



art of the everyday

curated by: Marilyn Waligore

Beth Callahan

Susan Dunkerley

John Frost

Mary Beth Heffernan

Robert McAn

Mark Monroe

Sherry Owens

Vaughn Wascovich

The Bath House/UT Dallas



The artists featured in this exhibition embrace the mundane. They transform everyday objects through photographic reframing or sculptural construction, prompting our reconsideration of materials that we deem to be without value or environments that we overlook. Their efforts heighten our perception, while reminding us of the potential effects of modest daily habits, rituals, and gestures.

These artists embrace commonplace materials, which are then transformed or recycled, to generate new forms. **Robert McAn's** relief works, constructed of accumulations of shredded documents, present identity as related to an ephemeral paper trail, marking our activities as consumers and citizens, our lives "as society and government define a person's identity through data."¹ His accumulation of paper demonstrates a fascination with the archive, while alluding to collective fears regarding identity theft. Despite our entry into the electronic age, the demand for the production of paper documents persists. An embrace of an all-over pattern, varied by the texture, diamond-cut, strip-cut, cross-cut, plays on references to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, while also evoking associations with relief sculpture. McAn replaces paint or wood, traditional artist materials, with paper derived from wood pulp, a material destined to decay. Through a search of these fragments, we discern clues of McAn's life, guided by cryptic titles. *Self-Portrait, A.F.* for *Artforum*, denoting a journal subscription, or *Self-Portrait, G.M.A.C.*, suggesting periodic loan payments, provide autobiographical information. Our lives can be summarized quantitatively, from credit score to credit balance, to foreclosure and bankruptcy. McAn acknowledges that these records reveal how we define the self. As we transition to a virtual recording of our lives, the supposed privacy obtained via shredding will be replaced by the electronic search.

Michael Sheringham has stated in "Configuring the Everyday," that "Everydayness lies in practices that weave contexts together; only practices make it visible."² McAn's highlights commonplace activities, everyday practices, to reveal "an artist's outer life"³ in his self-portraits, pointing to his participation in a larger social, economic, and political context.

Mary Beth Heffernan references the activity of cooking, and the sharing of meals, through presentations of worn knives and cutting board, and discarded factory table knife blades in her *Knife Series*. Resharpener blades appear at local garage and estate sales after decades of constant use, yet they function as well as family heirlooms, triggering memories of gatherings and daily chores. The artist sees "this essential kitchen tool as a metaphor for knowing and being,"⁴ while it also relates to autobiography, given that it corresponds to her maiden name. Heffernan's woodblock print of a 19th century family cutting board attests to repetitive tasks performed over centuries. Her video of factory excess, *Knife Name* and *Knife Signature*, records an installation of over 2000 tableware knife blades, presenting a shimmering panoply of reflective, sharp, steel planes. Her project, completed through an artist's residency, also affirms changing attitudes; in this case, the blades, formerly embraced as traditional wedding gifts, remained unused. Through her adoption of electron microscopy in *Knife Kiss* she connects the spheres of domesticity and science, pointing to the ways in which the latter "often mediate[s] our most intimate life experiences, and imagine the unruly ways we emerge as vital subjects."⁵ Her exploration of the "metaphorical meaning of knives"⁶ echoes investigations of culinary practices by Certeau, Giard, Mayol:

Every alimentary custom makes up a minuscule crossroads of histories. In the "invisible everyday," under the silent and repetitive system of every day servitudes that one carries out by habit, the mind elsewhere, in a series of mechanically executed operations whose sequence follows a traditional design dissimulated under the mask of the obvious, there piles up a subtle montage of gestures, rites, and codes, of rhythms and choices, of received usage and practiced customs. ⁷

Here the value placed on everyday activities, such as food preparation, becomes underscored, through acknowledgement of a connection to history as well as an affirmation of individual daily invention. "Each of us has the power to seize power over one part of oneself. That is why the gestures, objects, and words that live in the ordinary nature of a simple kitchen also have so much importance." ⁸ In *The Practice of the Everyday Life* the idea of the passive consumer remains contested, through reflection on the creativity that informs the daily practices of individuals.

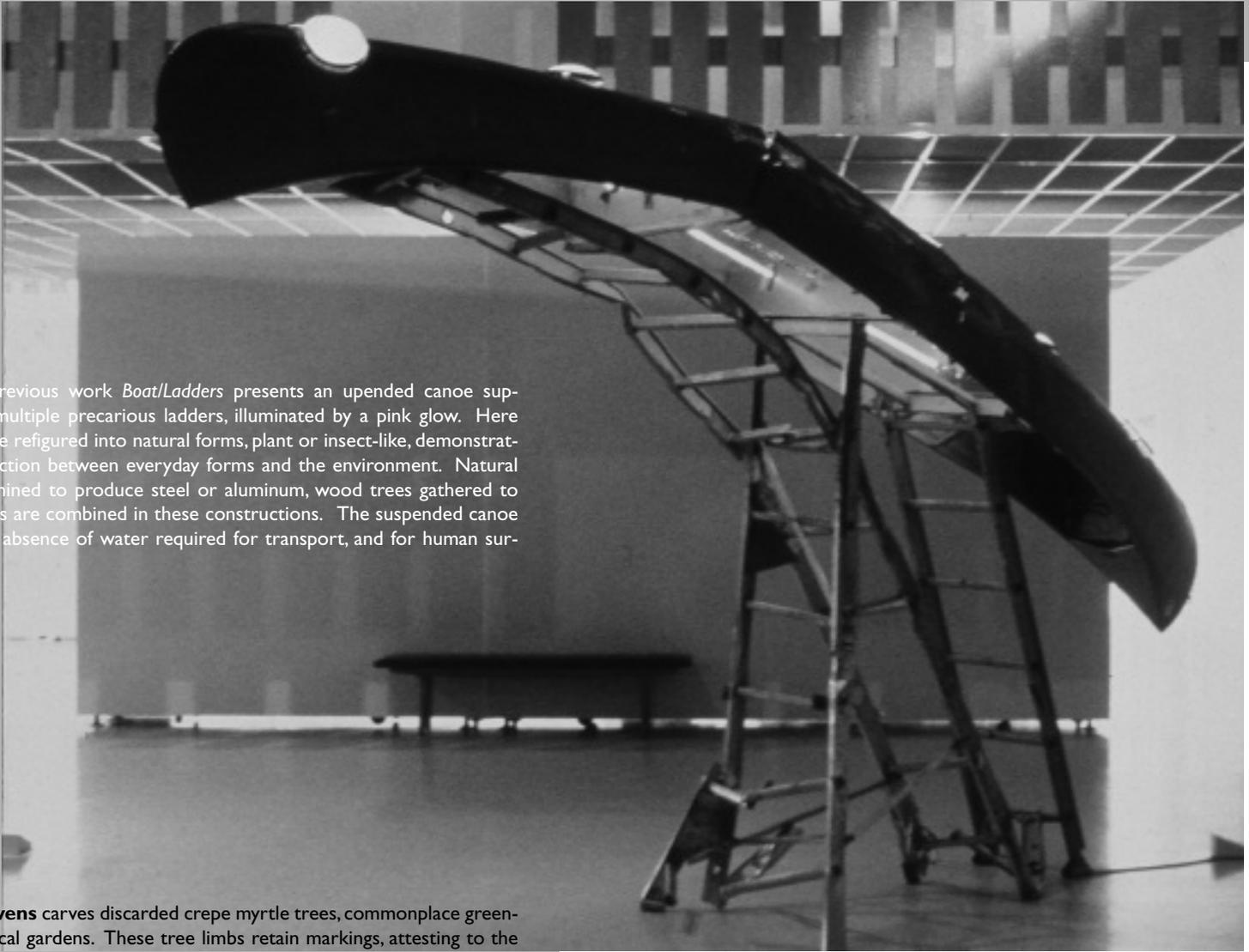
John Frost assembles cylindrical wood dowels, imperfect factory rejects, into a cyclonic spiral, to suggest tensions between natural forces and human efforts to tame nature. He salvages dowels, natural materials that have been processed to acquire geometric form and smooth surface texture. Dowels, used to construct joints in woodworking, instead are stacked, overlapped, and glued, to create a woven pattern. The final form resembles both a tornado and an undulating human figure, an imposing but at the same time, fragile skeleton. The artist is drawn to this play with balance seen in *as a result*:

This work stems from observations and contemplations on the relationship between humanity and the natural world -- our dependence, impact, affect, neglect, and mismanagement of the planet, and the consequences that we may very well be creating for us, and the future. I'm interested in the tension and balance between creative/constructive and destructive forces. ⁹

Meanwhile, his sculpture *assembly required* fosters a dialogue between processed wood products and natural elements-- branches and thin trunks of poplar trees-- to demonstrate how we seek to make nature fit our own purposes. Pulled from a forest, these tree limbs have been trimmed to fit slots within a cube, echoing Sol Le Witt's Minimalist grids and Jackie Winsor's process-based boxes. Yet the tree limbs themselves dominate the squared case.

Similarly **Mark Monroe** mines the tension between human constructions and natural forms through his assemblage of found objects, which often suggest natural forms. His totem-like sculpture includes garbage pails and canoes; formerly functional objects take on ritualistic form within the trunk, branches, and canopy of a tree, a curious monument to excess. His arrangement of canoes suggests our desire to float away from the evidence of our consumption. These heroic forms that fill the gallery or interrupt a city skyline often are comprised of familiar materials, discarded items that are recycled into his art.





Monroe's previous work *Boat/Ladders* presents an upended canoe supported by multiple precarious ladders, illuminated by a pink glow. Here materials are refigured into natural forms, plant or insect-like, demonstrating a connection between everyday forms and the environment. Natural resources mined to produce steel or aluminum, wood trees gathered to form ladders are combined in these constructions. The suspended canoe suggests an absence of water required for transport, and for human survival.

Sherry Owens carves discarded crepe myrtle trees, commonplace greenery from local gardens. These tree limbs retain markings, attesting to the repetitive human effort that has transformed nature's detritus. In *Heart of the Prairie* Owens celebrates "the essence of the American homeland."¹⁰ She laments however that, "Millions of acres of native grasslands have been destroyed with the advent of industrialized agriculture."¹¹ The brown limbs of the crepe myrtle radiate from the center, resembling arteries connected to a heart. Owens seems to compare human physiology--nervous system, respiratory system, circulatory system--to the complexity of a natural ecosystem. Similarly, in *Every Breath You Take*, the artist explores relationships between deforestation and climate change. Materials such as rotted wood and baling wire reference the forest floor, while representations of molecules of greenhouse gases, the atmosphere, are formed using kitchen ingredients. Owens notes that, "Destruction is threatening many of the world's natural forests, especially in the tropics, as land is cleared for what we perceive to be societal needs."¹² For Owens, her sculptural projects affirm the fragile nature of our world.

Jonathan Watkins comments on contemporary artists who explore the everyday, especially in relationship to the environment:

Much of the work exhibited embodies or marks the passage of time through traces of the process of production, thereby stressing its place in our material world. Time is measured out in gestures analogous to the coming and going of the every day, reminders that all is temporary and mutable. Concomitant with this is the acknowledgement that the everyday is manifest as much in natural phenomena as it is in common man-made or urban subjects.¹³

Like Sherry Owens, **Susan Dunkerley** also seeks to incorporate aspects of time in her work. Instead of progressively carving a tree limb, Dunkerley engages in the opposite, as she waits for nature to alter a familiar object. Susan Dunkerley's picture windows are the result of collaboration with nature, extending the practice of arranging the space surrounding a kitchen sink. Vine tendrils anchor objects within the frame, like a spider's web, referencing the passage of time as well as daily events, through the inclusion of a chicken wishbone or a teacup, markers of human presence. Her image elements hint at uncertainty: the lone teacup may hold tea leaves and a propitious fortune, as a photograph of two sisters looks on; and in *Seven Wishes* a parade of wishbones invite the silent reciting of an invocation before the final break. The time required to prepare the chickens, carefully removing the bones, and waiting for nature to take her course, suggests the invisible expenditure of time and effort required for domestic tasks. Similarly, the artist waits for the position of the sun. Light streaming in from the window varies as well from winter to summer. Through her collaboration with her garden, Dunkerley bridges her interior and exterior worlds.

Recycling materials underscores our relationship to our environment, to the earth, while acknowledging our relationship to each other, providing a social dimension. **Beth Callahan** travels from Dallas, Texas to Cambodia to Tunisia to photograph landfills and recycling centers, noting the collective impact of the production of waste on our planet, as well as

conservation efforts. She champions the concept that we should “think globally and act locally.” Her photographs of Dallas record accumulation of debris as well as efforts in aluminum can collection or mulch production from Christmas trees. In Cambodia, a disfigured doll’s head lies in a garbage dump, prompting reflection on the environmental problems that the next generation will inherit. In Tunisia she discovers a plethora of plastic bottles, lined in rows, retrieved from the Mediterranean Ocean. She records the museum of artworks created from trash by North African artist Mohsen Lihidheb.¹⁴ His combination of tires and refuse culled from the sea points to the shared practice of artists who seek to reuse commonplace discarded materials in their generation of artwork. Callahan documents both the disregard of the environment and the untapped potential of our collective effort—which may transform attitudes regarding accumulation and consumption.

In **Vaughn Wascovich's** *The Tar Creek Project*, the evidence of everyday small town life—parks, little league, Main Street—are framed against a terrain populated by chats, or mine tailings, from mining operations. Landscape becomes social space in these photographs of a highly toxic Superfund Site in Oklahoma, underscoring the relationship of individuals to their community, governmental institutions, and to the land itself.

Wascovich documents beauty and tragedy, as well as activism. His photographs present sweeping visits, toxic ponds, barricaded picnic grounds, and a matter-of-fact engagement in daily life. In photograph *A1B1051*, Wascovich includes a sign that appears to represent a call to both the Tar Creek community and our own: “For Stupidity and Corruption to Continue All good people have to do is to remain silent.” The prominent red fire hydrant, framed in the center of the composition against the snowy white landscape, acts as a stark warning. The residents of this place are also members of a community. Their collective efforts represent one aspect of our complex relationship to the environment.



Sherry Owens, *Heart of the Prairie (detail)*, 2007, crepe myrtle, dye, wax, 51" x 38" x 30"

The contrasts, as spray paint graffiti obscures the printed text of a highway traffic sign, imply a tension between governmental institutions and the people who inhabit this space. Wascovich documents native landscapes, which have been defiled, and native land, a portion of which is considered sacred by the American Indian tribes residing there. As Wascovich states, the decision to relocate the towns in close proximity to the polluted areas, namely Cardin and Pitcher, "is at odds with the indigenous peoples of the region who for the most part want to stay and demand that their land be cleaned up." ¹⁵ Throughout his series, images of the chats, mounds of mine tailings, appear in the background of nondescript scenes where children play, such as a baseball dugout or picnic benches, pointing to the complex nature of "living in a compromised environment." ¹⁶

Michael Sheringham notes, "The everyday exists through the practices that constitute it, the ways in which times and spaces are appropriated by human subjects and converted into physical traces, narratives and histories." ¹⁷ This exhibition highlights the invention and improvisation involved in everyday practices, which make visible larger contexts: a growing awareness of the environment, informed by everyday experience; and a social dimension--how these practices illuminate relationships among individuals, institutions, and communities, and our place in society.

— Marilyn Waligore, 2009



Beth Callahan,
From the Ocean, Tunisia,
2006, digital chromogenic
print, 20" x 16"



¹ Robert McAn, Artist's Statement, 2008.

² Michael Sheringham, "Configuring the Everyday." *The Everyday*, ed. Stephen Johnstone. London: Whitechapel, 2008. 141.

³ McAn.

⁴ Mary Beth Heffernan, Artist's Statement, 2009.

⁵ Heffernan.

⁶ Heffernan.

⁷ Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2, Living and Cooking*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 171.

⁸ Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 213.

⁹ John Frost, Artist Statement, 2009

¹⁰ Sherry Owens, Artist Statement 2009

¹¹ Owens.

¹² Owens.

¹³ Jonathan Watkins, "Every Day." *The Everyday*, ed. Stephen Johnstone. London: Whitechapel, 2008. 63.

¹⁴ Beth Callahan, "Garbage In, Garbage Out." *American Way*. October 1, 2007: 30-35.

¹⁵ Vaughn Wascovich. "The Tar Creek Project." Homepage. 20 Dec. 2008
<<http://www.wascovich.com/wascovich/tcp.html>>

¹⁶ Wascovich.

¹⁷ Sheringham 142.



Artist Talks @ UT Dallas

March 31 vaughn wascovich 2:30 p.m. Visual Arts 1.105

April 2 sherry owens 7:30 p.m. Visual Arts 1.105

PART ONE: march 14 – april 18, 2009

Artist Reception: March 15, Sunday, 7-9 pm

bath house cultural center

www.bathhousecultural.com

521 E. Lawther Drive, Dallas, TX, 75218 214-670-8749

Gallery Hours: Tues.-Sat. Noon-6 pm



PART TWO: march 27 – may 2, 2009

Artist Reception: April 3, Friday, 6:30-9 pm

**the university of texas at dallas
visual arts building, main gallery**

Gallery Hours: Mon.-Fri. 9 am-10 pm; Sat. 9 am-6 pm; Sun. closed.

cover images:

Vaughn Wascovich (above)
The Tar Creek Project: A1B0947
2007, Ultrachrome digital print
20" x 30"

Mary Beth Heffernan (front)
Knife Name and Knife Signature,
DVD (documentation of
sculpture installation and
sound installation) 2004

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