Interview with Brian Tolle
by Carlos Motta

artwurl.org, INT018

The sculptural work of Brian Tolle is accessible and complex. His structures look like familiar objects, though at closer examination, this very familiarity calls for further investigation. Tolle's use of historical references and modes of construction along with his choice of materials produces works that invite the viewer to question the very foundation of what he/she is seeing. Brian Tolle's art practice in not exclusively confined to the studio, he's also made public artworks for a number of years. Tolle designed *The Irish Hunger Memorial* in New York City; a work dedicated to the Irish Famine and World Hunger and was included in The Whitney Biennial in Central Park 2002.

Carlos Motta: A strong characteristic of your public art projects, *The Irish Hunger Memorial* and the*Witch Catcher* (currently on view in lower Manhattan), as well as of your sculptural pieces, is the utmost careful attention given to the use of materials. The craft of these works seems to be an essential formal quality that highly influences their conceptual reading. Let me start at the beginning, could you speak about your formal background and the development of your ideas about materials and materiality?

Brian Tolle: In the beginning my approach to materials was very matter-of-fact. I was interested in understanding an object through living with it, through its recreation and ultimately through its possession. Because of the form that some of my earlier works took (furniture and historical objects) I had to teach myself traditional cabinetry. Often, it was really about trying to convey an image through form; and in cases that image was not achievable by using "authentic materials"; for example when something appeared to made out of wood it didn't necessarily need to be made out of that material. I had to find the most economical way of producing these objects, because I was producing them on my own and because these things had to be manageable for purposes of installation. It is important for me that viewers understand that I've tried to be as fluid with materials as possible. Materials must serve the work. This is not to say that making a brick out of styrofoam is the same thing as using the actual brick. That's certainly not the case.

CM: The *Witch Catcher*, as an example of your works made in styrofoam, presents a "large-scale brick chimney, twisting 25 feet into the air, surrounded by the foundation of a depicted 17th century New England house". I am interested in your sculptural choices (a chimney, a frame, a farm house...) and in the manipulation of materials to "simulate", rather than "represent" them. This collision of the fictional and the real makes me wonder about the idea of communicating your conceptual concerns through a sort of formal artifice or *tromp l'oeil* effect.

BT: I think artifice is a better word than *tromp l'oeil*. *Tromp l'oeil* is used to give the impression that something is made of something else; it's very much about the surface. I move in and out of working with actual or synthetic materials, just to problematize the value that's placed on one versus the other. Often works are limited to being only about simulation. I've never given simulation that much weight in my work. If the way to make an image, piece or sculpture work means to make it out of an actual or synthetic material, then so be it. No one can ever actually limit the interpretation the work to one branch of discourse or the other. In the case of a piece like *Witch Catcher*, there are a number of collisions that are happening. One is the authority that some people give to history, that is to say the presentation that you just quoted about the 17th Century New England house for example. To a certain level that text (drafted by *Public Artfund* with my consultation) frames how people understand the work. Then there's the experience of actually walking up to this kind of object that has been given this kind of authority, knocking on it and realizing that it is hollow, that its defies the materiality that one might expect.

CM: It seems to me that these structures function as symbols of historical modes of construction, a basis of socio-economic foundations. Could you speak about the historical reference in your work? Is this the premise of what you've called "research based artwork"?

BT: History functions for me like a raw material. The idea of research as it applies to my work is really about a level of engagement or captivation. Things that catch my attention often come to me in the form of a historical text, object or situation. But it really is about a fascination. I don't approach history trying to prove a theory. I don't come at it as way of justifying the meaning or integrity of the work. I will approach a subject if it grabs my attention for long enough and then trust that I am on an interesting path. Over time this relationship grows more intense and matures. If I am lucky enough something materializes in the form of a work, yet this is something I can't predict. In other words, I am not trying to assume the role of a historian. It would be arrogant on my part to suggest that I am trained in a way to decipher or present history in an authoritative manner.

CM: The historical reference becomes particularly essential in a work such as *The Irish Hunger Memorial*. Tell me about the transition from making objects to working on a public project of this sort.

BT: There are many kinds of histories. One that we all reckon with as artists is the history of presentation, the history of the white cube and of the exhibition space. When I made work for presentation in those sorts of spaces, the historical aspect was understood as being one of the subtexts within the work. But in work framed in an institution such as a gallery, the authority of history is suspended, visitors can approach it in a freer way than if one should happen upon a work in a civic or public space. Particularly with a work that is a memorial. The biggest

concern for me when I was asked to consider making *The Irish Hunger Memorial* was what was it going to mean for me to produce something traditionally designed to last for a very long time but is not been mediated by any particular institution like a gallery or museum and might, in fact, be deemed historical. My previous public projects were temporary works that functioned for a specified period of time, but the memorial demanded different considerations. How to make this project flexible and responsive enough that it doesn't become a static image? The idea of making work that uses history as part of its content is very different from making something that actually might be understood as history or historical.

CM: It could be said that all of your works deal with memory: historical, collective, political, public and/or personal. *The Irish Hunger Memorial*, conceived as a memorial, specifically addresses all of the above mentioned. It was conceived as a commemorative memorial to a past event, the Irish Famine, but also as a contemporary monument dedicated to world hunger. Tell me about the process of directing the understanding of this work from the historical as well as present perspectives on world hunger.

BT: Public artwork is often presented to the public and contextualized by use of, lets say, in the case of The *Witch Catcher* a text panel, and in the case of *Eureka*, a catalog. In the case of the *The Irish Hunger Memorial*, it didn't seem to make any sense to have a text panel explaining the meaning of a memorial. I think the meaning is either implicit or not implicit. There is a curious relationship between the way that I've chosen to present the text in the case of the memorial and the way I've constructed the image that is the memorial. You can't have one without the other. The image of the memorial is something that is going to require maintenance. The landscape that's presented there is something that needs to be nurtured.

The text was a big challenge because I didn't want, as an artist, to be responsible for the official interpretation of the Irish Famine and the politics of world hunger in 2002. I didn't think that I had the requisite knowledge or background. But I did recognize it was important that certain ideas were communicated and available to the public. The solution was to present the text in an a-historical manner, that is to say, it is not presented chronologically, it's a stratified and very forced linear presentation. At the moment there are 110 citations or pieces of information and not one dominates the others, moreover there's no opportunity for one to escape the presence of the others. One might approach the memorial on a certain day and happen to find a particular phrase that is moving or beautiful; and that might frame the way somebody understands the piece. Or someone else might happen upon a citation and not completely understand its relation to the memorial; it might be a piece of statistical information about obesity in children in America in 2002, for example.

CM: How was the text chosen?

BT: It was a collaboration between Maureen Murphy, who wrote the New York State curriculum on world hunger for school children of the state, and myself. Battery Park City Authority hired her as an outside consultant. Maureen was instrumental for me in terms of directing me toward the kinds of places in Ireland that I was interested in seeing and taking a direction to as many different points of view as possible.

The text in the memorial is not presented permanently, that is to say it is not engraved in stone or cast in bronze. It is silk-screened onto bands of glass and installed from behind, casting a shadow. That enabled me to create the text very cheaply, quickly and easy to install. The idea is that each year the text in the memorial will be reviewed and new information will be presented as it becomes appropriate.

CM: A thing that struck me when I visited the memorial was the directed trajectory from the ground level in which the text is present as the foundation for the whole structure, through a passageway in which a voice coming from an audio recording narrates historical facts, to the upper level in which the ruins of a cottage rest in the midst of a recreated landscape. One reaches at the top of the memorial a platform which overviews New York City's lower Manhattan. The platform functions a place for reflection about the issues presented on the ground level. This trajectory became really interesting as it confronted me with a set of contradictions, that is, I was invited to witness an open-ended interpretation of the Irish Famine but at the same time to reflect about world hunger in the heart of the world's financial center.

BT: Battery Park City was initially built from the excavation of the World Trade Center's foundation and is a completely artificial landscape. Its artificiality is particularly interesting to me for in a way it exposes or suggests that maybe we should question the very foundation that we find ourselves standing on. The site that was allocated for the memorial was a traffic circle at the center of one of the most important settings of capitalism and world commerce. It seemed to me that those relationships were quite abstract. However, hunger is not abstract. It is a fundamental problem of human condition. If you don't eat you die. When I was asked to consider making this memorial, my initial response was that the money should be given to an organization that would do immediate good with it. They said: "we think that if this artwork is successful it will do more good for it is going to inspire people, its going to motivate and impulse people to do something, if it succeeds in it mission". I began to think about that. One of the things I think that is striking about the memorial is this harsh juxtaposition. It is a stark reminder of what is basic and essential, while surrounded by architecture symbolic of power. The fact that someone has decided to dedicate this piece of real state for the purpose of pausing and thinking about world hunger is an extraordinary thing.

CM: From an earlier conversation I know you were working on site on 9/11 and had to return to work less than two weeks after that day. Did living through this

event influence your way of thinking about the *The Irish Hunger Memorial*? What were your ideas about memorializing human suffering and death in the midst of an occurrence, which caused so much suffering and took so many lives?

BT: ... I am pausing because it always surprises me when someone asks this question because I think I have an answer and then I stop myself and realize that I don't really fully understand the relationship at this point. I can tell you that I initially didn't think about returning to the site. I evacuated the area like many other people did and when I finally reached safety and had access to a TV set one of the things that was most shocking to me was seeing Site 26, which is the site just across the street from the WTC and also the place where we had been storing all of the stone materials for the memorial. I was surprised to see that in the early hours of the disaster that those stones has been accounted for, that someone had actually put police tape around them. It was such a strong image to see the total destruction of the buildings, this heap of devastation and ... why on earth in all of this did somebody think that these stones were important? And they were important.

The next question was, will you go back to work? I got calls a few weeks later saying that they were preparing to resume construction and that I should return in my role. I made the decision to go back and it was important since we were one of two active construction sites in lower Manhattan after the disaster. While all the energy was directed to finding bodies and cleaning up the mess we were actually putting something back, building something, making something new. I convinced myself at a certain point that I had a positive purpose.

There's a certain arrogance in assuming that a new tragedy is the worst tragedy, but because you or I experienced the disasters of September 11th, and its sounds a bit awkward, but is that worse than the tens of thousands of people that starved to death because of political manipulation of access to land, ancient hatreds or religious beliefs? Is it any worse than the million people who suffered 150 years ago in Ireland? It is a different kind of tragedy and suffering. What I am trying to suggest is that I thought that it was arrogant to qualify a life and how a life was lost or taken just because I experienced it.

CM: Tell me about your contribution to the 2002 Whitney Biennial, the piece *Waylay*, in Central Park.

BT: *Waylay* means to ambush. I really like the word because it has kind lyrical sound to it but in fact it means to stalk. If you *Waylay* something you basically take it by surprise. It was a tremendous honor to be invited by The Public Art Fund and the Whitney Museum to make a work in Central Park. I say an honor because Central Park really has not been a site for public art for a long time. This is in large part due to a reaction to a proposal by Christo and Jean Claude in the early 70's to produce a very large-scale gate project, which was viewed with some alarm. Not only was the work not permitted but it sparked a debate about how art

was to function in Central Park, which was deemed by its creator Olmsted as a work of art. Departing from the idea that the park itself is a work of art, I as a sculptor was not interested in injecting a sculptural object into it. Thinking about the history of the park as raw material I asked myself how to make something that manipulates it in a way that is meaningful without necessarily creating a kind of dissonant relationship between the object and the park.

The idea behind *Waylay* was to create a disturbance in the water; let's call it a splash. I installed 50 pumps throughout a 300-foot area around the Bow Bridge, which were controlled by a personal computer. I could design and alter the splash patterns in the water. Sometimes the water would be tranquil, smooth and flat. At other times there would be a series of theatrical splashes. It was really about trying to use this very familiar language that people expected to find at a place like a lake in a park but manipulate it just enough to make them raise questions about how and why this is occurring. They were invited to invent their own narrative, whatever that might be.

CM: Do you have any projects for an "inside" space, a gallery or studio?

BT: I produced a lot of public work during the time that I was working at the memorial but I wasn't really able to commit myself to making something for a studio or a gallery. It took me a long time to wean myself from thinking about art and how it functions in a public space. During this time I became very interested in place called Levittown, which was a huge development that began after the Second World War on Long Island; 17500 houses were built to accommodate the returning near veterans of the war. These were basic structures; it is interesting how they provided a minimal amenity. On a small plot of land, a very simple house was made to be very affordable, and of course, there are many sociological and political things that come into play. I've been involved with this project for a while and right now I am getting to a point in which I am beginning to express some of these ideas through sculptural forms. More than likely I will show this in due course at Shoshanna Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles.

*

Brian Tolle is an artist living in New York City. btollestudio@hotmail.com

Carlos Motta is an artist based in New York City. He is the editor of artwurl.org