

Far from Waterloo: Stuart Arends and La Stanza del Amore

Diane Armitage | February 6, 2013

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Why would a contemporary artist with an international career live in the middle of nowhere, in Willard, New Mexico? The artist in question, Stuart Arends, as a joke, greets one of his visitors to Willard in Italian, saying that he hopes she will be entertained. Speaking Italian may seem odd in front of the Willard Cantina, but it's not so strange when Arends is in Italy on one of his frequent trips there for an exhibition. Or perhaps the artist's signature

painted objects or his aluminum wedges are scheduled for a show in Germany or Switzerland. When he is back in the desert, though,

Arends lives off the grid in a house he built. And there the artist is surrounded by the silence of his own 90 acres plus the thousands of others that don't belong to him. That land comes with the aridity of a high and dry life with little rainfall and virtually no snowfall, and in the far distance are the Manzano Mountains off to the northwest with the occasional line of a freight train passing slowly on its way to or from West Texas; the train looks like a long, shiny snake moving slowly on the horizon.

Arends' house is not all that big but, with its many windows and its immediate segues into light and space, it feels more like being on the outside than being sequestered within. And strange as it may seem, when you can tear yourself away from the views, Arends might offer you a book on the frescos of Piero della Francesca in order to explain a certain color blue that he is partial to on his painted cubes. As a matter of fact, Arends has dedicated a particular body of work, his PDF series, to that early Renaissance artist and his iconic use of the color. As easily as the art of Piero comes into focus out there on the plains of Willard, so does the conversation shift to the stuffed crow on the artist's studio wall—an object given to him by his father who was, no doubt, close by when Arends was born in Waterloo, Iowa. As the crow flies, Waterloo is indeed far away from Willard and farther still from the Villa Panza in Milan, Italy, and its prestigious Panza Collection, in which Arends' work feels right at home. Pieces by the artist are also in the collection of places like the Whitney Museum, the Corcoran Gallery, and the Lannan Foundation, based in Santa Fe.

I had for a long time thought of Arends as a sculptor who painted, but this is not the case. The artist began painting at an early age in the middle of Iowa farmland. Eventually his painting brought him to

art school in Colorado, then to a residency in Banff, Canada, followed by graduate school at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Arends came of age in the era of Punk, Postmodernism, and the on the wall/off the wall debates going on in the art schools of the 1970s and '80s. For Arends, participating in that art school dialectic meant attempting to get to the essential components of what constituted a painting. There is an anecdote he relates about holding a painting in his hands and being struck by its support system and how the balance shifted from the painting to its frame; it was the hefty physicality of the frame that made the painting seem like an illusion.

From that point, Arends began to swerve away from the traditional concerns of a painter and readjust his focus. He states, "I wasn't interested in sculpture, I'm a painter, and I wanted to go into the painting space so I projected the canvas out." Needless to say, projecting the canvas out meant creating a painting in three dimensions—four if you include all the time spent in deliberation, in making adjustments large and small, in studying a painted object as it protruded into space and was modulated by the power of ambient light. Arends could have thought about his initial paintings-as-cubes in terms of an imposing scale, but he did not go in that direction. If scale is an indicator of psychological need, Arends' boxes, cubes and wedges range in size from small to very small to tiny, all the better to establish intimate relationships with the artist's vision and the discerning choices he has made over time in terms of colors, textures, shadows and reflections.

The first wall pieces by Arends that I remember seeing were cubes painted with wax and oil on wood or steel, and they were about three inches on a side—tiny by any standard. Yet his work was unusually compelling. There was, in spite of his colorful palette reminiscent of a pack of Life Savers, a tendency for this work to break ranks with its surface accessibility and pull the viewer into a kind of aesthetic box canyon—no pun intended. Once inside the canyon, with its sheer walls and limited exit strategies, the viewer was left to figure out how these diminutive artworks could create such a weighty philosophical debate, such a craving to comprehend their genesis. Understanding the sculpture of Donald Judd was easy by comparison because Judd's work takes up so much space and, whether you want it to or not, it demands you pay attention. Arends' work makes no such demands but seduces the viewer like a case of love at first sight, like opposites attracting—appealing surface meets inscrutable object, strange alchemy resulting.

In a review of an Arends' exhibition in Santa Fe in 2007, at James Kelly Contemporary, John Yau wrote in *The Brooklyn Rail*, "For Arends, formal issues didn't mean achieving optical illusion at the expense of tactility or vice versa. If anything, he wanted the optical and the physical to be inseparable, which ultimately suggests that the informing impulse in his work is erotic.... [His] rigorous restating of formalism's privileging of the optical is philosophical rather than purely aesthetic; it speaks to issues of the heart."

In the autumn of 2012, Arends had a show at Isaac's Gallery in Roswell, the town that first introduced him to life in the Southwest desert 30 years ago. Featured were works on paper from the 1990s and selected pieces from five series of the last 10 years: PDF, Winfred, Wedges, Unfolded, and La Stanza del Amore.

If the artist's early painted boxes were products of a formalist struggle that addressed issues particular to painting, one of his later series, *Winfred*, deals with information that is both historical and personal. *Winfred* refers to a town in South Dakota where his grandparents and his mother moved looking for a new life in the Dust Bowl years. Using wax and pigment on small blocks whose largest size is 10 by six by three inches, Arends repeatedly painted numbers in white on a dark gray, red, or blue ground. The numbers actually referred to years like 1932, 1933, or 1940—years of the Great Depression with its failed crops, disrupted lives, and poverty—and this was his mother's generation as a child. Initially, the numbers don't read as specific years, they run together as patterns that are, at first, confounding. Staying with the work, though, allows the poignancy of that era to leak out of its containment within this work in high relief. Arends' family history is treated emblematically as a personal and universal time frame with its familial continuity from which the artist can and does draw inspiration.

The series *La Stanza del Amore* (The Room of Love—more or less referring to the master's bedroom) has its origins on quite another platform, that of the affluence of an Italian palazzo, with its own set of historical and aristocratic referents. The *La Stanza del Amore* pieces are box forms set on top of one another and painted with stripes in wax and oil on wood. However, each form contains a slightly staggered set of stripes in, for example, red, bright blue, or black on white so that as one line of color meets the stripes in the box below, the blue, for instance, is met with white; the colored stripes are not continuous vertical lines. Arends took this broken-stripe pattern from the designated field area of a coat of arms attached to a particular palazzo; the woman who lived there had commissioned the artist to do a piece for her and, in this case, he took his inspiration not from the privations of an American Dust Bowl existence, but from the signifiers of European gentry and their privileged lifestyles.

Arends is someone who has navigated as the crow flies from his years as a young painter to his maturity as an artist, if not exactly in a straight line, then with a strong sense of intuitive precision nonetheless. And from Waterloo to Willard has meant a few Italian cities in between such as Verona, where the artist will be having an exhibition of new work, the *Stormy Monday* series, in the fall of 2013 at Studio La Città.

The artist once said, "I look on the paint I use like blood, the wax like flesh, the wood and steel like bone." Rather than make a career in formalist nitpicking, whose modulations can be aesthetically incestuous and tiresome, Arends has worked another vein of artistic inquiry. He isn't interested in splitting the hairs of Minimalism in a hermetically sealed practice, but in transforming the influences that made him who he is and the affinities to which he gravitates. In contrast to the arid desert ecology that surrounds him, the artist lives in the fluid nature of his desires—desires for visual equivalencies that best express his lifetime of being an artist and letting his idiosyncratic gravitational fields pull on him slowly, from deep within.

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