

## 162 – Andrew Witkin, An Atlas Discussion

September 9, 2016



*This is my email conversation with Andrew Witkin after his recent exhibition at Theodore Art in Bushwick. It has been edited into seven sections, at times to make it a better interview, at times to develop themes that came up in the original emails, and at other times to provide previously unmade juxtapositions (these are the roughest 'cuts'). This mash-up interview is inspired by Christian Marclay's Artist Statement mash-up from his Phaidon monograph in which several recombined interviews become the Frankenstein's Monster version of an artist statement. Andrew is a very generous guy and this frank conversation is a result of his openness.*

1)

JB: I spent some time in/with your show and I very much enjoyed it. Congratulations.

AW: Thank you.

JB: Stephanie {Theodore} is a true advocate for you, so know that you're getting zealous representation!

AW: Stephanie is actually in it because she loves the art. I am SO appreciative of how committed and honest she is. Refreshing.

so... first... before we start going back and forth/getting to the art, I want to thank you for a) going to Steph's space to see my show, b) taking the time to look, c) appreciating the greatness in Steph, d) writing me and e) lots of other things.

2)

JB: I am a fan of you as a person and know your work some but when I prepared to go to your show I read about the Currier (links) and the Decordova exhibitions and past shows with Theodore Art. I felt that this was a very different enterprise. Would you mind saying if it was and how it was different for you?

AW: First – the feeling is mutual! As for the show... it was an interesting one for me (how boring a statement is that to begin with?!) – while I still consider it an installation of sorts, it's more an exhibition than anything else I have done. I think it's partly because there's less furniture/props/sculpture/sets/etc than normal (even though the 'easels' take up a good deal of space). It's partly that there's less "found" or altered material left as is. Weirdly, it was far more sales-successful than any previous exhibition, and yet it is the first show that has seemingly had no curatorial/museum or press interest. I can't help but have some doubts in that regards (reflections on my work...) and wonder if I should even pay attention to those issues. This flows right into the constant (in my head) bombardment of stories about curators, dealers, gallerists, etc who all say they realized they weren't good artists and thus just focused on the curation/promotion/etc side. Am I just being naive/blind/stupid?!?!?! (I've been through these doubts before – I've "quit" making work 3 times and each time I immediately, quietly, focus and make in a healthy way – and so I have to trust that desire/need/etc – but the doubts always come back....)

anyhow... that's just a bit of neurotic background emotional crap that you didn't even ask about!

As for it being a very different enterprise, I think what you are perhaps seeing is that in this show I used "images" not just objects. While I used images to make objects, they also existed as imagery (and unusual for me, they hung on the wall!). This, I think, made the show seem more in line visually with 'normal' exhibitions, which is partly I am continually questioning the approach...not sure if these explorations of imagery are worthwhile/needed/etc... and then not sure if my doubt is worth listening to ... and then if it is, is the work even worthwhile to spend time working on ... and that brings me back to the earlier tangent ... and so I should stop before you are completely bored!

JB: Thanks for saying all that, I REALLY think it's important to talk about that level of doubt and desire to continue/prevail.

AW: I find the continual questioning is the way to explore/experiment/experience and I can only hope that it betters what ends up to be experienced by others

JB: There were things I spent lots of time with, but I didn't get to spend much time with the bench.

AW: While a lot of the elements in the show took a long time to birth, the bench was the second newest work in the show (the postcard, large photo/text and small photo/text being the newest ones). In one sense, it took a long time to come into existence, but in physical form, I edited the sound and built the electronic and wood structures in a week or three. While I am very interested in it on its own, I think it also did a service for the exhibition aesthetically, aurally, spatially and visually. Hopefully. It is, though, just one iteration of something I can see having numerous lives.

(editor's note: the bench was based on a traditional six-board chest, but with speakers built in to the two side boards, with a sound component that consisted of Otis Redding's rendition of the Rolling Stones song, I Can't Get No (Satisfaction), but with a majority of the lyrics removed and replaced by silence, with only "I Can't", "I tried" and those sorts of lyrics left)



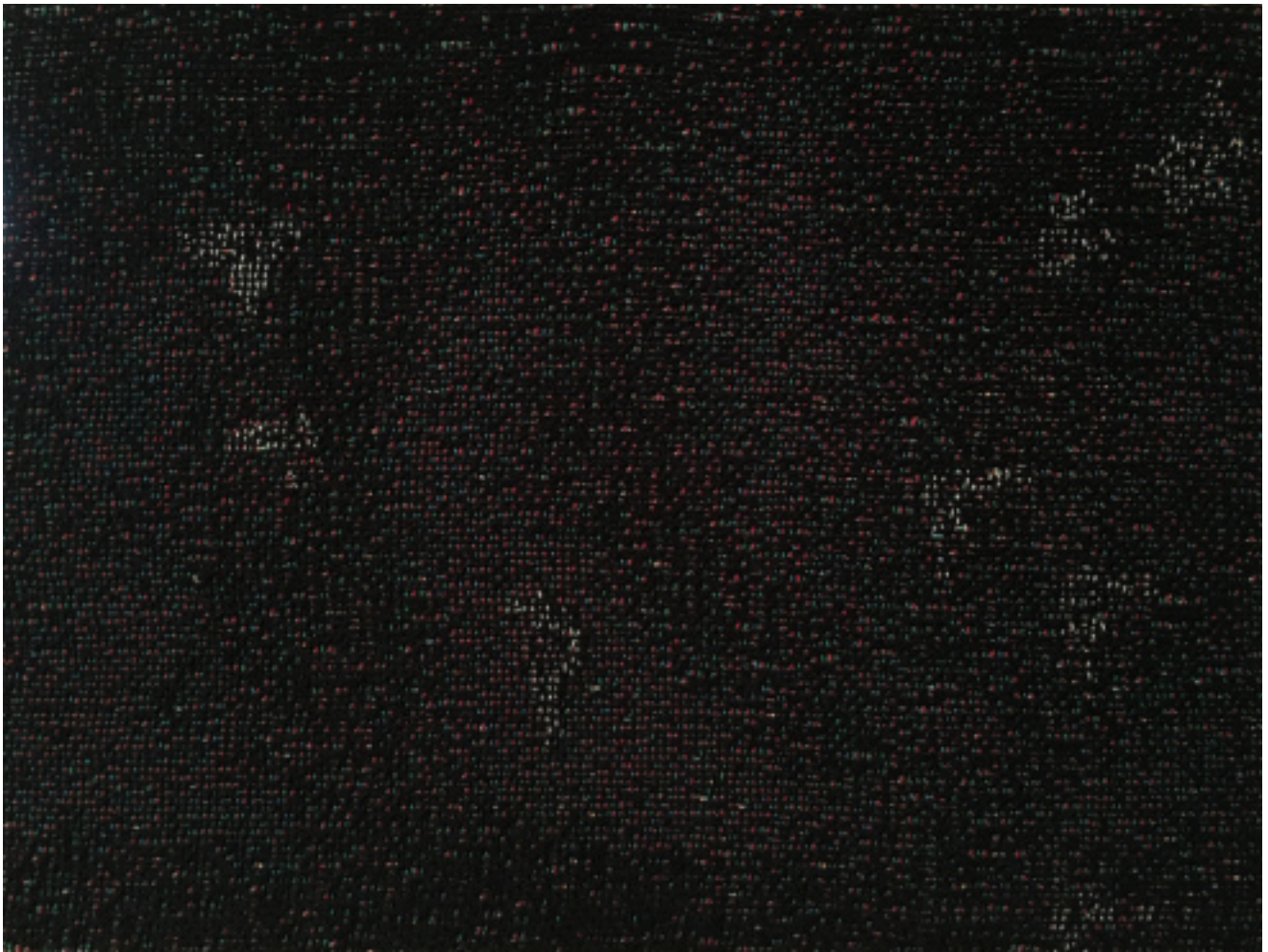
3)

JB: Returning to the placement of work and the exhibition, how did everything find its place in the most recent show? What was that process like?

AW: The show as a whole was an intriguing thing to put together. My first real show, in 2006, was partly planned and partly not: I had laid out the space (it had moveable walls) and designed furniture/props/sculpture/sets/etc for each subsection of the space. However, what elements would engage those furniture/props/sculpture/sets/etc was left up to be decided improvisationally (I brought a ton of things I had been 'working' on/with/for/etc).

Since that first show, I have really engaged exhibition planning as an important part of my work. I had taken it to such extremes that the last big show I had was a museum show that took 3 years to come to fruition. Not surprisingly though, I began having doubts about the vitality (and some other things) about the work with such intense planning, so I took Steph's show as a chance to get back to the original approach, but as opposed to tons of found objects/altered objects (with which I still engage), it was all things I had made/created/fabricated/conceived of/brought to fruition/etc., all of which were elements of more unified larger 'bodies of work'. When I showed up to install, I was unsure whether I would install 1-4 bodies of work (in totality or close there-to) or whether it would be a mix. After a couple hours of attempts, I realized that none of the projects needed to be shown in totality and actually showing different quantities of each 'body' would engage issues of open/closed legibility and the grey zone in the middle, as well as tug out some of the underlying issues within and between bodies. Probably too dense for most people, but relevant to balance ease of entrance with depth of exploration, among other issues.

This realization about not using full bodies of work also clarified for me, that the process of thinking, finding, making, accumulating, etc is definitively not the end of my process. Arranging, presenting, etc is equally important to me (perhaps an obvious statement to you...).



4)

JB: I was riveted by the weavings and the reproduced noise in the pattern.

AW: I'm glad. That 'noise' is rather key for me. Translation from photo/negative to print to drawing to scan to digital alteration to organic woven work is bound to have some friction/remnants/etc. I try to stay true to a material and to a process, all the while being just as interested in the actions of translations.

JB: I would love to know more about the white on black drawings that inspired them. Stephanie mentioned they were notes on a photo but that you liked the notes more than the photo, or maybe that you found the notes more interesting. And then the weaving process...and the easels. I want to know something about everything.

AW: Here's the esoteric backstory: in 2002, I photographed a beautifully grey day seven times (no particular reason for seven, except I wanted variants). I wanted to capture the beauty of a 'neutral grey' and I was exploring the potential flatness in a photographic image, etc etc. I developed the negatives (yes, negatives ... ), found that the images all seemed different (on account of small specs of darkness that seemed to move around from image to image), so I printed the seven negatives as 8 x 10's to get a better look at what was going on (I had originally just hoped to capture nature's gradations of greys that would both be a portrait of the sky and its deep space, but also a completely flat grey gradation). Comparing the variations visually was confusing, so I started measuring the 'irregularities' and writing their 'coordinates' on the photos. A number of erasures were necessary and I certainly wasn't being overly precious with the original photos. Once this (perhaps overly engaged) action was done, I was able to compare and see that irregularities were consistent between numerous images, while others came and went. Lo and behold, they could not be planets, lights, flying vehicles or anything else in the sky – they were particles on the lens and, as it had been a windy day (a detail I had previously forgotten), dust must have been blowing around a bit on and off the lens.

So... what started off as an idea to capture gradations of a beautiful grey over numerous negatives, turned into a naive 'scientific' exploration that exposed nothing more than the nature near the ground (aka the dust and dirt particles, not the nature in the sky). This misplaced focus seemed relevant to other ideas I had been working on and so I started exploring

how to present these pieces that were about chance, errors, misplaced focus, analysis and futility, among other things. I scanned the images into the computer and seeing that I had initially wanted to make images of the sky that would be only partially legible as such, I figured if I inverted the images, they would be read, perhaps, as some sort of star charts (balancing between esoteric interest and recognizable scenarios plays in often in my work). The 'deep space' of darkness and the various sized irregularities would be countered by the semi-legible scrawls of my measurements in order to create, sort-of, what I had originally envisioned – a semi-identifiable picture of the sky.

The inverted imagery went through numerous iterations over the years – layered versions, printed versions, rephotographed versions, etc etc, but I never felt they were quite right on their own...

JB: I love that moment when the noise becomes the image. I am so drawn to that concept in art and music. And then the diving down into the unclaim meanings of things like this. So, where and when did the weavings and these images connect?

AW: In 2007, I started working with fabric (felt, cotton and silk) and by 2012, I was working on large-scale weavings. In 2014, I started working with a digitally-controlled Jacquard loom (using American grown and spun 100% cotton yarn!) in order to further explore some ideas of legibility (related to issues one finds in 'resolution' on a computer, or through technology, more generally) as well as lightness/portability/durability/flexibility/etc, the myriad references possible with woven fabric (domesticity, warmth, craft, etc), the ability to easily alter its form (folding, stretching, etc) (and not even to mention that the weaver is of a long line – supposedly stretching back to making blankets for George Washington's army....). With a bunch of experimentation, I finally had some 'mastery' over how things look, how to use the colors, tightness of weave, etc., for various purposes.

Putting two and two together... aspects of the weaving really made a lot of sense for me in terms of completing the exploration of what I had casually been referring to as the 'star charts'. The gridded nature of weaving further flattens the surface, thus providing another level of spatial legibility. By using a limited but colored palette, close observation provides a bit of obfuscation of the source/purpose, but also helps one better understand the weaving process. Also, the soft nature of the surface felt like a formal unification for the imagery that was so conflated. For me, the main aspects of this work are the exploration of space and its visual illustration, issues of iteration, legibility, control and purpose, all with a goal of presenting a 'level playing field' where no one thing has control or the ultimate answer, but enough information to keep interest, exploration and desire constant.

I kept the palette, yarn thickness and tightness of weave the same between the large and small weavings, giving one the opportunity to contrast legibility more than just focus on the actual info/imagery in the weavings. The easels have a specific, intentional and formal simplicity which is key for me (each is five pieces of wood, two nails, one bolt, one nut, one washer). They work because of the natural tension between the wood and hardware. They read as oversized easels – perhaps science fair, perhaps hallway signage, etc. Putting six of them together, laying the fronts, sides and backs bare, and lining them up in that repetitive yet slightly curved way, are all gestures with numerous references that perhaps guide (or perhaps not?) the viewer in how these things are to be read/viewed/explored. Having the large one behind, slightly obscured when seen from a distance by the easels, gives a strong contrast, similarity and opportunity, hopefully, for an additional exploration that only comes 'at the end'.

5)

JB: The collages were pure pleasure for me. It seems like a serialized behavior nakedly expressed.

AW: Thank you. I've been working with stacking for a long time. I hate the designer aesthetization of the technique, but it comes from the same place – how to digest/store/present/know/see/keep/make useful all of this stuff/info/etc that we have in this world. The presentation of the stacks, shrinkwrapped (they could be easily unshrinkwrapped and none are adhered) and in frames, hopefully provides a balance between the pausing/examining and the forever-potential of editing a grouping.

JB: There is some need in me to collect and categorize and stack that felt immensely satisfied (yes I am using that word on purpose) by those works.

AW: I think I am glad to hear it!



6)

JB: I am very lucky in that I have nothing to be lost or gained when I write so I do it for the love of it and I wonder if you find yourself making art with that mindset?

AW: Making/doing/exploring/etc, for me, is part of life. It's an exploration through emotional, historical, physical, social, et alia (aka all means). I want to learn/grow/help/see/do and be different than I am at any given now. When I have my doubts, it's about the art 'world' and a 'career'. It's never about the need to make/do/etc, as I do not force that, or more accurately, when I travel down that dark path towards forcing, I become uninspired, need to back up and redirect. The doing happens when it's appropriate and the rest of the time I am learning/looking/thinking/trying to help/etc.

Environmental, financial, moral, storage-based, temporal and other issues play into my doubts, but the doubts are not about making the work. Not to say I think everything I do is good – I certainly am quite critical in a slow way about what I do!

Of course, as we all know, praise and its absence can lead to doubt. I get that. And still if you trust yourself, you will know what needs to be done, needs to be made. Maybe not in an efficient timetable, but at some point. I do believe that.

On one hand I believe in faith and trust and vision. Another part of me believes in grounding. I'd like to think that my belief system is based on the intersection of the two (as they are not mutually exclusive).

JB: I am unsure that I will ever know that particular anxiety that an artist or performer gets waiting for a response from the public. When I did my interview with Mary Temple something I wanted to pull out of the interview was how she may have felt by a specific amount of critical response to a new body of work. I can imagine that sometimes it feels like no one is noticing but that isn't true.

AW: I agree. A myriad artistic forbearers toiled away unnoticed only to be praised later. A myriad other never received praise on some grand scale. However, the conversation within oneself, with those few who do look, etc. can be so

meaningful. I am blessed by a couple very brilliant artists, some dear friends and family and a few other colleagues who have been big supporters of and engagers with 'my' work. The challenging conversations with them have been the lifeblood of the public presentations of my work. I would certainly count your attention to this conversation in that lifeblood!

7)

JB: I wonder if there is some way for you to elaborate either to me, or in general on the shows that also might have been. This is not to say that you shouldn't elaborate on the show that is but I am fundamentally interested in what might have been as well. And maybe that, if it isn't to "meta", is worthy of a piece of writing, or a show, or something in the Triple Canopy format of presenting image and idea.

AW: Oh Peter and Shelly... So interesting, right? They are just so under-appreciated. They have really worked outside the dominant mold, not always in support of artists, but in support of ideas, exhibitions, aesthetics and more. Very important to me are people who don't go the way most do. The list is long but the path, it can be hard. Thinking about rewards can be so depressing in those sorts of situations, but I do believe it is incredibly valid to give it a go... I could go down a long spiel about that, but I think I should stick to your question! and so ... my process, while not exclusively, but generally, occurs this way:

1) thinking/researching/experimenting/exploring/trying/etc

2) making/doing/fabricating/documenting/accumulating/trying/helping/tossing/tweaking/rediscovering/etc

3) presenting

#2 gives 'form' to #1

#3 is something that really seems to only happen when there is a place/space/time/context/etc. That place/space/time/context/etc is what gives form to all the various #2's and so I have always considered each exhibition an installation/project/etc and yet elements get reused/reduced/enlarged/recycled/etc. between projects, so the iterations are potentially (although I am not entirely certain if they are totally) endless (not unlike the process of each element). Sometimes they are exhibitions, sometimes books, sometimes slideshows, sometimes talks with or without image or text projected, sometimes long-form texts, sometimes short-form, sometimes ... well, you get the idea.

To give you a further sense ... some of the elements in the TheodoreArt exhibition are part of 'bodies of work' that potentially/will/have/might/won't be part of the following projects:

- a) a book of all the elements of the leaning headstone imagery
- b) an exhibition mixing collaged newspaper clippings and larger crowd weavings, along with a few other elements
- c) a talk (actually a couple months ago at the MFA, Boston)
- d) a larger sound installation
- e) a more concrete juxtaposition of the three variants on the burial ground/text work

and in the winter, as a precursor/exploration, I did this presentation at the Roxbury Latin School.

Meanwhile, there's other things stewing, too...

JB: I do love the way you list out these method of exploration and running themes in the work. It helps codify the concepts while leading me (and hopefully the readers) to grasp what you are working on/ towards.

8)

JB: Within the many manifestations of your gray gradation photos becoming inverted images and then digital information and then back to analog woven form (as well as many other things you mentioned) do you feel that these were fabricated (probably in all senses of the word)?



AW: Definitely fabricated in some senses of the word, but there's a real element of chance so that things "just happened" and so, in that way, it's hard to say they were fully fabricated. Life happened and things occur. How one utilizes/ignores/controls/etc these things are a key part of living.

JB: I wonder how much of their existence is about inquiry of material and how much is about the "thingness" of their physical form? Neither is more important, but the more I know about how they were created, the more I see the journey rather than the destination.

AW: I would like to think the story is interesting and adds, not subtracts, from the work, but I would also like to believe that there is wealth within the works, visually and physically, to explore and so that they stand strong without needing a formal explanation. I really hope that. They're definitely quiet, but there's a lot there that's easy to grasp (I think), it's just how much will it cause one to think/explore ...

JB: I am very happy to have started this conversation and to have been able to see your work. So much of what you have said to me here is information that would be monumentally valuable to the viewer but I get that it is impossible to give an easily digestible press release form of what you have given me above.

AW: The last two press releases with Steph have been more 'out there'. This one was a 'serious' endeavor by her. I feel my work is both quite visceral and cerebral and I hate when one supersedes the other completely. I fear the press release. It creates a single narrative. With a LONG release, it makes everything denser and dryer, limiting the potential for the visceral entering in ... so, an opportunity such as this conversation is a really lovely off-shoot of information/discussion/etc. THANK YOU.

*Editor's note: This conversation began as an email and transitioned into an interview. Andrew Witkin and I served as co-editors of this dialogue. To learn more about the artist please visit his website here: <http://www.awitkin.com/> and his artist page at Theodore:Art here: [http://theodoreart.com/artist\\_pages/witkin-artistpg.html](http://theodoreart.com/artist_pages/witkin-artistpg.html).*

Jeff Bergman

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