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RIGHT BACK ATCHA

A CONVERSATION WITH GREGORY COATES



Gregory Coates, *My Cloud*, 2017, interactive mixed media installation.

With the exhibition “Right Back Atcha,” N’Namdi Contemporary in Miami presents 12 works and installations by Gregory Coates from 2016 to 2020. According to the gallery, the solo exhibition that includes many new works created during and titled in reference to the pandemic “explores the nuanced ways in which tools of labor can define and redefine personal, social, and cultural histories.” Through the use of objects and materials such as ironing boards, brooms and records—whether in an altered state through the application of paint or contextualization within the gallery space—Coates investigates notions of utility and material possession but also materiality itself.

Gregory Coates, born in Washington D.C., currently lives and works in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The graduate of Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine has worked and exhibited across the world including Gasworks in London, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Triangle Workshops in Cape Town, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Coates’ artwork is included in museum collections such as the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, The Virginia Museum of Art, and the Paul Pozozza Museum in Düsseldorf, as well as many corporate and private collections.

BY HEIKE DEMPSTER



Gregory Coates, *Essential Workers #4*, 2020, mixed media ironing board covers, 54" x 14" each cover.

Heike Dempster - The exhibition is described as a “return to materiality.” Can you elaborate on this notion? Materiality seems to have been a primary focus of your practice for some time. Are there any shifts in your approach to subject matter or process that push the idea of materiality into a different space?

Gregory Coates - I am not sure where that statement came from. As you note my work has been about material as subject for over at least the last 20 years. With some shifts in and out of more painterly approaches and—for a lack of a better word—sculptural approaches. This show “Right Back Atcha” is pretty much indicative of the range of how I approach making work. Sometimes I leave the material raw, as I found it like with the ironing board covers, because they present a statement on their own that I find worth sharing, or sometimes I paint the surface.

H.D. - What aspects of the material itself matters most to you? Are your considerations textural, or based on form, color or function?

G.C. - I like different material for different reason—again the ironing board covers because they speak for themselves as an iconic shape and also because it is an object of everyday life, rubber—back in the late 1980s I discovered on the floor of a bike store and decided that was an interesting material to work with, partly because it seemed to be available in abundance and the repetitive application of the rubber to create texture and line suited me. It still does. I make similar considerations with the newer works of brushes. With the brushes, I like the surface which allows the paint to sit up high and it creates cavities which present unique depth. So I guess my considerations are primarily textural.

H.D. - Even if you choose to focus your artistic explorations on materi-

ality as subject matter, where does the conceptual investigation begin?

G.C. - It begins at discovery of the material and where I find it – in everyday life, in thrift stores in storage rooms or dumpsters.

H.D. - Your use of everyday objects adds layers of meaning to their basic form and function—aesthetically as well as conceptually—what would you say is your intention? Is there a focus on creating conversations around daily life or is there a push towards a contribution to a narrative on perceptions of art or art history?

G.C. - That’s a really good question. Good insight into my work. Well, I don’t make art with intentions other than following the process to what I deem completed or successful. But of course, I like to make a contribution to art history.

H.D. - Considering this interest in art history, and thinking of the many important current conversations around who writes this history and who controls the context through which it is presented and perceived, have you shifted your way of thinking as an artist recently?

G.C. - No. I always felt I was making a statement as an artist and my statement is visual. I am an artist of color and my experiences growing up and becoming an artist, and for that matter, being an artist are informed by the life I live(d) and the times I lived in. I feel, while maybe my voice may not be as recognized as other’s, my work is a vital part of the conversation. I am an artist, I make art that’s the conversations. That’s all I can control. But I do ask the question: Who owns my culture?

H.D. - What significance do you place on cultural context?

G.C. - This is some deep stuff you are asking... Let’s see: We don’t





Gregory Coates, *My Big Brown Peace*, 2019, deck brush and acrylic, 76" x 253".



Gregory Coates, *Delia Bar NYC*, 2019, feathers acrylic on wood, 24" diam.

live in a vacuum. My work is affected by life. I don't really think about cultural context because I am living in it. I just make the art that presents itself to me. Historians can place it in context. Having said that, I appeal to a broader sense of humanity that I hope will transcend into a larger context.

H.D. - In your opinion, is there such a thing as intentional fallacy? Do the artist and viewer need to share in their understanding of the artistic language?

G.C. - Maybe, but not for me. My work wants the viewer to bring their own response. There is a lot of room for visceral reaction, there are, if you choose to engage, layers of meaning, and the meaning of things are different for different individuals. I draw from my own experience as a starting point for the viewer to engage, their experience of my work is entirely their own. Free world and all that... Also, I am entirely too lazy to figure out what people should think.

H.D. - In your current exhibition, we see objects such as the ironing boards, records, and bristle brushes. How much do you consider the history of the materials you use? Not just the exact items you incorporate individually but also thinking about what they represent/could represent beyond that as markers of society, culture, time and place?

G.C. - I thrive on the history of the materials I use, also as a marker of time of my history that I share with others. I don't really set out with a plan of what impact "the object" might, or should have. I just find myself drawn to it, so I use it and often it takes off into different interpretations—even I interpret differently at times—depends on what goes on that day.

H.D. - Do you consider the placement of utility items and their claiming of space in the gallery/museum or even a collector's home, which would certainly shift the narrative?

G.C. - Yes, I like the elevation of it.

H.D. - Do any of the objects you choose have a personal significance to you?

G.C. - Everything is personal. Material speaks to me, sometimes on a more personal level—sometimes on an aesthetic level, sometimes because it is there and it presents a challenge. And the more I engage the more personal things become. Bicycle inner tube pieces have a personal significance. I equate them with riding a bike, and learning how to ride a bike, how the first time without training wheels a moment of victory on a bike. Something we all can remember and celebrate. Feathers are personal because I discovered them when I was grieving for my wife's



Gregory Coates, *Shelter in Place*, 2020, deck brushes and acrylic, 20" x 10."



Gregory Coates, *Kinky Series, Push on Up*, 2020, deck brushes and acrylic, 22" x 20".

father. Ironing boards are personal because they remind me of early mornings getting ready for school. Mistakes are personal (referring to the ball drawings). In general, I find myself having empathy for the materials I use. They were once used and/or owned by someone and then left behind. When I repurpose the material it is to say, “consider this.”

H.D. - When and why did you first start working with the brushes as “your canvas.”

G.C. - As the story goes: Joseph Beuys exhibited a soiled bathtub back in the late 1980s at the Düsseldorf Fine Art Academy. The museum’s cleaning lady washed it, thereby “destroying the art.” At the time, my wife and I were living in Düsseldorf, behind the train station. While there was a collective gasp in the art community, my wife and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for the cleaning lady. Many years later, in 2016, I had some discarded brushes in my studio and was thinking about the scrubbing of the tub incident so I decided to make brushes for Beuys, then I made some more for my wife and then when I had some money I decided to make larger scale pieces—no longer for Beuys.

H.D. - Does the space of creation and exhibition play any role in your process?

G.C. - Sometimes. I do like site specific work. Like in Verbier, Swit-

zerland on top of a glacier, an outdoor piece (*Fences*). You have to deal with a spectacular setting. I did a lot of site-specific work in Japan. And the Japanese present lots of challenges. For example, at the Kamigamo Shrine (a World Heritage Site) I couldn’t use fasteners on walls or ceilings it presented a serious challenge, which I overcame. But in my studio I work on ideas, often different things at the same time. Sometimes they ship to a show sometimes they ship later. Sometimes they provide the basis for a show I then make for a specific space. I like doing it all.

H.D. - What aspects of your explorations are communicated via the paint vs the sculptural elements?

G.C. - It’s a marriage. Color seduces, texture informs.

H.D. - Can you speak more on the color choices we see in the works in “Right Back Atcha!”

G.C. - My colors are often arbitrary, I work mostly monochromatically because I like the work to draw in rather than come at you. With the large “brown peace” I left the bristle color alone. There can be interpretation of brown is beautiful as it is and there is natural negative space and texture, I just wanted to leave that be, and the scale of it does engage you differently, so I think it works “un-manipulated.”



Gregory Coates, *Mistakes*, 2010-2020, mixed media interactives.

I wanted the brown to own itself. Also of course the blue is what could be considered my signature blue (me and Yves Kline). I like the visceral effect of blue and I think many viewers would agree. I don't think of color as a symbol but rather a way to draw you in. Blue is the color of trust, the sky and the ocean. It is such a universal color with meaning upon meaning all of which is personal to the individual.

H.D. - Many titles of works in the show seem to reference the pandemic. You have a series of *Essential Workers* pieces and one titled *Shelter in Place*. What has your experience been during this pandemic?

G.C. - This show "Right Back Atcha!" was originally scheduled for April 2020, when we all hunkered down. In the end, we decided to go ahead and ship the show in August 2020 and I haven't actually seen the work in the space. These titles are a nod to where we are in time, and a nod to those that keep us afloat, during and hopefully soon past the pandemic.

H.D. - Have you reconsidered or had to reconsider ideas around home, space, utility objects?

G.C. - Luckily not so much. I live and work in the same place in Allentown, PA and stuff I needed was shippable and the thrift store where I buy some of my supplies was open, too. I had friends in Brooklyn and

New Jersey that couldn't get to their studios for weeks. I can't imagine!

H.D. - Which records did you use for the installation *My Cloud*? Is there any significance to the music beyond the material of the record?

G.C. - My neighbor who guts houses had brought those records to me. I realized this was someone's record collection. I couldn't bring myself to through them out so I decided to honor the person's music by symbolically creating a cloud where (in the digital age) music lives. There is something intriguing in exploring someone's music collection. This piece is about how we share experiences, how we may at one point or another share in the same music. And like clouds, music travels.

H.D. - Talking about your more recent work, have there been any shifts in practice or approach to materiality, process or subject matter that we have not yet touched upon? If so, what has prompted those shifts and how have the experienced materialized?

G.C. - No shifts. I was thinking about that the other day. I find myself working circular rather than linear, meaning various ideas getting addressed separately at the same time, and then one might inform the other. And mundane stuff factors in, too, like walking the dog in the woods, falling leaves, or home improvement provides an interesting material. ■