

Making Real:  
A Conversation between Alex Conner and Joel Evey

- JE Let's get into it.
- AC Sure, and thank you again for agreeing to participate in this process.
- JE Of course. After having read your artist statement and seen your recent thesis exhibition, I'm wondering what was it about object histories drew you to produce this installation, *Ideals/Idealism*, at Moore College of Art in 2016? Also, is that history contained in the sum total of the experience or is it about it's component parts?
- AC I think that the history of how humans have constructed an object socially isn't just by either strapping ephemera onto it or removing decorative flourish. There is a tangible unifying thing that is each object underneath the surface. The development of our material world of objects seems intuitive in hindsight, but the way we have chosen to construct the world around us constantly reframes humanity. We are complicit, not only in the history of making, but in the current interpretation. By shifting the objects out of culturally-aligned trajectory through changing the materials and methods of manufacture I hope to reveal this gap in understanding. Their history is in fact contained in us, so it becomes more difficult to sort out than a "parts versus whole" binary.
- JE So are you proposing that there is an unconscious symbiosis between people and the objects around them with more of a 'push/pull' relationship as opposed to the top down hierarchical view many currently have?
- AC Yes.
- JE And by the introduction of the uncanny you can try and highlight that difference in thinking - got it. In some of the work in this installation: the wood framing, the drop ceilings, you chose to use very recognizable materials, why this choice?
- AC My background in Ceramics and Craft processes have given me a strong belief that most people would be more comfortable interacting with a bowl than with a bust - and not just because of the weight. Everyday objects have so much less 'aura' surrounding themselves than Art. We have certain expectations of these types of objects based on a sense of utility - how and why we've interacted with them before. In a world where Art can be anything and most people have come around to accept that, I choose to use these "recognizable", as you put it, materials because I want them to become a platform from which I can subvert expectations of experience.
- JE It seemed like with some of the pieces, the chair for example, you built objects that didn't follow a prescribed conceptual method. What was your reasoning for doing so? Also,

would you please speak about on the use of negative space in the installation? It seemed like you built the installation so the experience would always need to be very intimate or slightly cramped. Was that to force experience with the piece?

AC My methodology doesn't seem to want to restrict itself to a certain type of manufacture or medium. I am a potter by training and I use the ethos of crafting objects that I gained through that process as a way to approach the construction of new objects. The chair, specifically, is an interpretation of a Josef Hoffman interpretation of what is typically referred to as an X-Chair. Like with most of the objects I am interested in how forms change through time and process. By choosing to reconstruct the chair layer by layer (each vertical layer of its construction is .2" lasercut plywood) it was a meditation for me on how such an object can come into being and how it can resemble in form, but not in process, all those versions of itself that came before it.

It's so funny you pick up on the negative space. It's a hunch, but I feel as if - living in this digital age - all images now exist simultaneously in 2D and 3D because we are so used to flattening out space. I'd say it wasn't done purposefully, but intuitively, to create a space where each point of viewing for a participant created a provocative composition. I wanted the Object Poem to be filled with objects so that no where you could turn you had to consider the relationships between the disparate works contained within. The cramped/intimate proportion of the space was something I had to work with based on the restrictions of the gallery, but it did force this inability to separate individual works from one another that I think is useful in my work.

JE Great answer. Your distinction between the functional and the decorative seems to be an important one. It's as if we imbue an object with more power the more decorative it is. Would you advocate for a leveling of the playing field of this imposed reverence?

AC Well, it's not quite. There is no definitive system of power flowing between the object and ourselves. The thing that the object is, its being, is just as unknowable as our own. Nothing we do will get to its 'objectness'. I don't think it's a leveling of a playing field moment, it's just that I don't think that decoration exists. An object simply is what it is.

JE Fair.

AC We choose to order the objects of the material world in certain ways aligned with systems of power that exist throughout time - from natural resources such as the paths some rivers take to the design of identification materials. The construction the world around us takes on through time comes to reflect these. If you can create something that short circuits the history and sheds a new light on what the thing is we've created, it elucidates why that is and expands the possibilities of how the material world around us could potentially be constructed moving forward.

- JE What lineage of ideas did you look to when making this work?
- AC Jeez, I've been reading a lot of Object Oriented Ontology philosophy during the past year. The universalizing themes probably stem from a lot of reading of texts from the Arts & Crafts movements in the U.S. and Europe during the early half of the 20th Century. The actual objects I chose for my installation at Moore College extended from my obsession with researching the history of objects, which has been a driving source of research for my practice for years.
- JE Would you characterize this work as a hybridization of social and conceptual practice that is firmly rooted in craft?
- AC I think my practice sits at a lot of intersections, which is why I think its purpose can sometimes be elusive. Like all art there is a social component in the viewers' interaction with it, but I wouldn't say I relate it to any kind of socially-engaged work going on. It certainly does have a conceptual bent. Instead of making the poetic gesture in Art like a lot of the great early conceptual artists of the 60s and 70s did, I wanted to actually construct a poem read through observation. I think the gesture is just too subtle for and too easily co-opted for marketing purposes by the world we now live in. Of course, a lot of craft theory rests at the heart of my practice as well.
- JE Right on. It seems like a lot of this work really sits in the contrasts it creates, both cognitively and formally. What arc do you see this work taking in the future?
- AC I'd like to refine it further. It feels like I have found a very viable language to explore humans relationship to something relatively unexplored. I think it is particularly important now to understand how we actively choose to construct this material world, as we are embarking on the early stages of creating a completely new realm of objects contained in the digital world. The television in my installation was a nod to this, with a six-second looping video that constantly tells the viewer, "waiting" and "connecting", while never actually 'going' anywhere.
- JE That was going to be my next questions but you kinda answered it there! How do you see the advent of technology, especially things like augmented reality, changing or influencing the relationship people have to objects?
- AC I think the thing is we don't know. Augmented reality and other similar technology may in fact connect us to a real-world object-based existence. But, if that experience doesn't clarify anything about the object and only layers data over, it simply adds another more complexity to deal with. The physical isn't going anywhere - we won't be strapped into the Matrix until at least 2525. However, like all technologies such as the car and the mailbox, objects will continue to be constantly socially reconstructed due to things such as trends in

visual taste, the utility we see the object as possessing as well as the limits of the traditional materials the object is based in. The question concerning a hybridization of the digital and physical world isn't "Could we add this layer of interpretation?", but instead, "Should we?"

JE Very good. Any other thought(s) you'd like to share?

AC I hate to end on a note of vague speculation about the future. I'd like to have it on the record that I am very hopeful about what Design/Craft/Art will continue to bring into the world. We live in a very skeptical time. I believe that by being conscious of all the objects around us we can raise our own consciousness and expand our definition of acceptable interpretations of experience. We humans need to become better at understanding how our social impulses manifest and frame the physical world around ourselves, which I hope to help facilitate through creating these Object Poems.



Joel Evey is a Philadelphia-based Designer, Curator and Thinker-at-Large. He is the Freelance Art Director at Need and Supply Co. as well as the Creative Director of Light, his own design firm, which focuses on industrial elegance at the intersection of functionality and emergent aesthetics. His previous design clients include Nike, Levi's, Bloomberg Businessweek, TBWA Chiat Day (Apple), KARA Store, California Institute of the Arts, Modular Records UK, Anna Lunoe, Sixpack France, Blood is the New Black, Redcat Theater.



Alex Conner is a Philadelphia Artist. He uses the visual languages of Craft and Design along with the metaphysics of Poetry to create objects who invite the viewer to question why the world around them is constructed from objects in the way it is, as well as how they may be complicit in creating new (or reinforcing current) interpretations of reality through their interactions with objects.