ARTS AND CULTURE

Artist Up Close: Anthony Campuzano

By Katherine Rochester
Posted Aug. 15, 2012

Anthony Campuzano may have moved to New York with $150 in his pocket; broken up with his girlfriend, witnessed a murder and lived through 9/11; but when he threw in the towel to move back to Philly eight years ago, his career finally took off. Between completing a slew of projects thanks to a fellowship from Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, curating his own show—currently on view at Fleisher Ollman Gallery through Friday, Aug. 24—and making work for a group show in New York, PW got Campuzano to talk about what it takes to make those meticulously crafted drawings that put him on the map.

What's your relationship to the studio?
When I moved back from New York, I had a studio at my parents' house in the basement. And then I was contacted around 2007 to have a studio visit with senior curator Ingrid Schaffner at the Institute of Contemporary Art. I was totally excited but terrified of trying to explain what I do with piles of laundry around me. So I was talking with a friend of mine I went to school with, and she had a studio that she was using for storage. I told her my plight, and she basically let me use her studio. It was funny having the studio visit because it was basically the first time I was in a studio, and there I was explaining how it all worked! But it's been great. After my friend fully moved away, I rented it. But I continue to have an office at the house and a studio in the basement. I get overwhelmed about starting ideas, and I hang on to things for a while. That's why I have all these surrogate studios because then I'm just working on one thing at a time.

Does the work ever migrate between studios?
Yeah, particularly the drawings. The largest I usually work on is like 30 or 40 inches. I have this issue about wanting to be able to touch the whole surface at once. And that's about the length of an arm, so that I can do a fully unbroken line. I like to use board because it's absorbent, and you can really kind of dig into it so marks stick. The board is also the type of size that I could put in a bag and tote on the subway, which is good because I go back and forth often. And sometimes, part of the work that I've shown in Philadelphia and elsewhere gets incorporated into other work. A lot of times I'll photograph a piece and realize that I want to do it again, and then I'll do another version. The original work doesn't get exhibited, but maybe a photograph of an element of it is reproduced within the next work.

How do you decide what to collect, and how do you incorporate it?
I'm always on, I'm always looking, and I kind of make rules for myself. I don't erase; I only build with my work. So it's making choices and being observant about what you're doing. I don't add water. I don't dilute. That's one of the reasons I like to use the illustration board because I like to use materials at their purest. And the only thing that's modulated or mediated is the mark, the intensity: how light or how hard I can make the mark. But there's no manipulation of the material beyond that.

Do you feel like that comes out of your interest in found writing and borrowed words?
Borrowing from my earlier work is like cutting out the best paragraph of a story. In school, I was telling stories about why I'd arranged certain objects. I started writing notes for all my work, sort of annotations. Slowly, the annotations became just what they were: They became the art. That's kind of the bulk of what I do—trying to make these pictures that are basically stories or arrangements of words and letter that are whole, so that the letters become a cohesive picture of painting.

How did you start making these word-based drawings?
I had a period of time in college where I was a pretty decent painter, but I got to this point where I quit. I was taking these conceptual sculpture classes, and I found that there were ideas that I could talk about which came from the newsstand, which came from this idea of writing that I was interested in. I was just interested in a lot of these other conceptual artists that I had never heard of before. I had one great teacher, Paul Ramirez Jonas and also Amy Hauft, who really exposed me to current work like Jason Rhoades, Fischl and Weiss, and people who were just showing then, in the mid-1990s. So I just quit painting; I just made drawings and photocopies. And then three years later, I ended up at Skowhegan [a summer residency for emerging artists] as a sculptor. I was doing things like a piece of construction paper on the floor, a photocopied handbill where I try to describe who I am.

So it was basically just sculpture in name only?
Yeah, it was a purging, too. I was trying to find the essence of things. So I made this towel, but it was a found towel that I carved by trimming into it, carving words into it. I just made weird stuff. It's actually an interesting thing; I wish I had it to show you. And at the same time, I was also telling stories about why I'd arranged certain objects. Slowly, the annotations became just what they were: They became the art. That's kind of the bulk of what I do: trying to make these pictures that are basically stories or arrangements of words and letter that are whole, so that the letters become a cohesive picture of painting.
One of the objects in my thesis show was this filmstrip I made where I saved the five-day forecast for a number of months from this local paper out in the suburbs. The five-day forecast is about the size of a 16mm film frame, and so I cut them out, laminated them and taped them together in a line to resemble a filmstrip. I stored the strip in a film canister. It was a great object to me because I had this moment with my mother where she was collecting the Tetley Tea figurines, and I remember being like, "They're so stupid, why are you collecting them?" But my mother would have these little printer block cases in the kitchen where she would arrange them. So as a goof, I started collecting the weather and arranging it in these cases as this thing that's so valuable but loses its value as soon as it happens. For example, the weather report pre-Katrina, in hindsight, was very valuable. But now, it's worthless.

It's a question of accuracy, too.
Yeah, that's the interesting thing about the five-day forecast. Wednesday's forecast on Monday is one thing, but on Tuesday, it's slightly different. So I had this filmstrip, and I had exhibited it in the gallery. I always thought it would be interesting to make it into an actual film.

Did you ever try to do that?
I'm happy to say that this summer, it is being made into a film. Rachel Churner [of Churner and Churner Gallery, in New York] had seen that piece and knew I'd always liked it. I'd always take it with me to art lectures. I think it's a piece that gets at some of the essential things that I do: observation, editing and material. It's also portable. So Rachel found the guy who can help us convert it, and we're going to do it.

What is going to be involved in converting this five-day forecast piece into a film?
It's actually almost exactly how I was thinking I'd have to do it back when I made it in 1998, just a little easier with digital and computer technology. We're going to scan every frame, front and back. Then make, like, 70 images of every frame, print it on film, and stitch it together. There will be two sections to the film. Part One is all the forecasts, and then it goes to the back and shows the back of the forecasts. I think the film is going to be about two minutes long. The idea of the film is that it will loop. It's really exciting.

I remember talking to you a while ago about your decision to move back from New York to Philly and how part of that was because you felt like you didn't have time to produce. Can elaborate on that?
I had been here in Philly; I graduated, and then I got into Skowhegan. It was the greatest experience of my life. It changed me, made me the artist I am today. Eighty percent of the people at Skowhegan moved to New York. So it was just like, I'd just spent the summer with all these great people and realized, "Holy shit, I could live with them in New York!" But I had no money. Luckily, the artist Fred Tomasseli needed a painting moved and a bunch of us at Skowhegan rented a truck. I didn't even drive, but I somehow got roped into it. We sold extra spots in the truck to people who needed other stuff moved to New York, so I made like $100-$150 and that was all the money I had when I moved to New York.
The first year and half was awesome, and then the rest was just a slow slide. I witnessed a murder, my girlfriend broke up with me, and then the World Trade Center fell down, and, you know, I was like, "New York is the worst place in the world. My life is terrible!" But I kept going to galleries and seeing museums, and I was still engaged with a lot of people I had gone to school with. At a certain point, I realized I had a lot of friends and a lot of connections, but I couldn't articulate myself. When I came to Philadelphia in early 2004 is when I could really process and started to make actual work.

Are you still feeling like Philly is a good base for you?
Yeah. In terms of making work, I'm still at a point where I'm still struggling with figuring out how to do it. It still takes a lot of time, and I'm not as productive as I should be. I'm still trying to balance that: thinking about the work, searching for the work—and delivering, getting it done. Sometimes I'm indulgent about thinking about these things, but I have to be because I feel like it is the strength of the work. When the work is there, it's because it's gone through a lot of thought and process. I know if I lived in New York right now, that would be even harder just because of the expense and the distractions. I go to New York twice a month, and I want to go to everything. I mean, I know who I am. I'm guy that's going to movies, concerts, art shows—I just want to be there and see things. And you've to have to have restraint. So, it is good to be here. There are times I do wish I was there. But you can't second guess yourself. You'll go crazy.

You just curated a show at Fleisher Ollman Gallery. How did it feel to be in the curatorial role as someone who usually operates an artist?

It was the best. There were all these things about looking and finding relationships between artworks. Also, it was just pure selfishness. For example, my friend has this really great dice collection, and he would send me the editions online. I hadn't been out to L.A. in three years, and I just wanted to see all the dice together. So I convinced him to show it in the show. Artists like Anissa Mack had these two great pieces that are related to each other but that had never been shown together. Well, I wanted to be the first one to put them together in the same room. I want to see good things put together, and that's why I put together the show. I'm not trying to do this sort of thing all the time, but this year has been an interesting diversion from the studio.

You did not go to graduate school. Do you think artists should or shouldn't get MFAs?
Some should definitely, and some shouldn't definitely. I didn't, and then these other things happened that have actually replaced it. Right after Skowhegan, I was urged to go to grad school by many people. But I just didn't have the money. I'm not the most organized person.

But you're so meticulous!
I'll say it like this: I'm a Braque man, like Picasso-Braque. You know, they founded cubism. The difference between Picasso and Braque is, Picasso took something and then took it apart, you know, fucked it up. Braque took fucked up things and tried to order them. My life is kind of in shambles at all times. I try to make sense of it and put it together. When I do this [through art], I become highly organized and highly observant. And if I had a slightly different personality, I think I would have done good in grad school, and it would have helped me. But the whole initial effort to get your finances together and get the application together, it was just beyond my reach at that point. Four years in New York and then Skowhegan, that's my grad school. That was six years.

You were describing your organization and disorganization, using the example of Braque bring together or making sense of messed up things. You did that to the extreme, once, when you made a drawing to process the murder you witnessed in New York, in 2001.
It took me a long time. I didn't make it until 2010. When I was asked to do the show at Churner and Churner in 2011, that was 10 years after the murder. A lot of time had passed, but it was still fresh for me. So I just worked on writing this really taut and concise yet expressive poem—it's only like a paragraph and a half, and then repeats itself twice. Lenora McDuffy is the subject, and she was the girl who was murdered. She was 18. I was an eyewitness. I went to the trial. It rocked me, I mean, to the point that when 9/11 happened, I was already emotionally troubled and so that was just like, "Oh, that's

just Tuesday." I was already so emotionally damaged from Lenora's death.
I mean, it was crazy. It was a great piece to make. I've also been working on another version of it, where the colors are darker. I've been working on a series of works called "At Night," so it's as if the work was viewed at night. All the colors are darker, everything more obscured. Now that I've done the really legible one about the murder, I'm interested in receding it. It was tough to start it, though, because it's an emotional piece, and I kind of don't want to be around that anymore. It's heavy. It's hard.

A Complete Die, etc., runs through Aug. 24, Fleisher Ollman Gallery, 1616 Walnut St. 215.545.7562. fleisherollman.com

Read more: http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/arts-and-culture/Artist-Up-Close-Anthony-Campuzano-166169836.html?page=2&comments=1&showAll=#ixzz2O6kz0pdd