. Encased inside each of these containers was a hidden object nonetheless – a provocation to the usual use of the baskets? To discover them it would have been necessary to destroy the structure woven by Coopey. As we avoid the work's desecration, we read the identification of its contents in the accompanying materials list and are forced to take the artist's word. Shown side-by-side and irregularly shaped, Coopey's 'baskets' have crevices and curves that are both abstract and contain nods towards the human body. In the absence of an explicit message from the artist, our gaze rests on the way the colors spread across its surface and present us with something akin to a rainbow's ghost.

Dry, the artist's solo exhibition in 2017 at Kubikgallery, Porto, featured six baskets shown side by side in a more symmetrical way. The application of paint is set aside and our gaze rests on the natural tones of the particular wicker chosen by the artist. This observation exercise is essential: depending on how the wefts are constructed in the basketry, the presence of color differs in contrast to the white of the gallery wall. Thus, a feature central to Coopey's work is noted: one object will never be the same as another. Even though these six works come in a cylindrical shape, each of the forms differ and bring specific subtleties to the public. This strikes me as an important aspect of the relationship between the artist, craftsmanship and time: every doing is a doing, every object is an object on its own and every interweaving of material is a unique experience. When Coopey gives time to time, his body opens to the chance inherent in braiding - which could not be mistaken for utilitarian basketry, as the artist's research evolves into attention-grabbing designs and textures.

In the same year, at Pivô, in São Paulo, the artist continues and expands this research for his solo Interiors. Here the baskets are bunched together, attached by thread directly to the wall and giving space for a more informal set up. Different materials are mixed in the same piece; rattan is accompanied by organic and industrial materials found in different regions of Brazil. Alongside these objects, another work already indicated another line of enquiry: several plastic containers are simply stacked. The industrial character of plastic contrasts not only with the material of the baskets, but also the color – this artificial palette somehow blends with the natural beige and earth tones of the baskets.

In the same interview with Brenner, the artist comments how links have been drawn between his own work and contemporary art production by Brazilian artists (Coopey is British, living in São Paulo and London). Why is this association made? We could, it seems to me, easily link his research to the work of artists such as Sonia Gomes, Alexandre da Cunha, Felipe Barbosa, Mano Penalva, Marcone Moreira and Marepe; artists who, each in their own way, play with composing and decomposing industrial or craft forms. What is striking about Coopey's practice however is that his work makes no explicit reference to Brazilian culture or history – either in his titling or by how the sculpture is formally presented. Evidently the artist is interested in researching Brazilian art and the materials found in the country, but the end product refuses the discourse of an identity belonging to Brazil and, also, denies an exoticisation of the country the artist is a foreigner to. It's a position the artist is not immune to lightly satirizing. The last of the towering plastic bowls in Interiors has a tag that reads "Made in Brazil".

These brief reflections on Dan Coopey's journey seem to me important to establish connections with the project that the artist presents at Galeria Estação which features three new series of works by the artist. The first one gives continuity to his work with basketry. The other two he appropriates found objects, namely pencils and matchbooks.

When these new baskets are mounted in space, two elements draw attention. The organic, closed forms of previously produced objects give way to a more undefined character: loose threads hang down from each object. Returning to the relationship between time and doing, it is as if the artist invites the audience to complete the otherwise tightly woven works. We can also assume these works no longer have secrets hidden within them; they are what they are, strands partially woven as a structure and partially presented as matter. Their structures are not rigid, but lightly malleable, constructed in materials as diverse as sisal, paper, banana fiber, and plastic cord. Their size, colors, and curves move within the bounds of matter. As we enter the gallery space, we notice this silent dance of forms. This aspect is corroborated by the second contrasting element to his previous assemblies: the exit from the wall to the center. Hoisted from a spool of rope, these objects hang in the air and will likely move given a slight breeze.

The other two series continue the artist's use of industrial objects. After scouring several secondhand markets in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Coopey acquired bundles of pencils and matchbooks produced during the 1930s and 1940s in Brazil. What unites these objects is that, as well as their obvious utilitarian use, they all served as commercial merchandise displaying vintage logos and advertising for a range of products and services.

Coopey has layered and stitched the pencils one on top of the other, wall hung they sit in dialogue with the baskets in the center of the gallery. At first glance one might dwell on the chromaticity of the pencils, on closer inspection however, the different slogans evoke a vast variety of narratives and mental imagery. Casa Aliança bancária, Transportadora Mayer, Bar Restaurante e Sorveteria Rodoviário., Armazém Elite. These brands, one above the other, lead us to a time when typography was the main means of advertising a product or establishment. One of the works shows a series of pencils from Passoquinha Paulista. Just below is a phrase that could have been extracted from a contemporary meme: "Always envied never equaled."

Having the budget to invest in marketing at this time in history was something to envy among business owners. It is perverse that the object used to advertise was the pencil; an essential tool for writing and drawing, not only to be disseminated among workers, but also present in the educational environment. From a young age, therefore, a child could be surrounded by messages alluding to consumption – something distant, but certainly recalled within today's saturation of digital images, multiple tabs and feeds on our little computers, that make us hyper-stimulated,

Something similar can be said about the works made of matchbooks but these narratives move beyond brand names. Coopey opens up these objects and places them side by side making a collage of the advertising images. Holiday greetings and promotions, a profusion of typography and images of human bodies all sit side by side, slightly overlapping. Against the wall, matches of various colors form a kind of incomplete color circle. These new works by the artist make a comment on the history of São Paulo itself and its central position in the history of capitalism and the industrialization of Brazil.

Time is central to Coopey's production. This is not only because of his interest in the ancestral making of basketry, but also in the way the artist discreetly weaves out objects and images of different temporalities. One eye explores the organic fragility and ephemerality of his materials, while the other manipulates objects that desired eternal life and can already be seen as ruins.

Between them, we see Coopey's central preoccupation, a question of permanence.

Interview with Pivô Artistic Director Fernanda Brenner - July 2017

FB - I've been struggling recently with the inescapable –and timeless- question of the role of art in times of insecurity, volatile economies, climate changes and political turmoil. When the future no longer seems predictable I guess we tend to reach for the past and its stable narratives as possible answers of how we ended-up here or how to proceed. Your work delves into vernacular techniques that are later combined with found tribal objects and industrial materials –an ancient kuba textile mended together with cheap and colorful Chinese threads. How do you see the question of permanence and how you relate with the provenance of the materials and techniques you use to shape your work?

DC- My works often evolve from or utilise found objects, in particular those that connect to what I term 'speculative histories', and objects that have long-running narratives that span many, even every culture. Basketry is one example of this where, due to the perishable nature of the natural materials employed, few ancient basketry artefacts exist. What we know is mostly derived through fossilisation.

There is a theory that in pre-history, basket makers packed their woven vessels with clay in order to contain liquids, and that through accidental fire, the basket perished and the first fired clay vessel remained. This theory interests me, as one would assume that at this point basketry would become outmoded, yet it is still practiced widely today.

Although these historical narratives inform the work, it is a mistake to assume that my works are concerned only with the past; I consider my practice to be dealing with a very current situation, and in turn the future. My works which involve basketry are often interpreted through ancient histories, yet with the new works for Pivo, the viewer will be very aware of the freshness of my new materials when contrasted/intertwined with that of the found indigenous vessels.

I am very impatient to see my works in ten years time, as I am very conscious of how the rattan I use will age, its colour deepening over time.

My intervention with the Kuba textiles you mention above was to mend the holes and tears in the textiles surface that have amounted over time through their use as ceremonial dress. The value of these cloths is largely dependent on their condition, so I was interested in considering how my repairs would shift their value, as my intervention could be considered both an act of compassion, in some sense rescuing them from ruin, but on the flip side it could be considered invasive, even destructive. However these works are considered, my interaction with them has ensured that they remain intact for years to come, even if they may no longer function within the culture from where they came.

FB- you always hide small objects inside of the basket-works. I really like the idea of an artwork having a secret, something that can only be accessed if the sculpture is tear apart. Sometimes the titles are hints for what's inside. Can you tell me a little bit about these hidden objects and how do you select it?

DC- the objects that I have hidden inside previous woven works are always found items, either tools or ornaments that are handcrafted from base materials, metals, minerals etc. These objects perform several functions within the work.

I am interested in how an object's value shifts when out of sight. For example, one such object, a nineteenth century set of hand carved ebony piano keys, to all intents and purposes, returns to the raw material when the only evidence of its presence is that material listing in the work's caption. I like however that in, say, a hundred years time when the basket has perished, the object inside retain its original value, though presumably by then, the value of ebony, and the value of piano keys, will have shifted either up or down. But hiding the objects, it also raises the question of the value attributed to artistry and craftsmanship. Each time I make a new work in this series, I try to find an object made from a material I haven't used previously. I enjoy this challenge, because as the series progresses it becomes ever more difficult. The objects are often antique, as handicrafts are largely outmoded and replaced by mass produced items. I find each time I travel that I am introduced to new materials, for example in Sicily I found coral, and here in Brazil alot of items made from nuts, stones and agate.

FB- For this exhibition you are trying something new. Combining found indigenous artifacts (pots and baskets) with your particular methods of weaving. I guess it's different from the kuba-textile works because instead of fixing the holes in the old fabric using new materials you are creating new structures that depart from the artifacts, thus annulling the possibility of practical use of those objects and their relationship to their origin or any kind of symbolic value they might have. In these works, the indigenous basket is in the same hierarchy of the rattan threads. You are constantly shifting the notions of material and symbolic values in your practice, the copper works are also an example. Can you tell me how you see the relationship of attributed value and the raw matter throughout your practice?

DC- The use of indigenous baskets in these new works, partly came out of an interest in what I perceive as a very unstable, fluctuating set of values that are attributed to these objects. Already removed from the context where they were made, their value here in a big city, specifically São Paulo is mostly for use as decorative items for the home, particularly for the educated classes. Their material value is also increasing rapidly as indigenous communities are depleting, and there is now a scarcity of authentic indigenous items. Most of what you will find in indigenous stores in São Paulo today are not what you could term genuine artefacts, but items made solely for this particular market.

My intervention with these baskets, expanding and altering their forms using materials and some techniques which are alien to their origin does indeed disable their ability to function as practical vessels, yet it is a condition that in some respects is already inherent in these vessels through their displacement.

Last time I was in São Paulo, I spent a lot of time studying and admiring the indigenous baskets, yet felt uncomfortable trying to imitate the techniques I discovered, and although my intervention here could seem intrusive, I feel the contrast with my own weaving that I instigate here, somehow allows the found objects to retain their identity, perhaps even heightens the viewer's awareness of the specific forms and materials utilised to create the indigenous vessels.

FB- Vernacular techniques of architecture and artifacts are not so easy to find in Brazil anymore, what wasn't entirely replaced by industrial manufacture and importation is nowadays closer to ethnical merchandise with decoration purposes. Lina Bo Bardi's seminal show *A Mão do Povo Brasileiro*, reedited recently at MASP, dealt with this questions by putting together a large inventory of what use to be 'The Hand of the Brazilian People' in 1969. The curators chose not to update the collection and showed only pieces from that period. The exhibition from 1969 became itself a museum piece and, arguably, contemporary art is looking more and more to the locally sourced and to it's own ecological footprint (the latest editions of the Venice and São Paulo Biennials are good examples) instead of reinforcing the lavish and globetrotting art world of the early 2000s. You mentioned to me once that people say often your work looks Brazilian and it is the second time you spend a long period in the country. How has being in Brazil affected your work? Do you agree with this image of your work? Or maybe is a stereotyped idea of handmade work belonging to underdeveloped environs?

DC- Indeed last time I was in São Paulo, many people thought my work looked 'Brazilian', and this was really what has instigated the works I'm making here now. Being a self taught weaver I am very aware of the specific origins of the weaves I use and the materials I employ, and am therefore able to make a strong distinction between the weaving I do, which is actually a hodge podge of weaves from across the globe, that I use to form vessels which

have no real point of reference in terms of cultural identity, and the very specific weaves and materials used here in Brazil.

I think the resultant works are interesting as they in some ways dispel of this idea, through the direct contrast I set up, but in some ways they could be considered to look even more Brazilian, as they employ found Brazilian objects. But it is an interesting idea. You see the label 'Made in Brazil' on many products here, mostly food; as a foreigner in São Paulo making these works, could I label them as 'Made in Brazil'? and what would it mean to do so. I still don't really have an answer.

Handcrafted objects such as baskets are often collective endeavours when made in indigenous communities; the sourcing of materials, their preparation and then the crafting of the objects themselves may involve many hands. I am aware that I am making my works in the city, within a society that is more geared towards the recognition of individuals. Of course this is evident across social media etc, but it is interesting to think that by utilizing these objects in my artwork, they in some way become authored, and their value is shifted under my name. Perhaps my act of weaving also receives a higher recognition, precisely because I am doing it in a context dominated by quick mass production and flat screens. But I hope that through the recognition of my own manual labour, people might consider the other hands involved, maybe even see my works as a collective endeavour.

FB- To end this conversation, can you tell me a little bit about the process and installation of this particular exhibition. Is the context and the architecture of the space playing a significant role in the conception of the show or you are mainly focused in producing the artworks?

DC- For this exhibition I have chosen a fairly informal mode of presentation, the objects that I have created are in themselves quite informal. This non-hierarchical method of display also references the environment of the indigenous stores here in São Paulo, often a jumble of different forms and textures. Kind of a beautiful mess, a little like here in Centro.