

The Traveling Mind

Globe-trotting artist Richard Tuttle, who opens this year's Art Basel Conversations series, waxes philosophical on all sources of beauty, and how it inspires his work. *By Carol Kino*

Richard Tuttle, on the phone from a hotel room in London late at night, is talking about the many places he's visited and worked over the preceding few weeks. His odyssey had begun in Los Angeles, where he is currently Artist in Residence for The Getty Research Institute's annual Scholars Program. Then, travelling with a suitcase full of artworks, he and his wife, poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, had flown to Germany to install a show at the Kunstverein München. After that, they had relocated to London. The following weeks held a similarly dizzying number of shows and projects, including one at the Bergen Kunstmuseene, Tuttle's first solo exhibition in Norway, and another

at Munich's Pinakothek der Moderne.

Tuttle seems a bit bemused by the Pinakothek show, which turns out to be drawn from private collections throughout Munich. "I don't think there's a name for it," he ruminates. "Why don't I know that? Because I don't care, I guess. I just want to make art as well as I can."

Then he talks about the Kunstverein show, "Hello, The Roses," on which he collaborated with his wife, who read four poems aloud as he created and installed works.

"It was on the one hand based on the idea of talking to plants," Tuttle says. "And on the other hand, it was about love—how one can get love into something, whether it's a fruit bowl or a life."

"Did I hear you say 'fruit bowl?'" I ask.

"I'm just looking at a bowl that came from Munich, so that came to mind," Tuttle says. "But I think how we find love is always an ingredient. It doesn't often get into things, but everything's always better when it does."

Then he confesses, "I'm a hugely abstract person, you know, and you've got to keep me concrete."

That's the sort of discourse—at once rambling, philosophical, and also extremely genial—that visitors should probably expect when Tuttle is honored at the Premiere Artist Talk at this year's Art Basel Miami Beach. The event that opens the annual Art Basel Conversations series features a discussion between an artist whose work seems ideally suited

to the times and a curator or critic who has worked with that person closely. Previous groupings have included Ai Weiwei talking with Philip Tinari, and Vik Muniz and Chuck Close in conversation with Richard Flood.

Tuttle's conversation—sure to be entertaining—will be with Chris Dercon, the director of Tate Modern, with whom he is planning a grand, multiveneue project in London for 2014. As Tuttle explains it, the plan will include various sites that will each be involved in the organization of complementary shows. "This is a real vision," Tuttle says. "And we're all terrified. Everything has to be done so perfectly."

But London probably doesn't need to worry: Since Tuttle arrived on the art scene in the early 1960s, perfection has been his byword. So has the idea of using minimal materials to create pieces that don't really fit conventional categories (such as drawing, sculpture, or collage), while also



Richard Tuttle

College because his parents wouldn't let him go to art school; instead he worked on the yearbook and is now known for his interest in book design. After moving to New York, where he studied briefly at The Cooper Union, he eventually got a job at the Betty Parsons Gallery, known for showing work by Pollock and Rothko. Within a year, Tuttle, who was making tiny paper cubes that must have been about as far from Abstract Expressionism as you could get, had convinced Parsons to show him, too.

For his first show in 1965, called "Constructed Paintings," Tuttle used canvas stretched over plywood—and sometimes just the plywood itself—together with many layers of carefully mixed paint, to build artworks that lay somewhere between drawing, painting and sculpture. Stuart Preston, in his *New York Times* review, called the pieces so "dovelike and gentle in color, and so explicit that they cry out to be recognized as signs ordering us to do this or that." Gordon Washburn, who wrote

expanding into something much larger than the sum of their parts.

In his life, as well, Tuttle has also been adept at taking the materials available and making them into something completely unexpected and new. Raised in Roselle, New Jersey, he attended Trinity



Systems, IX, 2012.

the gallery brochure, noted that “the subtlety of their modulations [gives] them the air of faintly breathing... like tender living things.”

That’s exactly the way people continue to talk about Tuttle’s enormously influential work nearly a half-century later, now that he has expanded his range of media to include mundane and ephemeral materials, such as Styrofoam, twigs, bubble wrap, string, dyed cloth, rope, wire, or plastic bags (among many other things). At 71, he has also worked in many different scales, including the pencil-length piece of painted wood that he showed at the 1976 Venice Biennale; the matchbook-sized constructions and drawings that he hung just above the floor at Mary Boone Gallery in Soho in 1992; and the much larger sculptural assemblages, one measuring 17 feet, 6 inches in length, that he showed at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea this past fall.

The poet Bob Holman, Tuttle’s longtime friend, calls his work “off-hand and totally conscious,” and notes its eternal “sense of happenstance and ‘has to be.’” Madeleine Grynstejn, Pritzker, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, says, “They have a kind of life of their own, these works. They kind of live and breathe in the same air and space that we do.”

Grynstejn curated Tuttle’s 2005 retrospective, “The Art of Richard Tuttle,” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (which later travelled to the Whitney, as well as four more institutions). Even when he’s reinstalling a piece, she says, “He finds a way to make it come as alive as it moves from context to context.”

To make the works at Pace Gallery, Tuttle arrived several months before the show with elements of each, and spent a long time in the warehouse working on the relationships between them. Then, just before the show, he reassembled each work in the gallery, making careful adjustments, adding a circle of Kraft paper to an Arp-like construction involving a doormat, a piece of lumber, and a piece of twine; or changing the angle of a construction made from burlap, wood, and signpost-like concrete signpost that suggests a New Guinea tribal mask.

Arne Glimcher, the founder and chairman of Pace Gallery, points out that Tuttle’s process is completely intuitive. “You can intellectualize the art all you want afterward, but that’s not what it’s about,” Glimcher says. “It’s very akin to Agnes Martin. It’s all about finding beauty.”

But try to get Tuttle to talk about how he finds that beauty and he’s likely to veer off onto other subjects, such as the cycles of the Mayan calendar (“Some of us subtle types are trying to get prepared for the new period,” he says); or his love of Velázquez drawings, one of which he has just spent a long time looking at in a show at The British Library (“You’re really asked to look at the back end of this horse!” he marvels). He finally admits that Velázquez fascinates him because he was the first European painter to hit “a true vertical” in his compositions.

Then there is Tuttle’s even more surprising passion for German Romanticism. In the spring of 2012, for an exhibition of artists’ collections at the International Print Center New York in Chelsea, he

lent prints by artists like Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich and Ludwig Emil Grimm (of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* fame). Earlier this year, he contributed an essay to the catalogue for the Hamburger Kunsthalle’s show on the landscape painter Johann Christian Reinhart, at the request of Neue Pinakothek, chief curator Dr. Herbert Rott, will contribute a text to an upcoming exhibition of the portraitist Anselm Feuerbach scheduled for the museum next year.

Tuttle is fascinated by the period because, like the American and French Revolutions, the German Unification movement was “really concerned with the same problem—the social structure,” he says, which in a sense is what underpins his own work. Plus, “I’m wired to show people beautiful things,” he adds, whether it be the color of the sky or a work in a museum.

Tuttle is reticent to discuss the work in the Pace show—or any other show, for that matter. He finally divulges that sometimes inspiration for works will come to him while walking around his local Lowe’s hardware store.

“You walk into this huge room that’s a bigger space than you’ve ever seen before,” Tuttle says, “and it’s kind of like a metaphor of the world. Everything is available there. Nothing’s about art. It’s about not art.” But if you enter with “just art on your brain,” and you wait till something clicks, that’s how you proceed.

“It’s kind of corny, but when you go out into the world you’re doing something similar,” Tuttle says. “Art isn’t just for museum walls or galleries or art fairs. It’s a living thing.” **ABMB**



26th Line Piece, 1990.

7th Wood Slat, 1974.



Two or More XIII, 1984.

The artist in his studio in Rome in the 1980s.



“I’m wired to show people beautiful things.”
—RICHARD TUTTLE

Ten.D., 2000.

