

Peter Brock, Part I

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March 2012

“I started to seek out greater objecthood in what I was making...” In Part I, Peter Brock discusses his move away from traditional painting and how the preparation of his New York gallery debut has impacted his studio practice. Audio + transcript below.

Artwrit: Well we’re here with *Artwrit* and we are in Sunset Park, interviewing Mr. Peter Brock in his studio. We wanted to start with talking about Peter’s new show that’s going to be at the Black and White Gallery in Brooklyn. It’s Peter’s first show and he’s preparing now for the opening in April. Can you talk about what the process has been like to prepare for the show and if it’s affected your practice at all?

Peter Brock: Yeah! Well, first, thanks for coming on out, Sandra. It’s good to have you here. It’s a little weird, it’s definitely my first time with an actual show. I’ve put on shows with friends and at school, so it’s all new and a bit weird. I was really worried that it would get in the way of the anarchy or the free-making of things here, and that the pressure... I guess I already have kind of an intense work ethic with things and I was a little worried it would drive me to an unhealthy degree towards that tendency and take away that relaxed pace. I’ve only been in this studio for maybe nine months and I feel that to form a good connection with a space takes a while and I was feeling in a really good place with this particular space in terms of taking risks in the work and really just letting it have its own rhythm. And that was feeling like a really natural place to be and this is obviously a disruption no matter how well you adapt to a new force. I don’t know, it’s all new in a way.

Did you find rhythm, considering that you were in an academic environment for a while and transitioning into your own independent practice, and now you’re engaged in this relationship with a commercial gallery? What were those transitions like?

Well first I’ll say I was in a really loose academic setting, which was the best type for me, where I had pretty much total autonomy.

Where’d you study again?

The New York Studio School with Bill Jensen and Margrit Lewczuk, who were phenomenal teachers, and they were phenomenal mostly because they trusted you to find your way towards what you actually wanted to do and were there to guide you. Tons of freedom. That being said, I really was seeking a place with no external input and I was almost feeling more negatively affected by praise, even classmates or people would stop in and say, “Oh I like that piece,” or we’d have a critic in and say, “Oh I like that.” For me that was really almost harmful, because it cut short my own process of making something, liking it at first and then getting frustrated with it. It would make things jump too

quickly into a realm of judgment as opposed to letting that longer, more uncomfortable indeterminate phase... where you're not quite sure how you feel about a piece. It's like a person you don't know so well, but you're still getting to know them.

Right, an academic setting often truncates the entire process. It's like you've fulfilled an expectation and you don't have anywhere to go from there. You lose touch of what you were getting at yourself, naturally.

Yeah, even the most soft and open-ended expectation or commentary from the outside, it puts a kind of cap or limit on things. So I was really excited to have silence, no voices, particularly no praise, no affirmation, no criticism, so that it would all come from my own frustration with myself. I really value that cycle of making, getting kind of enamored with the making of something and letting that enthusiasm carry you through the process of making it, at least the first stages and then you start to get uneasy about it, look a little deeper, it sits more, and you sometimes you feel—I feel—unhappy or suffocated. I don't like what's there. You deal with that feeling or sometimes you let it sit a little more. So, being here in my studio, the way that I work here, I've tried to let that phase be prolonged, and let things sit on the ground when they're not working out on the wall. And, it's weird, in the last year making work here, almost every piece that's become successful was at one point, I thought, total trash. And it sat on the ground as trash and got dust and crap all over it. I'm really happy for that. I don't think that would have happened unless I had this space, that space with no judgment, other than my own cyclical rhythms about how I felt about the objects and what was going on in the room.

I think you've considered yourself a painter for a long time and I know you've made quite a bit of a transition now, especially leading up to the show, with sculpture. How did that evolve and what was that evolution like, from painting to sculpture? Was it something you were conscious of or was it more of a natural arrival that just occurred organically?

I think it was generally pretty natural in that it came in small phases and I allowed myself greater and greater freedom to go towards what my actual inclinations with material were. In hindsight it's been almost a year, a year and half now, that I've made work that is somewhat in between painting and sculpture. Or say, since I painted on canvas. I spent a little time painting on paper and then on aluminum. And then from there it really departed from maybe what is generally called painting and is somewhere in between. In hindsight, what it looks a lot like to me is the move away from art making to just making shit and getting curious with material. That process of: you make something, and then you see how it changes what you feel about that space and that object. For me it came out of frustration with painting. The experience, the visceral tangible aspect, wasn't fully there for me. I'm not a particularly narrative person. I don't read much fiction and I generally tend to be interested in moments or things that are tangible in a visual or maybe even visceral sense, like texture. The amount that I could have empathy with painting, just as paint on a canvas, really was not very much so I started to seek out greater objecthood in what I was making that started with just making my painting surface. I was sort of provoked by my teacher, Bill Jensen, to really explore the materials more, to make my own paint, which had a huge effect on my color, my palette, everything. Because at the point I was making my own paint and stretching my own canvas but I still was using canvas and wood that I bought at the hardware store, making stretchers in a very conventional sense. Even though I was making it all myself, what ended up happening is more and more of it was becoming integral to the art. Those conventions were getting in the way of me getting a more in depth engagement with that object, so I tried to get from the very beginning more of a curiosity because there's something rote or repetitious about the making of canvas, stretcher, gesso that I didn't really relate to.

It's interesting that you worked backwards until you got to the materials. You kind of got into, not just the process, but what really leads up to the process of painting that maybe some artists never really tap into or want to be part of, I think. Now, with your sculptures how do you gather and source your materials? I've heard you refer to some of

them as castaways. Can you talk a little bit about how you find the right things? What sort of relationship do you have to have with them in order to bring them into the studio?

Well, this comes to mind when I think about that. You ever rode a train like Amtrak in the Northeast or even out West? The train tracks go through an area of town where there's almost all the time tons of detritus, tons of things just cast about and there's pieces of wood, old furniture and it's an area, like a really materially rich area, and it has a lot of history, and it's kind of a no man's land where things accumulate. I like that kind of feeling and those materials, materials with history and inherent texture and characters of their own. What became really important for me was to deal with materials that had their own momentum and their own properties. Canvas, I guess, was a little too neutral or something. I mean, if you're paying close attention I'm sure every material has personality that way. But for me I really wanted things with more direction of their own, something that I could use as a partner to discover things so it wouldn't just be my own ideas out there. You know, the brushstrokes and that just seems a little too limiting. So I find a lot of my shit on the street, I go dumpster diving right here under the BQE, right near the studio and I really like that, it keeps me on my toes, it keeps me in a curious kind of posture. Before I was making paintings with too much predetermination or just ideas. I would try and be spontaneous, whatever the hell that means, with my paintings but it just was really never satisfying.

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