

Art & Design

ART

Something There Is That Loves a Wall



An installation with a wall drawing, "Heads and Tales," and "Soap and Water"(bicycle). Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York

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IT was a quiet Sunday afternoon in Chelsea, but all three branches of the Perry Rubenstein Gallery were buzzing as assistants uncrated and positioned sculptures — including a green soap bicycle, a gold-plated spade and a silver abalone shell filled with coins — by the South African artist Robin Rhode. Yet the most intense interchange involved the artist himself, who was arguing quietly with his dealer, Mr. Rubenstein, about a drawing he had executed earlier that day directly onto a gallery wall.



Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York
A film still from "The Candle."

Mr. Rubenstein told him, "I believed that this drawing we talked about a week ago was appropriate for the show, your practice and for this exhibition in New York."

But Mr. Rhode firmly refused to change it. "I don't want to bow down to New York," he said. "This is what I do."

For the artist, this show is something of a departure. Now 31, he has been known primarily for performances, photographs and video animations in which he interacts in



Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York
Mr. Rhode uses a shell to draw on paper.

a remarkably realistic fashion with a two-dimensional drawing of some everyday object, like a bicycle or a car. This time, along with the photographic work, he is offering something quite different: his first 16-millimeter film; a long video made in collaboration with a dancer and a cellist; and several editioned sculptures, including a dozen abalone shells cast in chalk and charcoal.

The wall drawing in the gallery was the first he had made without a public performance.

Over the previous two weeks Mr. Rhode and Mr. Rubenstein had worked out its concept. He would start with a stenciled acrylic underpainting and finish by making marks with the chalk and charcoal shells.

But suddenly Mr. Rhode had decided to scrap the acrylic preparation. "Have you ever drawn with black and white on a white wall?" Mr. Rubenstein had asked, sounding doubtful.

Mr. Rhode replied, "Nope, but I think it's going to work quite nicely."

He grabbed a charcoal sculpture and demonstrated, grinding it into smithereens against a freshly prepared wall. Then, taking a chalk shell, he worked it into the blackness, producing a scribble whose aesthetic suggested a mix of Twombly and Basquiat.

Mr. Rubenstein muttered something about there still being plenty of time to repaint, but it was too late, for Mr. Rhode's performance instincts had taken over. "I can't stop!" he cried, pacing in circles like a boxer. Assistants crowded in to watch. He made four more furious scribbles in a burst of explosive energy. Then, just as suddenly as he had started, he stepped back and said, "That's it."

Despite the excitement, it was clear that Mr. Rubenstein was disappointed. "Don't you want to do more?" he asked carefully.

"I'm not changing this," Mr. Rhode said defiantly. "If you don't like it, take the wall out." But the next morning he was back in the gallery, hard at work.

Mr. Rhode first came to attention in 2003 in "How Latitudes Become Forms," a show about globalization that originated at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and toured worldwide. In one performance, "Car Theft," he drew a car with charcoal on a wall and tried to break into it using objects that included a wire hanger, a piece of scrap metal and a spark plug, displaying such intensity that the drawing seemed to pop into three-dimensional life. Then, in "Car Wash," he washed it with rags, erasing the drawing.

He was also represented by "He Got Game" (2002), a storyboard made from 12 cannily posed photographs in which he interacts with a real ball and a hoop drawn on the ground in chalk, striking articulated attitudes that suggest he is flipping in midair, making an impossible slam dunk. As his poses change, so does the drawing.

In 2004, in his New York solo debut at Mr. Rubenstein's gallery, Mr. Rhode made a wider impact with stop-animation videos that presented his storyboards in motion. In the joyful "Kids on the Bike" (2002), two boys appear to swing from the handlebars of a speeding bicycle chalked on asphalt. In "Stone Flag" (2004), a black man dressed in white struggles to hold a flag made from bricks, an image that suggests both triumph and surrender. (Both were shot in his mother's backyard in Johannesburg, "my studio of choice," Mr. Rhode said.)

Some curators were drawn by the vibrancy of the performance. For Stephanie Rosenthal, the contemporary-art curator at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where Mr. Rhode will have his first solo museum show next September, his work harks back to Allan Kaprow, the father of the Happenings of the late 1950s and '60s. "It's all done so easily, and the effect is so enormous," Ms. Rosenthal said. "I just liked the fact that he could make a fantasy seem real."

Roxana Marcoci, the contemporary-photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art, said she was drawn by the work's art-historical complexity. "Visually his work recalls Muybridge, and the motion studies of the late 19th century, as well as William Kentridge's idea of constructing a narrative by sketching and effacing a single drawing," she said. Full of references to graffiti art and hip-hop culture, Mr. Rhode's work is certainly accessible. Yet it also has a darker undertow related to race and class: unsurprising, considering that Mr. Rhode, who was born in Cape Town and raised in Johannesburg, was classified as "colored" — generally a term for mixed race — under apartheid rule.

In art school, where he was one of only two "colored" students, Mr. Rhode didn't take kindly to authority. "I was quite rebellious," he said. "I rejected the studio so that I could devise new forms. It was also a political decision." While searching for his own aesthetic language, he found himself reaching back to a rite of passage for boys in his high school.

Every day the older kids would steal the teacher's chalk and draw an object, like a bicycle or a candle, on the wall of the bathroom. "We'd force the younger kids into the toilet and force them to interact with the drawing," he said. "It was a form of initiation into the high school subculture." When they didn't comply — and it was hard for them to do so — they were pummeled and had to relinquish their lunch money. "It was really entertaining," said Mr. Rhode, who experienced the hazing from both sides. "It's like a cycle of evolution."

Often the drawing would depict an object of desire like the bicycle, something that few of the boys owned. Other times it was a sly put-down, like a candle, which referred to the reality, Mr. Rhode said, that "some people couldn't afford electricity."

This tactic — drawing an object and interacting with it — came to form the heart of his work.

Mr. Rhode's earliest projects were site-specific political actions. In the notorious 2000 performance "Leak" he aped Duchamp by drawing a urinal on the exterior of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, then used it to urinate on the wall. The same year he drew a park bench on the wall of the House of Parliament and tried to sit on it, an activity that could have gotten him arrested years earlier during apartheid. When the parliamentary police questioned him, "I told them I want a seat in Parliament," he said.

In 2001 he moved to Berlin for a three-month residency and saw it as an opportunity to change his work. "I didn't want to make art, I wanted to become it," Mr. Rhode said. "It was about getting closer to what art can be." Within a couple of weeks he had met his wife-to-be, the artist and writer Sabinah Odumusu (of African and German parentage), who has photographed many of his projects; when she became pregnant, he decided to stay. They have a 4-year-old son named Elijah.

Leaving Johannesburg, Mr. Rhode said, "allowed me to step back from the South African context and to consider myself a global player" — or "playa," as he likes to say.

Since then his themes have grown increasingly universal, verging on the spiritual. The 2005 stop-animation video "Harvest," for instance, seems to address metamorphosis and

regeneration. Using white spray paint against a black wall, he sows seeds and waters them until they become long grasses, then he scythes them down and builds a bed from the stalks. Lying down before it, he covers himself with a white sheet, as if in death or hibernation, before the cycle repeats itself.

Most of the photographic work in this show suggests a similar cyclical motion. In the storyboard “Juggla” (2007), a black man in a top hat, Mr. Rhode’s friend Vernon Scholtz, walks up to a white wall and juggles black balls against it; as they shift position, they are partly erased. At the end he walks off, leaving a circular trace of the action behind. In other storyboards, a physical action like boxing or playing Ping-Pong builds to create an abstracted geometric shape.

“Candle” (2007), Mr. Rhode’s first 16-millimeter film, moves between light and darkness. It is based on a simple action: He draws a candle on a piece of paper and lights it with a match to create the flame. As he does so, the image switches from negative to positive as if the light were flickering; the spectacle fades into the wall as he puffs it out.

For the last year or so he has steered clear of museum performances. “I was feeling like a minstrel,” he said. Although performance remains essential to his work, he said, his aim now is “to see how it can evolve into other forms.”

Thus the sculptures are essentially three-dimensional renditions of the two-dimensional objects he often draws while performing. The show opens with three cases of dark-green beer bottles whose necks elongate into waving fronds, much like the grassy garden in “Harvest.” Beyond them a green soap bicycle lies beside a bronze bucket of water, suggesting its potential to be erased.

But the most conceptually resolved pieces in the show are the charcoal and chalk shells that he used to create the wall drawing, effectively transforming these three-dimensional objects back into a flat form.

“I always look into my work to try to find the next step,” he said. “The next step for me is the medium I’ve neglected in the studio context, and that is drawing. That is something that I’m now trying to work through.”

By the time the show opened, Mr. Rhode had reworked the wall mightily, and the gallery staff had repainted it several times. In the process he had used up 11 of the shells, which he was shocked to learn later had cost \$1,500 each to produce. “Perry said, ‘You’ve done the most expensive wall drawing ever,’” Mr. Rhode said. “He was so cool it was unbelievable.”

The drawing he eventually arrived at, now called “Heads and Tales,” is simple and elegant. Made with one charcoal shell and fleshed out with black spray paint, it presents 10 stalky black fronds that almost seem to pop into sculptural dimension as they recapitulate the sinuous curves and circles in other works in the room. After finishing, Mr. Rhodes was so excited that he began producing drawings on paper — another first for this artist who eschews traditional techniques.

“I’ve really cracked the code with this object,” he said. “I think what you are witnessing now is the birth of a new form of expression for me.”