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TALKING TO MYSELF – OR, A LIFE IN RUINS

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I think we've all sworn not to become our parents at some point. Then there is that alarming day when we see our mother or father reflected in the plate-glass window as we walk down the street – gray hair, jowls, and an all too familiar gait. Likewise, we all collectively agreed that we would not, like our parents and their friends, talk constantly about blood pressure, cholesterol, and imminent hip replacements. Rather we would converse about articles in *The New Yorker*, recent trips to South India, and the great vegetable-dip we found at Trader Joe's. However, eventually the dinner-party conversation descends to afflictions that are interrupting the life of someone we all know, and we are our parents – nervously hoping that we don't begin talking about whatever it is we suspect we may someday get.

However, I also find that strange and exotic diseases are often welcome and entertaining dinner-party banter. People tend to enjoy talking about afflictions they have little chance of getting – like bilharzias, dengue fever, or rabies. Images of Old Yeller and pioneers foaming at the mouth as they were tied to a wagon-wheel to prevent them from biting their children have always lingered with me. I have had the odd fortune of *only* contracting such diseases: malaria, for example – discussions of which seem to be genuinely diverting to many. Such afflictions usually have involved traveling to places without hot water or Happy Hours; places that most don't intend on ever visiting. Odd foods and curious liquids may be involved. I was recently diagnosed with another odd one – a quite rare and quite exotic affliction called Ofuji's disease. It affects one's face, causing one appear to have been badly burned. While Ofuji's does sound like my favorite apple and indeed shares the same country of origin – Japan – it affects only a few hundred people worldwide and appears to be easily controlled with the same drug that controls leprosy – which I take daily. Now, all of you who are, at this moment, squirming in your chairs, trying to remember if you shook my hand or kissed me earlier can relax – it is utterly non-contagious. I promise. I only bring this issue of my afflictions

to your attention because it has deprived me of a basic theme of this brief talk – face-lifts, or at least my face-lift. I had sincerely planned on appearing on this stage looking strikingly younger, a bit Asian, and better rested than you see me today. I thought that a deliberate reorganization of my facial surface, through the miracle of modern cosmetic surgery, had great metaphoric potential for this talk. I could have shown before and after photos – to, I hoped, mummies of ‘fabulous job’ and ‘he looks so young’ from a startled and envious audience. Alas, my dermatologist has forbidden me to consider the pursuit of such an excellent metaphor. It seems there is yet another exotic and opportunistic affliction, this time with a seriously Germanic name I don’t recall, which could strike me down if I attempted to reduce the real estate on my neck and face. Apparently Ofuji’s would seize the opportunity, spread over my entire face, and it would be dark, but tasteful veils for me for years to come. So, I stand before you as I am; as I have become: reconciled, resigned as a pawn of natural and unnatural forces that have encrusted me inside and out with a surface whose evolution and authenticity I endlessly probe. So please, indulge me with perhaps excessively personal revelations of how I suspect my own surface has precipitated and how I seek to make some sense of it all.

Authenticity – Are We Really Real?

A favorite line of mine was delivered by a luscious drag queen named Agrado in a movie by Pedro Almodovar, the remarkable contemporary Spanish film-director. It was in the movie *All About My Mother*, where Agrado proclaims to a captive, but rapt audience, “soy muy autentica” – I’m very authentic.

I’ve come to understand that authenticity is an essential component of the surface that attempts to project some sort of transcendent meaning. I wonder what we collectively accept as authentic and why, indeed, authenticity seems to be so important. Why won’t the pastiche or a reproduction do just as well? Actually, in some cases, the pastiche does, sadly, appeal more than the real thing – take Las Vegas for example.

As a dealer of ancient and antique ethnographic art, I spend a great deal of time considering the authenticity of the things I sell. I hunker down in a back room at the gallery with my cue tips, my acetone, my black light, my microscope – sniffing and probing at surfaces – searching for any attempt to deceive me in to thinking some surface is not as it appears to be. As in most art markets, the world of tribal art is rife with forgeries, misrepresentations, and clever alterations designed to convince us that a given object intrinsically has those qualities of authenticity that we desire.

Authenticity is a somewhat subjective condition. Like most realities, it seems to hover somewhere between a liquid and gaseous state. Many of us spend years cultivating a surface we desperately hope others perceive as authentic, when deep inside we never totally erase our own suspicion that some deception, on our part, is involved. Personally, I have always feared being unmasked as an imposter – that somehow I am not qualified to be playing in the sophisticated wealthy art-world in which I often find myself. If they really knew where I came from they’d never buy this from me. In the case of objects, say an African mask for example, the substantiation of authenticity is often

predicated on intent. For whom was a given object made? Preferably, we want objects that were not conceived and made in our honor, but rather, we hope, reflect some set of values; a certain pure lifestyle or belief-system, which have convinced ourselves is better than our own corrupt lives. I often find that we Westerners are quite convinced that those of an ethnic persuasion (ethnic is, of course, everyone but us) lead lives closer to nature, are spiritually richer, and are somehow, upholders of a loftier morality. The banal movie *Dances With Wolves* was a perfect example. The Indians had great haircuts; Kevin Costner's hair was a mess. The Indians lived simple, peaceful lives in interesting and tasteful tepees; the White soldiers were nasty and drunk, didn't shower, and kicked their horses. We seem to be rather desperate in our hopes that someone else, out there, is preserving values long abandoned by us. This strangely borderline racist attitude, born of lush liberalism and blissful naiveté (that others are inherently better people than we), has long fascinated me. It is an important aspect of our concept of the authentic and what we seek as real in an object or surface – or at least more real than our own surfaces. We seem to bring this desire to the surfaces we create, cultivate, or collect. An authentic surface is one that demonstrates passage, use, and distillation – but most importantly a perception of layering or accumulation – encrustation if you will. Patina.

Authenticity and patina are mutually self-reinforcing conditions. Each ratifies the other. An authentic surface has patina; patina demonstrates authenticity. Both are worth a considerable amount in the art market. Often, when asked about the specific composition of a certain patina, the dealer, curator, or auction specialist will obfuscate with the reply, 'Oh, it's sacrificial material.' In reality this often means blood, feces, dead animal parts, strange unguents, and other elements we ordinarily would not be shopping for. As long as it's not *our* patina, we're willing to pay. Over the years, I have often thought about what it is that draws others and myself to the crusty, layered surfaces of ancient tribal objects or places. What makes us flock to Venice and lust after moldering walls; or photograph dozens of old paint-encrusted doors in some village in Guatemala; or pay a million dollars for the sticky surface of a Fang mask? What do we desire from these surfaces? Where is that exquisite line between rhapsodic patina and reaching for Mr. Clean and the scrub brush? What does the African forger, pouring fuel oil on a day old mask behind the airport in Lagos, understand about surface? What does the Italian travel agent, placing ads in *Travel and Leisure* with photos of crumbling walls in Sicily, suspect of our deep needs? What exactly does Martha Stewart, the doyen of flaky paint, understand about us?

In the mid-1980's I noted the emergence of a type of painting among many young American artists. I came to refer to it, somewhat derisively, as the 'dirty barn door' school of painting. Much of it, I recall, could be seen in law-firm office hallways and the lounges for First and Business Class passengers at major airports. The finer motels, particularly those with a slightly Southwestern theme, were also natural galleries for this particular school. This was a style of painting greatly influenced by the Abstract Expressionists of an earlier generation, which was characterized by spontaneous calligraphic brushwork, layers of color deliberately scratched and rubbed, submerged graffiti-like markings, and, at best, the insinuation of age; or at worst, something like a

traffic accident having just occurred on the surface of the canvas. They often had names like: 'The Pavements of Pergamon,' or 'Temple of the Mayan Zen Priest.' There was likewise a movement among sculptors, which seemed to be loosely attached to the outer fringes of feminist themes then so popular in art. It seemed that anyone who could find some sticks, feathers, a few beads, and something to lash it all together with suddenly had a profound ritual object. We were seriously presented with 'Altar to the Great Goddess,' or 'The Shaman's Dream Catcher,' or 'The Sacred Hopi Lightning Portal.'" Those were very heavy days, redolent with pop spiritualism, vortexes, and a lot of turquoise jewelry. Silly as it was in its facile and naive appropriation of the physical nature of true ritual objects and authentic surfaces that resulted from the passage of real time and actual events, this artistic movement signaled, to me, a rather serious hole in the American psyche. What exactly were we all looking and longing for in these pseudo-ancient surfaces? And then there is the rather disturbing question I was forced to pose myself: why was I so keen to check myself into the Forever Youthful Clinic of Cosmetic Surgery to create a totally unauthentic surface on my own face?

Lithic Obsessions

I am a great fan of the natural sciences, in particular geology. Unlike exotic diseases, I find few interested in discussions of this topic, although I find its lessons most useful and actually rather calming.

I spend a good deal of time reading books almost as heavy as that which they describe. Books about geology tend to be fat. Close friends fear that I am, at times, quite lithically obsessed. They may be right. I do like to push heavy rocks from here to there replacing on my farm in northeast Iowa, all the stones that the previous six generations of farmers labored to remove. Obsessed or not, I do identify with the great geological forces that have shaped and continue to shape the surface of the earth. Gravity certainly is the force I confront each morning as I stand, revealed and defenseless, in front of a full-length mirror. We're still fighting each other for control. Geology is full of useful similes and metaphors when considering the ravages of time I feel I have cruelly and unjustly suffered. Consider plate tectonics for a moment. This, of course, is the mega dynamic of massive sheets of the earth's crust which are continually sliding over the mantle of the earth, subsuming, emerging, pushing India into the Himalayas, and California towards Acapulco. One can think of plate tectonics as a really huge face-lift for the planet. Whether it is Silurian, Devonian, or good old Pangea – the earth gets a new surface every few million years, yet traces of its previous surface remain in some places. When I travel, I often seek out these particularly ancient rock formations: escapees from the last great geological event that altered everything about them. I grew up on a small farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. While I did not realize it at the time, being blinded by the thrill of youth, some of the oldest rocks in North America poke out of that landscape. Native Americans must have sensed the antiquity of those same stones and what that antiquity represented, because they claimed the area as the home of Gitchi Manintou, a principle deity of ancient North Americans. I have often wondered about the vagaries that have determined what rock formations survive the vicissitudes of geological change or what qualities of one's character survive the vicissitudes of personal change; those

same qualities occasionally poking up out of one's surface like Sioux Falls granite on a small failing Dakota farm in the 1950's.

My own personal plate tectonics are less physically apparent – I don't detect any internal activity or find particular body parts having moved about in the night. My plate tectonics are the accumulation, movement, and settling of experience. These experiences continually jostle for dominance in the formation of my consciousness – my inner surface – each seeking to be the uppermost layer, like Hawaiian lava bubbling up and out, only to be topped by yet another flow. Those experiences, which contain elements of stress or conflict, seem to have some sort of advantage in the short term. They're the ones sitting at the end of my bed at 3:00 am, like pets I forgot to feed. They stare at me in anticipation of a thorough review – again. However, those experiences that are a fermentation of pleasant things – of loves, of horticultural successes, of a well done pie crust, an accolade of some sort – they are never quite as strong in the short term, but they are the fundamental foundation, I believe, of one's patina.

Philip Rawson, in his remarkable writings on the appreciation of ceramics, describes the relationship between experience, aesthetics, and art as follows: "As we live our lives we accumulate a fund of memory-traces based on our sensory experience. These remain in our minds charged, it seems, with vestiges of the emotions which accompanied the original experiences. The overwhelming majority of those experiences belong within the realm of sensuous life, and may never reach the sphere of word formation or what are usually regarded as concepts at all. And yet they probably provide the essential continuum from which evolves everyone's sense of the world and consistent reality, everyone's understanding of what it means to exist, and are even the ultimate 'compost' from which scientific abstractions spring. It is in the realm of these submerged memory traces that creative art moves, bringing them in the orbit of everyday life and making them available to the experience of others by formalizing and projecting them on to elements of the familiar world which can receive and transmit them." This is, of course, what surface is – the accumulating, projecting, and formalizing of experience.

A Life In Ruins

I have spent a great deal of my adult life seeking out the past; particularly those tangible aspects of the past: ruined cities, abandoned tracks and paths, the liana-covered temple, the fragmentary statue. I am one of those cursed with the discontent of living in my own times. No matter where travel, I spoil the day with thoughts of, 'Oh, if I'd only been here when...' I much prefer the forlorn abandoned vestiges of a once-living place to the contemporary lively colorful market with native people doing festive things. There is nothing I abhor as much as a traditional folk dance being performed in my honor – usually in some over-lit hotel lobby just after the welcoming cocktail. The poor hotel staff having been forced to dress up in the feathered garb of previous generations and pretend that the Rice Goddess Harvest Dance really means something to them. For me there is something terribly attractive in the failings of man – we all know how good it feels to feel badly. In the introduction to the marvelous and somewhat morbid book, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, which contains photographs of ruins the world over taken by Rose

Macaulay, Roloff Beny, a Canadian photographer and friend of Macaulays', speaks of, "the strange human reaction to decay." Of Dame Macaulay's photographs he writes: "the emphasis is on the ruins themselves, and the impression they individually make, by their beauty, or their strangeness, or their shattered intimations that strike so responsive a nerve in our destruction-seeking souls." In my case, perhaps wandering in those empty places relieves me of excessive personal expectations of who I should be, or for what successes I should really be striving. Among ruins it doesn't really matter. I think ruins make me less disappointed in myself. This is perhaps also the strange relief I feel in something like global warming, which is sort of a ruin-in-waiting, on a global scale. Ruins proclaim an intoxicating inevitability: whether political systems doomed to self destruction, the life span of lime mortar, or the mildly pleasing thought of Florida being submerged by the end of this century – I am reprieved – can't do a thing about it. Likewise, I'm much relieved knowing that the next Ice Age will clean everything up. I imagine great ice sheets creeping down from Canada like gigantic bull-dozers with massive piles of the detritus of civilization before it – flattening ugly suburbs, pushing down cell phone towers, crushing outlet malls, and generally purging the planet of bad taste. It keeps me optimistic in the long term.

I also suspect that I am drawn to ruins and picturesque decrepitude by the real, but reluctant realization that I am going to die much sooner than I deserve to. A friend of a friend of mine has already composed her epitaph. To be engraved on her headstone at some future date is: "I knew this was going to happen!" I know what she means. I realize that I desire to experience far more than I have time for during the unfair brevity of time allowed. Part of me honestly envies religious people who are able to believe in heaven. I really wish I could. I wish I believed that I had another chance; particularly if it lasted for eternity; and particularly in the case that I really blew it this time around. I could relax. But sadly I can't bring myself to believe in heaven and so I can't relax. And this is why there is such an imperative to vicariously share the vast store of the experience of others – and the patina of ruins is, for me, oddly, such a vehicle.

I've often said that for me, being an art dealer is like being a liberal. I feel like I am standing at the base of a stairway that gets wider and wider as I go up. In the case of being a liberal, each rise in political consciousness that I may experience leads to several more – obvious and impossible to ignore. Likewise, as an art dealer, each revelation of another's manifestation of what it means to be human, which is what art is, leads one to another and another and another. Pre-Columbian art led me to Khmer art, which led me to India, which led me to Yogic painting, which led me to Mardsen Hartley and on and on. The stairway just gets wider and wider, and more incredible with each new step. Ruins are a condensation of this dynamic. They are, for me, a physical editing of what would be too much to comprehend otherwise. So here is, for me, where surface and patina come in. The patina on a surface is a microscopic ruin. Like a well-rotted ruin, patina is an edited shortcut, a portal, a vehicle that enables me to vicariously step into another's experience and accumulate far more than I have time for.

Sometimes I look closely at my body in the mirror and imagine it a ruin – well, after nearly 60 years it is well on its way to becoming one. This fleshy Angkor Wat or Chaco

Canyon is traced with the same evidence of many having passed this way. Paths and channels, lumps and scars, Offa's Dyke and Inka roads – they're all there. I can imagine a Fodor's or Lonely Planet guide to my body. In it are noted historic events, impressions, experiences, and people who left their mark – inside and out. Little historical markers are everywhere and every day more appear: noting everything from past loves to LSD, the many springs – each more amazing than the last, the blinding light of art, stone walls built, a thousand holes dug for trees, disco frenzy, friends come and gone, and the constant fear and excitement of what is yet to come. All this and much more has indelibly molded my surface into a ruin – ripe fodder for a Piranesi or Capability Brown.

Kuba Skirts and Steven Hawking

I clearly remember when I saw my first Kuba appliqué skirt: it was in the early 1980's and it was a moment of revelation; here was a surface that was so authentic and so transporting. Looking at it was like receiving a formal invitation to go somewhere I had not yet been. At the same time there seemed to be very personal information encoded in the effervescent markings. I thought that this textile surface was a mirror of how I considered experience in my own life. Was I seeing chaos erupting out of order, or order precipitating out of chaos? It was unclear in the same way that the sedimentation of my own experiences was unclear.

The origin of the markings on these textiles is quite remarkable, as you may know. The difficult-to-use raffia fiber, laboriously drawn from the edges of the raffia palm leaf, is woven into panels by men who sit underneath the loom and thus look up and through the web of yarns as they weave. This fact alone seems quite amazing to me. How indeed would one's perspective on the creation of order, the literal ordering of space through interlocking yarns, be altered by looking up through the web at the sky and light beyond? It must be like being able to see through an experience as it is occurring. The most remarkable of people can do this, but I think ultimately they probably go mad. After weaving, the panels are then sewn together into long narrow skirts; women do this work. Raffia fiber, naturally about 24" long, cannot be spun, so the textiles are predicated on square-shaped panels about 24" x 24". Once assembled, the stiff cloth is beaten to make it more pliant. In doing so, small holes are inadvertently punched through the cloth. These, once patched, become the path to the final pattern. About 30% of the patches on the surface of a Kuba skirt cover actual holes. The Kuba women then begin to link the patches together, guided by the necessity of covering holes, while at the same time intuitively recognizing the evolving pattern and facilitating its evolution. This approach to surface design totally astonished me. The unavoidable necessity of patching holes took the hand of the artist and led her onward, often to brilliance. I can easily think of myself as a Kuba skirt. Like Kuba weavers, who are essentially organizing and controlling chaos on the surface of their remarkable skirts, I am constantly trying to put things in order and then keep them there until it doesn't matter any more. Unlike the Kuba weaver, I don't think my skirt ever really gets finished. In my case, certainly, new holes are continually getting punched in the fabric and the patching is often panic-inspired – not a leisurely artistic moment. Indeed, the patching never

really ends and the struggle to make them link together in a pleasing and meaningful pattern is sometimes successful and sometimes not. I depend on the frankness of friends for that evaluation. Like the Kuba artist, we spend our lives trying to order and contain space; we have to of course or all but the strongest of us would find the unimaginable vastness of space and existence too much to bear. In fact, there seems to me something rather astronomical about Kuba skirts. Perhaps it is the effervescence of the surface patterns, or again, the suspicion of order, which often makes my agnosticism squirm.

I have such admiration for astronomers who spend their lives staring into endless vastness. How do they keep it together? Really? I often wonder what their houses are like? I imagine most of them living in Airstream trailers, tightly wrapped in aluminum cocoons: no hazy edges, no unclear boundaries. I suspect that most of them really do. I also wonder what they talk about. What could possibly seem important or meaningful after a long day of staring into space? 'Honey, the light from that exploding nebula that I was watching last evening took three and a half billion years to get here and is 400,000 times bigger than the Milky Way. Oh, by the way, did you remember to get Kitty Litter?' Like geology, astronomy, of which I know embarrassingly little, offers me considerable optimism in light of the really depressing unrealized potential of the human race. I agree with Steven Hawking, who believes that we humans are the vectors that will take life off this planet after we have totally despoiled it. I think that makes me an evolutionary determinist. I have come to evaluate so much in terms of possible evolutionary advantage. It seems to be a really clear formula for understanding behavior. So, I really wonder about aspects of my own personal behavior: particularly obvious self-destructive behavior, which has been a major marker of my surface. Why do we do things we know are not in our best interest? Why can't I lose weight? Why don't I wear a seat-belt? Why don't I check my answering machine? Why did I have five Cosmopolitans the other night? Why did I tell that person I was only 45?

I still really don't know this. I suspect that it is like the 80's artists, vainly trying to patinate a surface with reality, when really it is desire they're dealing with. Like a good face-lift, it has much more to do with desire than reality. Much like the Kuba weaver, a large portion of one's surface is out of our control: holes not planned for that we have to patch.

Tea-Bowls

I was a production-potter during the 1970's, living on a political collective in rural Iowa, patiently awaiting the collapse of Western Civilization – the inevitability of which we were all but certain. We published a Marxist newsletter for the farming community in Allamakee County on a press in the chicken-coop. I was there to make cheap and attractive pottery for the same community to embrace instead of Tupperware and Corning Ware. They chose not to read our newsletter, nor embrace my proletarian cookware. I tired of poverty and dirty communal refrigerators and moved to Chicago, where I heartily embraced Capitalism and the art-gallery world. But for some imponderable reason a preoccupation with vessels of clay has remained a constant in

my life, surviving shifting relationships, place changes and a membership in middle class America. I strongly suspect that the metaphorical potential of the vessel – the containment and definition of space within solid walls of clay, fired to something approaching permanence – has consistently and subconsciously appealed to me. Pots are architecture; they are how we humans have first successfully contained the chaos and panic of space; they have continually tranquilized us and helped us relax when we infrequently remember that we exist on an unimaginably thin membrane of life in an unimaginably vast universe. But it is not only the comfortable interiors of vessels that reassure me that I am unlikely to go flying off into space at any given moment in the event gravity abandons me, but also the surface of vessels, which so often seem to be a reflection of my own meanderings – simultaneously haphazard and intentional. And of all pot surfaces it is those of bowls and vessels associated with the Japanese tea ceremony that continue to intrigue me most – perhaps because they seem to me the most articulate. And, unlike many pots which have developed their surfaces through unconscious and constant use, these rarified vessels are a result of intense introspection, the vagaries of process (i.e. the firing, the material, the skill of the potter), and the requirement that they function as a means of non-verbal communication between participants in tea ceremony – or *cha no yuu*.

This may seem somewhat of a contradiction to that which I pontificated upon earlier, when I excoriated those who consciously create a surface of unsubstantiated history or depth of experience. But the Japanese potter and his pots are a bit different. The cult of tea bowls began with the appropriation of rude Korean peasant rice bowls brought back to Japan after the ill-conceived imperialism of Hideyoshi in the 16th century. For the first time, Japanese aesthetics separated from the Chinese model of technical perfection and embraced an aesthetic of rusticity, simplicity, and incompleteness. Japanese tea-masters saw these rustic spontaneously-conceived bowls as a reflection of the vagaries of life. Like a well-fermented ruin, the *wabi-sabi*-saturated surface of a fine tea bowl is both evolution and precipitation. It gains its meaning and legitimacy through use, association, implication, and, most importantly, a complete separation from ego. The masterpiece tea bowl, frequently named and with a pedigree of use by generations of past tea-masters, is often stained, chipped, and repaired, becoming, in a way, more geological than artistic. Ceramic criticism in Japan does not often discuss artistic intent or the psyche of the artist. Rather, what is pondered is the capacity of the object to transcend both the intent of the maker and the expectations of the user. A Japanese potter may hover at the edge of exasperation as he strives for a shape and surface, which, in the end, denies everything about him. The final surface of the bowl – a result of glaze inconsistencies, finger marks from dipping the piece in the glaze, rim distortions, and lastly, and so importantly, the ineffable and uncontrollable vagaries of the firing – is an easily recognizable metaphor of life; of how one's own surface evolves; a combination of personal intent and a nervous meandering among uncontrollable events. Even the exquisite mendings of broken bowls with golden lacquer seem to me like the attempts I make to mend cracks in my own surface. The wonderful contradiction of material: smooth sophisticated lacquer on a crusty eroded surface. The implication is, of course, that the application of fancy expensive lacquer legitimizes all the implications

of the rough cratered surface of the bowl, clearly and firmly placing it in the realm of value and importance. So, I hope it is with me and my attempts at repair.

ZEN IS NOT A VERB

A well-meaning and very sensitive couple was recently in the gallery. They announced that they were “zenning” their house. Of course I knew what they meant. They were seeking to instantly create a certain sense of calm and spiritual depth through well-considered sofa placement and the arrangement of particularly refined objects for the cocktail table. This new verb – to *zen* something, which, like ‘disrespect’ and ‘impacted,’ has entered the English lexicon as yet another new pop-verb meant to imply a bit more education and erudition than may actually exist – conveys an aura of restraint, distillation and up to six different hues of beige. When I was in college in the late 60’s, there was likewise a strong interest in Zen. The poet-writers Gary Snyder and D.T. Suzuki were required reading, or at least having their books on Zen Buddhism laying about was required. The interest then was more focused on a new kind of spiritualism. Disenchantment with suburban life, the war in Viet Nam, and the general banality of American culture led many unsuspecting young Americans to consider the wisdom of the East – at least for a semester. Today Zen has become a decorating concept. I saw an ad in a Crate and Barrel catalog this past week for a Zen bed. I feel about this new interest in Zen like I feel about Minimalism: both are meant to imply something that is usually not there and both can be overcome with a little self-discipline. I have long suspected that Minimalism is really just the inability to make up one’s mind, while at the same time allowing one to project sophistication and justify a subscription to *Artforum*. White walls, white floors, Eames chairs, a couple of well-hung Minimalist paintings, and, more recently, after a trip to Art Basel Miami, a super-sized photo of a depressing motel in Oklahoma or a landfill in Bangladesh. It’s a formula for purchasing a surface of profundity and reaping considerable social cache. But before I bore us all with my own cynicism, I must remind myself that the success of my business is predicated on assisting those who don’t neurotically obsess, as I do, about each and every object one may encounter and likewise feel morally compelled to purchase and display. I have helped many overcome Minimalism and learn to thrive in a domestic environment where no surface remains vacant and the fear of putting nails in virgin drywall is left with the Therapist.

I’ll come back to Zen in a moment, but let me diverge a bit and talk about perhaps the most important of several realities I cultivate: gardening. I honestly am a relativist, but there is one aspect of being on this planet that I feel is quite absolute and non-negotiable. That is the necessity of gardening. I don’t mean farming or vegetable growing. I mean the consideration of plant material for aesthetic purposes only. I believe it is the greatest art form and I cruelly judge cultures and civilizations on whether they garden or not. Without a doubt, gardening has profoundly affected my surface – inside and out. One only need look at my knees and fingernails. As an art-form, gardening combines it all. It is intuitive, it is conceptual, it combines more aesthetic variables than anything else – texture, color, form, bloom time, scent, seasonal change – all of which must be considered and planned for in creating a successful garden. But most

importantly, it is the philosophical lesson of gardening that etched me: the impermanence and unpredictability of nature. Gardening, like everything in the end, is utterly ephemeral. A single storm, a drought, Gypsy Moth, or simple neglect for a season or two and the garden is gone; and with it all the vainglorious, self-congratulatory accolades we gardeners tend to bestow upon ourselves – all gone. Years of careful composting, rhizome-divisions, pruning, Dirr's guides to trees and shrubs, and Smith and Hawkins all for naught; save the new humility we harvest. Someone will wander through this vegetal ruin, a mossy Machu Pichu of good intent, wondering what passed here, what order existed, what energies spent, what hopes and desires realized for a brief succession of seasons.

The new mantra in gardening these days is Zen and no-maintenance. I am fascinated by this evidentially not so obvious contradiction. Here we clearly encounter the desire for something deep, studied, and refined, a horticultural surface of sorts, which projects all this and still reflects upon us – but without substantiation or process. I so often hear that, "We want a no maintenance garden." Have the Gonzales brothers plant it, add a little Miracle Grow, and stand back. We have Zen and the insinuation, like those 80s' painters and their crusty canvases, of something rich; of depth; of accumulated experience; of sensitivity; of being someone we have not really been willing to risk the vulnerably, the insecurity, and the energy necessary to become. A beautifully constructed soil, the endless moving of this plant to there, the long and often agonizing consideration of placing stones, the weeding, the cleaning, and then standing in the garden on a late summer evening and gazing upon it all – such should be one's person. Gardening is the perfect metaphor for the authentic surface, built of experience, thought, struggle, and acceptance of so much beyond one's control. As I can think of my body as a ruin, I can also think of it as a garden – certainly a more pleasantly thought – constantly changing and evolving, blooming and then disappearing.

Raw Meat and Bacon

At an early point in my career as an art dealer in Chicago, various well-meaning groups, often connected with a museum, would request a visit to my apartment. I think I was viewed as one who was safely eccentric and creative, a visit to whom made suburban ladies feel a little wild, like they were living on the edge. I tended to create environments that people liked to visit, but would never consider living in themselves. I often imagined the dinner conversation that evening back in Highland Park after a visit to my apartment: "I could never live that way but it was sort of different," that wonderful Midwestern adjective for something disturbingly strange, but interesting. I noticed that often these groups were unabashed in opening drawers, going through closets, etc. as they wandered through my apartment during the 45 minutes allotted for their visit. During one such tour, I found several women going through a box in a cabinet in my bedroom where I kept a collection of 1950's pornography. Inspired by the audacity of their investigation and anticipating the next tour, I subsequently filled two dresser drawers in my bedroom with raw meat and old photographs of nuns and priests. It worked! I was apparently removed from the list of the acceptably eccentric and seem to

remain there. I have had no requests for apartment visits for several years now. Word spreads.

Someone else who thought about raw meat and people of the cloth was Francis Bacon. I think I would have liked being the boyfriend of Francis Bacon – George Dyer. Being in Bacon's inner circle and floating amid the wreckage he surrounded himself with would have been an intense and brilliant experience. There was no 'dirty barn door' sensibility at all in his paintings. Arguably the most important post-war British painter, Bacon was obsessed with surface – inner and outer. The volcanic forces which linked the two, which he so masterfully put to paint, inhabit his pictures with such tension that one can scarcely stand in front of them. We only need to look upon his work to realize the futility of self control. Bacon painted real surfaces – not contrived or imagined ones. He didn't make them up – he saw them and recorded them. His work appeals to me because of its brutal clarity – he spares nothing. His life was one of remarkable excess, which I have always admired. Like Bacon, I too have long been attracted to the seedier aspects of life: the forbidden, the socially unacceptable, that great spectrum of being that most people spend their lives avoiding: slabs of raw meat and Popes. Bacon was willing to sacrifice everything. He roasted friends, lovers and his own health. His self-confidence was only exceeded by his talent. I think that if I had seen his work before I saw Japanese ceramics I might have tried to become a painter instead of a potter. Like the Kuba weaver looking up through the web of his loom, Bacon was able to look through the personalities he painted. He painted their inner surfaces as if he had peeled off their skin and all artifice they may have hoped for, like a piece of raw meat. Kuba skirts, gardens, tea-bowls, Bacon's paintings: all oddly share and illustrate something about the formation of one's own surface. Even though the assembled aesthetics of this group extend from the horrific to the sublime, a common denominator emerges, at least for me. All seek a degree of order out of disorder: the frantic personalities of Bacon's subjects contained in tight, minimal slashes of line; the uncontrollable holes in a Kuba skirt lashed down tightly to the face of the cloth; the incredibly dynamic surface of the tea-bowl secured within a ceremony of impenetrable formality; the transcendent nature of living plants held in place, if but for a few seasons, by the futile efforts of the gardener; the disorder of our own experiences lashed together in the web of personality.

Patsy, Edwina, and The Unintended Aesthetic

I hope that there are some among you, irreverent and tasteless as I often am, who were addicted to *Absolutely Fabulous*, the British sitcom. For those of you unfamiliar with the series, it featured two immature drug-crazed fad-obsessed preposterous sex-starved British women, Patsy and Edwina, slogging through the fashion world of 1990's London. Just as I judge civilizations on whether they garden or not, I, with equal insensitivity, judge people by whether this absurd British comedy appealed or offended. People who found it offensive usually feel the same way about me. The bewildering absurdity of trying to understand life has rarely, and with such vulgarity, been made so appealing. Edwina, the overweight owner of a public relations firm who was constantly trying to squeeze into LaCroix or Galtier several sizes too small, imagines herself the epitome of high style, particularly when it comes to interior design. In one installment, she is

attempting to create a stylish Minimalism interior in her Holland Park flat. As she wanders through near empty white rooms she finally shrieks in exasperation: “Surfaces, surfaces, surfaces! I need surfaces!” Don’t we indeed.

I fully realize that this talk is perhaps excessively personal and of not much profit to those of you who might have hoped it would shed some light on how to create surfaces of depth and meaning. I doubt that anyone will leave here today with a clearer idea of how to approach surface design. Rather, perhaps selfishly, I have taken advantage of this kind invitation to speak here today, to continue the conversation I’ve been having with myself for some time now. How did I get here? Am I going where I had planned? If there is a common denominator to my little verbose vignettes, vituperations in which I obviously shield my own insecurities with sarcasm and hyperbole, it is that the surface I have acquired is not as intentional as I may have anticipated. It has evolved in spite of my best intentions.

I am really not unlike the many who have visited me in the gallery over the past 25 years seeking things of beauty, interest, mystery, or a reflection of the myriad ways life can be interpreted. I too carry a bundle of desire and hope, seeking satiation and affirmation by vicariously tapping into the experience of others. It may be through marvelous ancient objects or through the equally amazing people who pass through my gallery doors. In the end it is really all about connecting – placing oneself in the web. Perhaps this is what I mean when I speak of the unintended aesthetic: that surface, that patina; accumulated and acquired, layered, dynamic, uncontrolled, and unanticipated. This is the surface we present and this is what others see and deem either authentic or hypocritical. We can only hope, that in the end, we are all ‘muy autentico.’

I always imagine myself talking to someone or a group of people as if its really happening. It would be imagining a normal family life, me with work colleges at my dream job mostly, me with my dream boyfriend, all of that. In my head I live the life I've always wanted to live, instead of leading the bori (more)Loading Interesting. Just A Tip #26. Talking To Myself Or Alternately Freedom and Life In Stories. Just A Tip #27. The Writer's Crisis. A lot has happened to me this year. Some of it I've talked about, and some of it I haven't, but suffice it to say that landing an agent + getting a book deal + graduating college + all the other stuff is a lot of change to process. Unsurprisingly, the best method I've developed to process big changes is forming a narrative. That's a slightly more fancy way of saying that I retell this year to myself, over and over again, starting from different places, pulling in different details, focusing on different themes. I try to explain the gaps between the events I don't under