

Bakker, Benjamin and Kerr

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Gahlberg Gallery

McAninch Arts Center
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 **College of DuPage**

Conrad
Keith
Chris

Bakker,
Benjamin,
Kerr

**An Interview with Conrad
Bakker, Keith Benjamin
and Chris Kerr**

The following interviews were compiled
through e-mail conversations that took
place in September/October 2003.

— Barbara Wiesen

KB Yes, an optimistic outlook. My life is so busy with family responsibilities, the project gallery that I run (*Warsaw Projects* in Cincinnati, OH), the constant struggle to find full-time work and then making my own work can be overwhelming. Therefore, much of the recent work addresses the struggle (emotional and physical) to start the day (particularly *Rise and Shine*, 2001, and *The Four Horsemen*, 2003). *The Four Horsemen*, while referencing the apocalypse, is really about starting a new day.

BW How did you get to this point in your work or career?

KB I've always used materials that were available and abundant mostly out of financial necessity. The use of cereal boxes, grocery bags and newspaper comes from the blending of art-making and daily activities. These materials must be processed anyway. I choose to transform the most mundane materials into art instead of giving them over to more practical recycling.

BW If you would describe your work in one word, phrase or sentence, what would it be?

KB Garbage.



Keith Benjamin, *Spiral Jetty Breakfast Nook*, 2002, mixed media, 33" x 36" x 56"

Facing page: **Keith Benjamin, *The Four Horsemen* (detail), 2003, newspaper, cereal box cut-outs, cardboard boxes, 84" x 60" x 24"**

Conrad Bakker lives in Urbana, IL, and teaches in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign.

Chris Kerr currently resides in the western suburbs of Chicago. He is a licensed associate real estate appraiser and has managed the art department woodshop and sculpture areas at Columbia College of Chicago for the past four years.

Keith Benjamin resides in Cincinnati, OH, where he is director of the gallery, *Warsaw Project Space*, and is a faculty member of the Art Academy of Cincinnati.



Conrad Bakker

BW You reference the everyday in your work whether it's in relation to nature, consumerism, contemporary culture or public space. What is it about the everyday — the common? And what's your motivation in pursuing this theme?

CB I would say that my motivation in attending to the everyday comes out of an understanding that there is a direct connection between ideas and things that the world of theory has to eventually have the weight of matter in order to matter. This is not to assume that only concrete realities have significance, because in truth the everyday is filled with complex, transient moments that are difficult to hold on to. Like Baudelaire's painter of modern life drawing lines of connection around a quickly changing world, I view my art and practice as an active agent of the everyday, marking the social, political and economic trajectories of contemporary spaces.

BW Your projects extend out beyond the traditional gallery space and seem more in tune with commercial practices than the traditional art market. I've seen your work on eBay and in a beautifully designed mail-order catalog. Is this what you mean by your artwork being "an active agent ... marking the social, political and economic trajectories of contemporary space" via the Internet and mail orders?

CB Yes. I am interested in allowing these (art) objects to drift into and out of social and commercial contexts. This is both an attempt to identify what happens to an object in these situations, as well as a method of bringing the context into focus. In fact, the formal construction of these carved and painted objects allows the illusion to fall apart rather quickly. This is not a strategy to draw attention to these artworks as "specific objects" as much as it is a way to create a conceptual kind of drag that leaves an odd and awkward trail when they are inserted into social and commercial trajectories. In other words, the objects function as a kind of non-site that attempts to incorporate the contingencies of objects, contexts and persons.



Conrad Bakker, *Untitled Projects: MIXTAPESWAP*, oil on carved wood (cassette tape). Each carved and painted tape is constructed as part of a trade for a real mix tape, 2003.

Conrad Bakker, Untitled Projects:
Tupperware@theTang, oil on carved
wood (Tupperware, measuring cups,
vintage). Twelve sets of carved and
painted sets of measuring cups were
installed in the Tang Museum, then
auctioned off on eBay in the vintage
Tupperware category, 2003.



BW If you would describe your work in one word, phrase or sentence, what would it be?

CK One phrase or sentence ... I think if squirrels and owls and other forest creatures had room in their nests, they wouldn't mind having one of my pieces in their home.

Keith Benjamin

BW You reference the everyday in your work whether it's in relation to nature, consumerism, contemporary culture or public space. What is it about the everyday — the common? And what's your motivation in pursuing this theme?

KB My motivation in focusing on everyday tasks, desires, necessities and debris is a push toward optimism. One goal of my recent work is to turn everyday waste (in my case the detritus of a family of four) into situations of fantasy, renewal and escape. Often times the work addresses morning rituals because of the need for optimism to start each day. The thing about the everyday is that it's so damn persistent.

BW In an earlier conversation we had you said that this new body of work is more about nature. Can you elaborate on this?



Keith Benjamin, *Workaholic*, 2002
Molson's Canadian six-pack carton,
newspaper pulp, 3" x 9" x 5"

KB The comment about nature could be more accurately described as rural escape. I'm attempting to escape the stresses of a typical suburban family existence with all the soccer practices and yard work that comes with it. A lot of my recent imagery comes from a desire to live a simpler solitary "mountain man existence." Because the work is made from such fragile materials, they read as pure fantasy.

BW This recycling of waste that is used in your work is not necessarily about ecology but about maintaining an optimistic outlook on life through "fantasy, renewal and escape." Am I interpreting this correctly? If so, could you give us a few examples?



Chris Kerr, *Campsite*, 1999
felt, cardboard, acrylic, 36" x 36"
(dimensions variable)

picked up a rock (tennis ball size) and started smashing it against the rock he was sitting on (in a wood chopping sort of motion), then he started scraping the rock back and forth like it was some kind of tool. I kept thinking, what if he throws it at somebody? That's the kind of animal weirdness I like. For example, in the painting, *The Arsonist*, 2003, an owl holds a lit match that he presumably struck off a pine cone that he grasps in the other wing. Hopefully, the painting is interesting for its composition and color choices, but also because it asks the viewer to subscribe to the possibility of animals making human decisions. It's nothing new of course; we all grew up with cartoons.

BW Outdoor space, nature and camping are recurring themes in your work, why?

CK I like the outdoors. In Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, he interviews Canadians. He asks them why they don't lock their doors. They said that while we Americans lock our doors to keep people out, they feel that by locking their doors they are locking themselves in. I guess I feel that way also. It would be nice to live in a tree house, if squirrels and raccoons wouldn't rob me every night.

BW You recently told me you're a painter foremost and had never taken a sculpture class, so does that mean you see your objects (sculptures) as paintings? What pushed you to go 3D?

CK I took mostly painting classes in school. I never took a sculpture class, but I worked in the woodshop and hung around a lot of sculptors. I grew up on a Mennonite farm in Kentucky. My dad and I built our three-room cabin from the trees we cleared from our 15-acre parcel. I guess life on the farm was my sculpture class. When making my sculptures, I still use the wood joinery techniques my dad showed me when we built our cabin. When I was in school, I don't think I ever took the distinction between different mediums very seriously. I was always very comfortable shifting between 2D and 3D. For a while I tried to make work that would function equally well on the wall or floor.

BW The MIXTAPESWAP project, where anyone could make an interesting mixed cassette tape, send it to you, and in return receive an original carved and painted mixed tape — is a very generous trade in terms of receiving an “original” artwork that may increase in value. On the other hand, in terms of time and craft, it is somewhat an equal trade. Is this project commenting on how we place value on objects, especially in respect to the art world?

CB The MIXTAPESWAP project is, in part, an attempt to expose the shifting and somewhat arbitrary assignment of value we place on objects. This project comes out of an interest in alternative economies that incorporate transactions as an exchange of value and does not resort to money. Mix tapes are interpersonal objects that are rarely bought and sold, they are given, received and often contain significant (perhaps subjective) meaning to the persons giving or receiving. My carved and painted mix tapes are an attempt to see if the attention and detail I place in the construction of an object can be recognized as a value equal to the attention and detail that goes into the construction of a real mix tape. I suppose I was also commenting on the current technological shift in recording music by forcing the engagement of outdated technologies (cassette tape mixing and the traditions of painting/sculpture). And while it is true that an art object



Conrad Bakker, Untitled Projects:
Consumer Actions, oil on carved wood (duct tape), a series of objects installed and left in consumer setting, 2003

has the potential to increase in value, I consider the mix tapes I have received as equally valuable objects. What continues to hold my attention in this project is the moment of exchange, what happens afterwards I am unable to control.

BW How did you get to this point in your work or career?

CB Perhaps I got to this point in my career out of a tension between my interest in constructing formal objects and an ongoing frustration with the perceived isolation of formal practices. Not wanting to let go of the investment of making, I slowly, and at times clumsily, discovered strategies that allowed me to address wider contexts and contingencies.



Contingency is a big thing for me right now. Traditionally, artists have addressed the contingencies surrounding art objects by consciously controlling context or denying its existence. I am interested in incorporating contingency as an active and positive force in my studio practice — a force that can at once increase my options and require me to pay attention.

Chris Kerr

BW You reference the everyday situations in your work whether it's in relation to nature, contemporary culture or public space. What is it about the everyday — the common? And what's your motivation in pursuing this theme?

CK Well, I don't know how much of the everyday I reference in my work. Hopefully enough so that anyone can get something out of the work. I like to give the viewer a reference point to begin with, for instance, *Garage in the Snow*, 2002, everyone knows what a garage is, and most people even had one attached to their home growing up. In the piece, the garage is detached from the home and surrounded by deep snow. Why is the light on in the garage? Why is the door opened slightly? Who is in there? I'm not comfortable "abstracting" things from the everyday; I think there are plenty of strange things to make art about from everyday life.



Chris Kerr, *Garage in the Snow* (detail), 2002, wood, polystyrene foam, acrylic, Christmas lights, 48" x 60" x 15"

Facing page: **Chris Kerr, *The Arsonist* (detail), 2003, acrylic on panel, 20" x 28"**

BW Speaking of "strange things" in odd situations — your owls are cutely strange. What is it about owls and placing them in these various situations that interests you?

CK I like strange things and strange situations. I'm not a big fan of sci-fi movies or over-the-top weirdness, but I like people, animals and situations that are a little off what we consider normal. I was recently at the zoo watching the baboons. They were sitting outside on huge rocks looking at us looking at them. They would occasionally relieve themselves or pick lice from their hair and eat it, you know, normal monkey business. Then, one of the baboons