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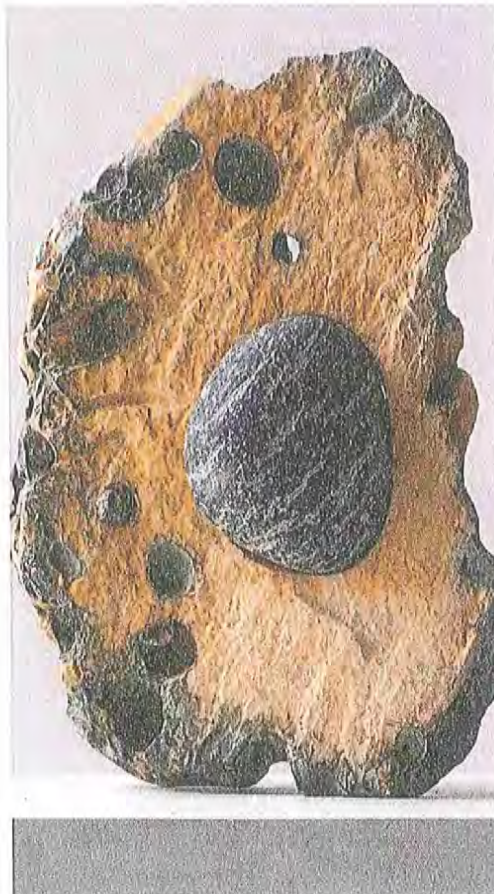
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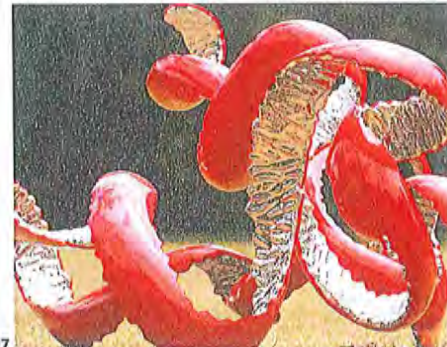
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On the Cover: Andrew Mowbray, *Bathyscape* (detail), 2007. Polyethylene plastic, acrylic, bronze, steel, and vinyl, 84 x 42 x 42 in. Photograph: Peter Harris.



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A Conversation with

Andrew Mowbray



Weird Science
and Aesthetics



"In Search Of," 2011. View of exhibition at LaMontagne Gallery, Boston.

CHEYENNE SEABORN WESLEY, BOSTON

BY FRANCINE KOSLOW MILLER

Andrew Mowbray makes objects that, in the spirit of his hero Marcel Duchamp, upend elitist notions about the artist, the art object, and its place in the traditional white-box gallery. His finely tooled works—frequently carved out of ivory polyurethane—are often used in video performances sited outside or staged within gallery walls. His recent show, “Andrew Mowbray: In Search Of” at Boston’s LaMontagne Gallery, dealt with luck and fate through a selection of handmade objects that included a divining rod, a wishbone, a planchette, and a lucky horse shoe. Writing his own press release in the third person, Mowbray described his problem with privileging fine art by referring to one of Bruce Nauman’s most iconic and ironic neon sculptures: “Mowbray acknowledges the absurdity of applying meaning to both art objects and fortune-telling implements. This struggle with belief in art is similar to Bruce Nauman’s neon work that states ‘The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths.’” After two days of lengthy conversations with the naturally droll, deeply earnest, and ever-inquisitive Mowbray, I began to realize that his unique gift involves an idiosyncratic spiritual sincerity combined with a proletarian approach to the role of art in society.

Mowbray was born in Boston in 1971 and grew up in the coastal town of Duxbury, Massachusetts, where he first began fly-fishing. He received his BFA in 1995 from the Maryland Institute College of Art and his MFA in 1998 from Cranbrook Academy. Mowbray has been the subject of one-person shows at the Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts (2005); Space Other, Boston (2007); Gallery Diet, Miami (2008); and the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts (2009). He has received grants from the LEF Foundation, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and the Artist’s Resource Trust Fund. He is currently teaching in the art department at Wellesley College.



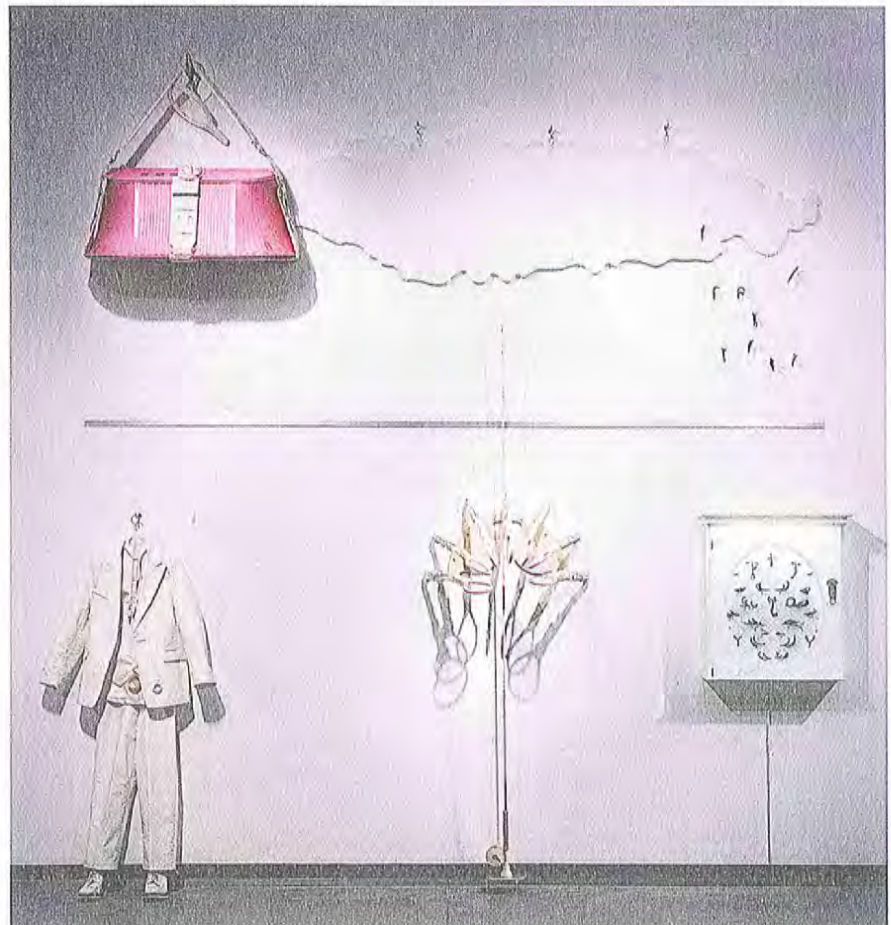
Wishbone, 1998. Packaging, plastic, and cardboard, 6 x 4 x 1 in.

Francine Koslow Miller: *From your earliest days as a sculpture student at Cranbrook, you have been making, packaging, and selling art that is distinctly sweet and subversive. Back in 1995, you made chocolate Jesus figures that celebrated and satirized Easter.*

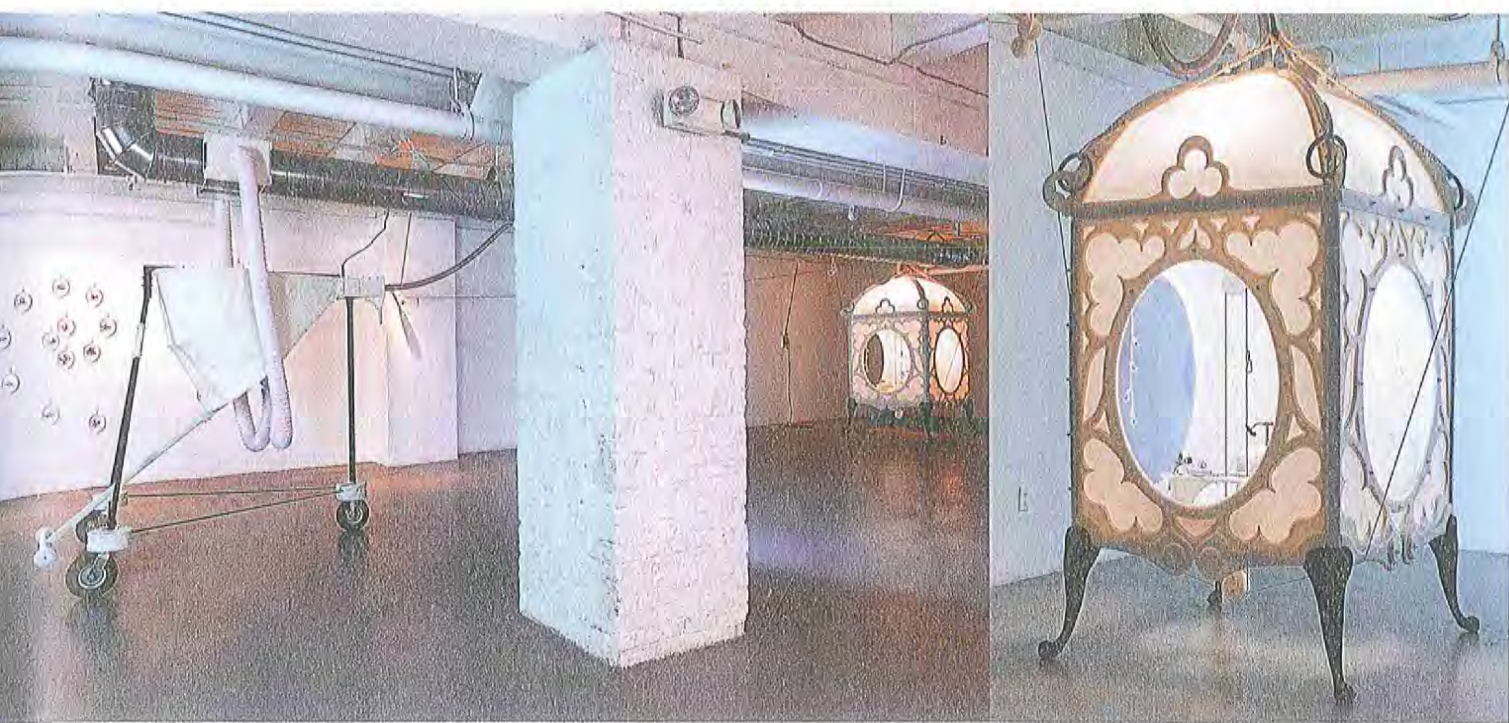
Andrew Mowbray: I made an endless edition called *Sweet Jesus* and packaged each one in what looked like a coffin. I made them around Easter time, and they were my version of the omnipresent marshmallow Peeps. I thought that they related more directly to what Easter was about than pink or yellow candy chickens.

FKM: *Speaking of chickens, for your 1998 MFA thesis show, you made a vending cart and sold plastic wishbones with chicken heads, combining a Pop aesthetic derived from commercial products with a Fluxus subversion of the art world and recognition of art as commodity.*

Palingenesis, 2005. Mixed-media installation, 12 x 14 x 3 ft.



BOTTOM: LUC DEMEERS



Bathyscape, 2007. Polyethylene plastic, acrylic, bronze, steel, and vinyl, installation view and detail.

AM: I formed wishbones from cast urethane plastic and added my own carved and painted eyes, beaks, and packaging. My studio became my personal sweatshop. The idea was to explore the strange belief that a wishbone could grant you a wish if you broke off the larger part of the bone. It is absurd to think that this synthetic plastic product could potentially be a fortune-telling instrument, but there is all this weirdness out there and I wanted to add to it.

FKM: And you had an entrepreneurial spirit, selling quite a few breakable, chicken-headed wishbones for \$9.95 apiece.

AM: Yes, I made just enough money to cover my expenses, pay my phone bill, and help out with my rent.

FKM: After moving back to Boston in 1998, you participated in a number of group shows, among them "Supermarket" (Slop Art, Kansas City, Missouri, 1999), "The Entertainment Show" (Jorge Hernandez Cultural Center, Boston, 2003), "Boys Life" (Evos Art Center, Lowell, Massachusetts, 2005), and "Back From Nature: The Sportsman Redux" (ICA, Maine College of Art, Portland, 2005). These titles imply a populist-allied life outside the studio and the gallery. One show was even named after the official magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, leading to an association between your work and male gender identity.

AM: I like the fact that my work draws on everyday life. The most elaborate installation for me was the one in "Back From Nature," which included Bob Braine, Kimberley Hart, Arturo Herrera, Jocelyn Lee, Scott Peterman, Alexis Rockman, Mark Swanson, and Inga Svala Thorsdottir.

FKM: "Back From Nature" explored art either dealing directly with the activities of hunting and fishing or with the aesthetics, cult status, history, and politics of the sportsman. Although three women contributed work, the press release stated, "The American sportsman is a cultural icon and enduring metaphor for manliness, bravado, and courage."

AM: My contribution to the show was an installation of sculpture and framed digital photographs called *Palingenesis*, which is a term referring to rebirth, regeneration, and reincarnation. In genetics, it describes an unmodified inheritance of ancestral characteristics.

FKM: You have said that the conceptual setting for this work dealing with maleness, bachelorhood, and fishing was inspired by Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (The Large Glass). *Palingenesis* recapitulates Duchamp's mechanistic interpretation of desire, featuring a Bride in her domain above and the Bachelor's Apparatus below. The nine Malic Molds symbolizing the Bachelors share their space with, among other things, a Chocolate Grinder. The Bride floats in an amorphous Milky Way

with three windows. Her suitors misfire their "shots" and are thus forced to "grind their own chocolate" (masturbate), while being watched by faint circular patterns representing *Oculist Witnesses*. Explain your reincarnation of Duchamp's love machine

AM: My installation also dealt with bachelorhood. I put my personal twist on it by taking the *Large Glass* and translating it into a functional piece whose themes were fishing, masculinity, and femininity. Positioned in two layers against one of the gallery walls were my hand-crafted objects, including a horizontal metal bar to separate the Bride from the Bachelors. The Bride was represented by an oversized pink creel basket—used to carry fish and usually made from willow, though mine was made with interlacing pink plastic lanyard and had three windows woven into it. I created a replica of the Milky Way from white synthetic fur. Below, my Bachelors were signified by a white vinyl two-piece suit on which I sewed tiny urinal buttons to refer to Duchamp's *Fountain*. Beside the suit, I arranged my version of seven sieves—which were small landing nets for catching trout—above my fly-fishing rod, or chocolate grinder. I then cut tufts of hair from my head and used them as dubbing around hooks to create freshwater fishing flies. I placed a number of these flies inside a white cabinet fitted with an oval window and a zipper



Top: *Anemometer*, 2008. Video still from performance. Above: *Tempest Prognosticator with Park Bench*, 2009. View of mixed-media installation at the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

latch. Picture this as the area of the Oculist Witnesses, where the Bachelors shoot a look, or other things, up at the Bride located in the Milky Way.

FKM: *This wall and another with video stills documented a performance at Walden Pond.*

AM: I associated Thoreau and his Walden adventure with bachelorhood. My pre-show private performance featured me fly-fishing, dressed in the waterproof white vinyl suit, which stood out as being very out of place with nature. Just above my crotch, I wore a gimbal belt cummerbund, which is a girdle-like device used to hold a rod while fighting and catching large fish. My action of turning the fishing reel was meant to refer to the Bachelors grinding their own chocolate. I carried the oversized pink creel on my shoulder. The video was never intended to be shown, but I photographed stills from it and framed them in white plastic. I like the pixelated look because it suggests that my fishing efforts were simply a performance and not real life. It also suggests action without being tied to a narrative.

FKM: *Everything became fetishistic and sexy. The gimbal belt makes the attached rod appear as an extended phallus, and your*

white waterproof suit reminds me of John Travolta's suit in Saturday Night Fever.

AM: But the sexy part is very tame, and everything was a result of extensive research. I have clippings in my scrapbook/sketchbook of Michael Jackson, the Bee Gees, the Beatles, and the *Superfly* album cover in which the men are dressed in white suits. I also have images of Victorian hair wreaths that inspired me to use my own hair.

FKM: *Indeed, you have put together voluminous notes, sketches, clippings, and photographs in what seems to be a modern version of Duchamp's own mass of notes, which he began jotting down in 1913 while fabricating *The Large Glass* and later published as *The Green Box* (1934).*

AM: I just kept collecting and drawing, and the pages kept piling up and started to fall out of the notebook. Eventually, I put all of my notebooks into a white plastic and vinyl box fitted with a handle on which I stitched another urinal.

FKM: *Your first big solo show in Boston was in 2007 at the progressive South End gallery Space Other. To prepare, you sat dressed in a white T-shirt and pants on a small stool inside your Victorian-style version of a bathyscaphe. Your four-sided rendition with delicate legs, four windows, and water installed in a ceiling tank was created from white polyethylene plastic, acrylic, bronze, and steel. What is a bathyscaphe?*

AM: It's a rare device related to a diving bell, which is an airtight windowed chamber lowered underwater to transport a small number of divers. The pressure of the water keeps the air trapped inside the bell. Although the first bathyscaphes were engineered in the late 1920s to investigate the deep sea, interest in diving bells goes back to the time of Aristotle. Along with a number of designs for diving bells, I also found an illustration from a medieval manuscript showing Alexander the Great being lowered into the ocean in a diving bell. I pictured divers bringing treasure and stories to the surface in much the same way that artists bring ideas to light in the gallery.

FKM: *Your one-person apparatus seems to be from the world of fantasy. It reminds me of Cinderella's carriage.*

AM: It has also been compared to a Victorian cabinet and the elevator in Tim Burton's *Willy Wonka*. I love that. The top has a hatch to let air in, while the top basin percolates with water to create an undersea illusion. For me, *Bathyscape* was more like a birth canal with four oval windows. I had a hollow tube attached to the top, which was like an umbilical cord that connected me to the gallery.

FKM: *So you made a womb/studio inside Bathyscape. Bellows operated by gallery workers dressed in white vinyl suits pumped air into the area where you sat silently on a white cushion and created the works of art, which you framed.*

AM: I installed the apparatus for tying fishing flies on a small white plastic table. I cut locks of my hair off and used them to tie 24 Hairwing flies, which are the type used to catch salmon. I then framed each fly in an egg-like plastic oval and clipped it to a pulley system that ran through a small hole in the bottom of *Bathyscape*.

FKM: Again, you used your hair as the main material for your "product." As the frames came out, another assistant, also dressed in a sanitary white costume, received them and hung them on an adjoining wall in a predetermined pattern of spirals based on your double cowlick. This complicated performance seems to combine fetish with ritual and identity. Your hair, a source for DNA, is also a memento of a performance enacted without an audience.

AM: *Bathyscape* was about networks and devices of support. The diving bell is tethered to the ship like a baby to its mother and the artist to the gallery. The performance was documented in a video that became part of the installation.

FKM: This elaborate performative sculptural installation has been compared to Matthew Barney's CREMASTER cycle.

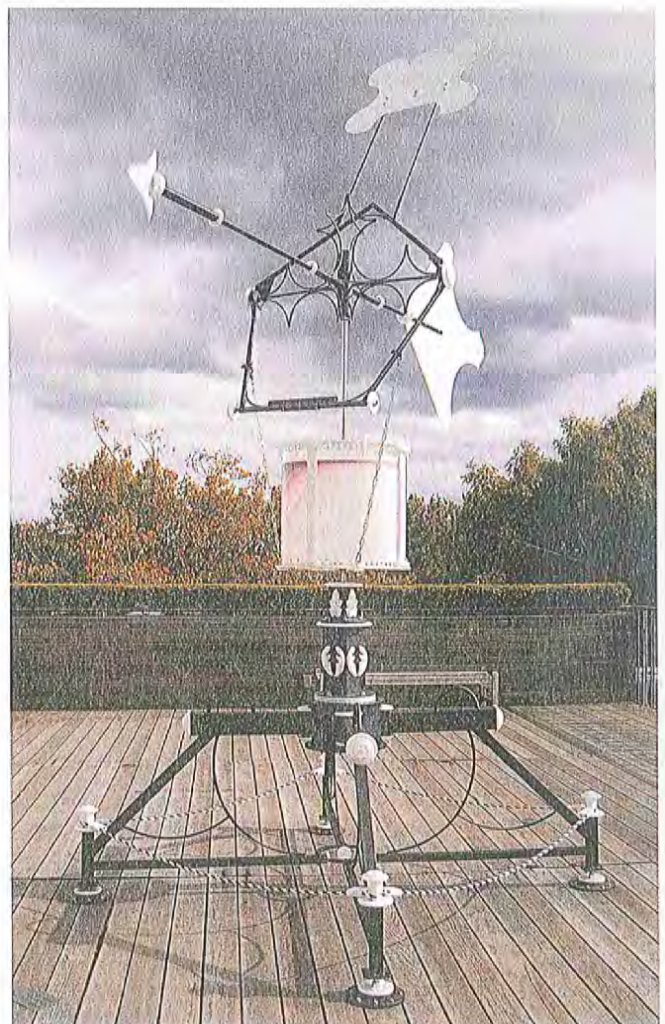
AM: I admit that we share an interest in materials and what they stand for in the history of art, as well as a definite theatricality. However, Barney's work has an overt and dark sexuality to it that mine doesn't. In *Bathyscape*, I'm more like a baby in an incubator, while Barney is an athletic hero wrestling with his content.

We both deal with masculinity in different ways. My work is internal and contemplative rather than aggressive and spectacle oriented.

FKM: There is a strong narrative insinuated by the sculptural artifacts of your performances. *Tempest Prognosticator*, your next major work (originally at Gallery Diet in Miami in 2008, then at the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in 2009), used weather to symbolize the uncontrollable parts of life that we try to measure through technology. For this project, you placed yourself on a Boston rooftop clad in a black business suit and a white plastic harness with three extending arms, each ending in a wind-catching cup. You became a human anemometer and weather vane, standing on a low plastic table and rotating at a very slow pace. The performance was shown as a video in the museum, and the audience was invited to sit on a white polyethylene park bench that you fashioned.

AM: Even when I try to make something functional, it is absurd because it all comes down to weird science and aesthetics in the end. The title refers to a rather bizarre Victorian device, which

Left: *Weather Vane/Anemometer*, 2008. Polyethylene, steel, vinyl, and PVC, installation view. Right: *Drawing Machine #2*, 2009. Steel, polycarbonate, Mylar, and pen, installation view.



LEFT: MARIANO C. PEUSER



Above: *Parachute*, 2008. View of performance.
 Right: *Parachute*, 2005. Found umbrellas, kite line, vinyl, and aluminum.

used live leeches to measure atmospheric conditions. It was invented in 1851 by a Dr. George Merryweather who had observed that freshwater leeches tended to become quite agitated before a severe storm. He created an apparatus meant to harness the energy of the leeches. He placed 12 white glass pint bottles around a circular stand at whose top was a bell and 12 hammers. Each bottle was attached to a hammer through a metal tube, a piece of whalebone, and wire to which a gilt chain was connected. Merryweather then poured a small amount of rainwater and a live leech into each bottle. When influenced by electromagnetic changes in the atmosphere, the leeches ascended into the tubes; in doing so, they dislodged the whalebone and caused the bell to ring, thus predicting a thunderstorm. In the spirit of Merryweather's device, I created a series of alternative weather instruments, including my wearable weather vane and anemometer. I was the leech in this work.

FKM: *Weather Vane/Anemometer (2008) became an artifact of your rooftop performance and a unique sculptural object. Three plastic arms with catching cups and an elaborate interlaced arabesque capped by an arrow were attached to PVC pipe.*

AM: The pipe was affixed to a white Lazy Susan pedestal-type table, which I stood



on in the performance. It appears to be another chocolate grinder.

FKM: *You also made a drawing machine that reacts to the weather outside.*

AM: I put together a vitrine-style table meant to be used outside to make drawings from wind power. A wing-like weather vane catches the wind and moves two pens attached by magnets to create all-over drawings on Mylar inside the case. The markings are purely aesthetic and reveal little measurable evidence of wind direction or speed.

FKM: *One of my favorite performance-based artifacts is Parachute (2005), made from found umbrellas sewn together with kite lines. You attached yourself to the parachute with a human-scaled vinyl umbrella handle. Did you actually fly?*

AM: Well, I did get my feet a bit off the ground. When I made *Parachute*, I was thinking about the corporate world, which is why I wore a black suit for my performances first in 2005 and then in 2008. I collected a ton of umbrellas—all representing corporations—and sewed them together as one giant parachute-umbrella. In the gallery, *Parachute* is best displayed in a pile. When an object enters a gallery, it cannot function, so it has to be seen deflated. It was on exhibit in 2008 during the economic crash.

FKM: *Your most recent show, "In Search Of," moved from parascience to the paranormal.*

AM: Most of the objects in this show are implements used to conjure and interact with luck and chance. I'm trying to tap into something inexplicable—the unknown. These sculptural implements were made to draw on some power that scientific instruments cannot. I'm concerned here with the somewhat futile attempt to get any real answers.

FKM: *The show featured two baroque "magic mirrors"—one white and the other black—installed on either side of the gallery. They reminded me of the magic mirror in Disney's*



Left: *Well*, 2011. Found Styrofoam flotsam, 24 x 48 x 48 in. Above: *Oracle*, 2011. High-density polyethylene and acrylic, 18 x 34 x 48 in.

Snow White. They reflect one's image with some texture, because you used a polycarbonate, and they both have solid polyethylene frames. How did you come up with the design, and what does a mirror inside a gallery mean to you?

AM: I found the design motif in a Sotheby's auction catalogue. Both mirrors are based on an Italian rococo tinted mirror. I wanted supernatural ornate mirrors because I was thinking about mirrors as portholes to another realm. When I made the decision to create a mirror, anything reflective was at the forefront of my mind. I consider these pieces performative, too, in that the viewer is performing with him/herself while looking in the mirrors. At the same time, the viewer is being reflected into the gallery space.

FKM: This show featured a great deal of work made from white plastic. Why are you attracted to this material?

AM: I use a solid polyethylene, a strong white surface most commonly used to make cutting boards, and carve into it with a chisel. Ours is the age of plastic, whether we like it or not. And plastic has the ability to mimic many traditional sculptural materials both in form and craft. Since the gallery space is white and sanitized, it provides a good home for plastic objects.

FKM: *Oracle* (2011) was one of my favorite pieces from "In Search Of." It is an oversized planchette—a heart-shaped movable indicator made to be used with a Ouija board to spell out messages from the spirits during a séance.

AM: *Oracle* was used in a performance to find something unknown or meaningful within the empty gallery space. But it can also be a functional coffee table if nothing works out with your search for the supernatural.

FKM: You placed a coffee mug from Marfa, Texas, and a copy of Artforum containing the "Best Shows of 2010" on top of *Oracle*.

AM: Those objects ended up there during the installation of the show, and I just left them. It seemed fitting. I think that the investment side of the art world deals with the future and a search for the unknown.

FKM: You used an oversized black plastic divining rod called *The Curator* (2011) to find water or treasure in a clever video performance. When the gallery was still empty, you walked around with this representation of a stick held in front of you.

AM: As much as I'm joking around with this material, I take my art and humor seriously. I am interested in my work having a functional quality. I used the stick to mark out the places for the works. I taped off the areas where the stick seemed to lead and eventually installed the works there. Maybe the rod was telling me good places to stop, but I'm not sure.

FKM: It seems that you have gone full circle, back to your student days of making plastic chicken wishbones, with *Implement for Studio Practice* (2011), which is a giant white plastic wishbone made to be broken.

AM: I wanted something that could be broken and put back together again, so I fitted the sculpture with equal breaking points and magnets on both sides. I wanted something to interact with physically, so I made a video performance with it held in my hands. I kept pulling the bone apart and putting it back together again. This reflects a lot of the art-making process.

FKM: How so?

AM: Well, you just mentioned that I'm back to wishbones. This is one example of re-creating something. The repetition of process can be very revealing. Whether it is a line repeated in a drawing created by the wind, a form or subject revisited, or a performative action, there is an understanding achieved by the meditative quality of a repetitive process.

FKM: Like fishing?

AM: Like fishing.

Francine Koslow Miller, a Boston-area critic for Artforum for over 20 years and a regular contributor to Sculpture, has published numerous catalogues and monographs, including the forthcoming Cashing in on Culture: Betraying the Trust at the Rose Art Museum (Hol Art Books).