

AN INTERVIEW WITH SANDY SKOGLUND

By Douglas Dreishpoon, curator of 20th Century Art, Albright-Knox Art Gallery

Dreishpoon, Douglas. "An Interview with Sandy Skoglund." In *Sandy Skoglund: Raining Popcorn*. Grinnell, Iowa: Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, 2001. © 2001 Douglas Dreishpoon. Used with permission

When this interview took place on 27 January 2001, the present installation had no title and the studio was full of fodder: popcorn (of course), red pipe cleaners, wood panels, metal springs, small motors, and epoxy resin—sundry edible and non-edible substances awaiting deployment. Studios function differently for different artists. In the Skoglund studio, an unlikely cross between a playground and a laboratory, high-minded ideas commingle with basic materials through a series of procedures until another kind of world emerges. Sandy's has always been an empirical creative process from beginning to end. Research and experimentation drive her conceptual orientation. Between the flash of an idea and its realization lies a rigorous and programmatic investigation. Numerous issues arise along the way. Those of a procedural nature are generally tackled and resolved immediately. Others, however, remaining in flux, become the cultural, metaphorical, and psychological subtext of a given piece.

The interview traverses a still accelerating career. I felt it germane to begin at the beginning, with a discussion of two early drawings from the mid-70's. These two-dimensional works on paper, executed by the artist straight out of graduate school, presage a sensibility drawn to repetitive gestures and fantasy spaces--- a mind prone to conceptual problem-solving, but receptive to unexpected discoveries and unlikely associations. As a prelude to subsequent installations, they signal a prescient point of departure.

With any spontaneous interview, fits and starts are inevitable. Ours was no exception. In editing the transcript, I set out to extract salient passages without compromising Sandy's distinctive voice. In the hour and a half spent together, we covered a lot of terrain. The resulting text combines philosophic musing with the existential demands of a piece in process—an appropriate dynamic given the nature of the work.

Douglas Dreishpoon: Let's start with some of your early, conceptually based drawings and your remark to Carol Squiers [in *Sandy Skoglund: Reality Under Siege*, exh. cat. (Northampton, MA.: Smith College Museum of Art, 1998)] that obsession and repetition have been a constant element in your creative process. Starting with *Two Lines* and *Starting with a Pencil Sharpened Once* (two drawings executed in 1975) seem to embody the essence of your sensibility. Given drawing's ability to affirm the primacy of personality, several observations come to mind: First, that these early drawings demonstrate a preoccupation with the systematic development of an idea; secondly, both seem to project an architectonic dimension, especially *Starting with Two Lines*, as though you were already visualizing, even if subconsciously, a room-like space – a curious coincidence in light of the environments you began to design and photograph four years later; and thirdly, the drawings' titles and the notion of starting with one thing or an idea and ending with another prompts me to ask about the role of improvisation in your creative process – that which unexpectedly enters the process and results in something marvelous.

Sandy Skoglund: The primary issue for me as an artist is how to reconcile the irrational and the rational and how to include insanity in the context of sanity. Your questions raise dualities — systematic and rational verses obsessive – that is to say, when the system through its own perseverance undoes itself. The trajectory of rational thinking and rational behavior has done so much for us. I'm grateful to be alive in the 21st Century, at a time when I can benefit from all of the scientific investigations that have made my lifestyle possible. At the same time I think we, as citizens in this culture, experience a sense of emptiness in spite of the positive products of reason. So for me the element of dysfunction is an equally compelling theme: How do we deal with the non-rational byproducts of rationalism?

So, I engage in repetition, for example, and in the process divide myself in two and investigate this split condition. Growing up in the suburbs, in a manicured landscape where everything seemed to have a human intention behind it, I felt dissociated from the larger world. My family lived in many different suburbs, yet always the same, and very American. This was the landscape of my youth, and the feeling of loneliness and disengagement it produced has been an underlying subtext for my work.

DD: To my mind, a systematic orientation also connotes a methodical approach to the selection of materials, whether it's a piece of popcorn or a jellybean. And you constantly change materials. It's a little like shedding skin; new materials demand new procedures. Yours is a hands-on, empirical approach to materials, which often assumes a repetitive gesture. The results, however, are unpredictable. When you have an idea and begin to develop it, how does that idea morph in the process?

SS: I evolved from being a conceptual artist to a figurative artist who is a photographer and sculptor. Inevitably, ideas develop through various procedures and materials, depending on the scope of the project. That said, the process of repetition generates a variety of subsidiary procedures. One is learning. That's why I use the term "research and development," because there's a built-in experimentation with most projects in terms of materials and how they behave. I search for unusual materials that haven't been used before, so I have to figure out how to use them. In the case of the Grinnell project, popcorn is the sculptural material. I like to begin with a material or subject, as in *Radioactive Cats* (1980), where I focused on the cat. *Raining Popcorn* is more material-based, where the material itself determines the way in which the thing is made.

DD: There's a conceptual rigor to most of your work.

SS: There is. And there's humor as well.

DD: And a sensitivity to materials. You seem to love making sculpture and experimenting with form, even when that experimentation is more intuitive.

SS: It's very schizoid in a sense, or holistic, depending on how you look at it.

DD: I'm fascinated by the early drawings as subliminal handwriting, because they were empirical and intuitive, and they implied pictorial spaces. Each of your installations, including *Babies at Paradise Pond* (1995), conceived outdoors, develop within spatial parameters, eventually modified through the camera's viewfinder.

SS: Although the early drawings suggest a feeling of space, it's illusionistic. I set out to construct a three-dimensional experience from this limited point of view.

DD: Was it liberating to realize that first three-dimensional space?

SS: It was unbelievable. I had gone through a ten-year period, struggling to find a voice. I tried a little filmmaking and had worked with a strict conceptually based program. And then, I got my hands on a material like plaster and at the same time acquired a camera and started taking pictures.

At that point, being alone in the studio was no longer meaningful. I wanted to create a

vocabulary that somehow grounded me in the world. What that came to mean for me, in a funny way, was shopping, buying, finding things – a worldly orientation far removed from those early drawings.

I realized, too, that photographic representation solved the problem of figuration for me. I desperately wanted to work figuratively, but being conceptually focused as I was at the time, any kind of figurative painting or sculpture seemed burdened by history, whereas the kind of automatic representation possible with the camera wasn't.

DD: Let's talk about the figure, a reappearing motif since 1979. It can be sculpted or real. The human beings you sometimes incorporate into certain installations when they're being photographed adds a performative, theatrical quality to the resulting image. What's the figure's importance? What does its presence add to the work?

SS: The figure brings a sense of scale to the work. From the beginning the figure was also a kind of foil, so that when you encounter the strange material that is the work, there is still something you can relate to. The figure functions as a psychological gateway, without which the photographic space might seem too alien. Once the photograph is taken and separated from the installation, a whole new reality sets in. New questions come up, whether the person is real or not.

DD: Would you say that the inclusion of a live human subject introduces a greater sense of pathos?

SS: A sense of poignancy perhaps in terms of life and death, temporality and transience. The notion of reality constantly escapes us. Especially with the photograph, implications of mortality seep in.

DD: How do you go about selecting people to pose in your installations?

SS: Well, it depends on what the person is supposed to be doing. In *Breathing Glass* (2000), or even *Raining Popcorn*, where the landscape is made up of popcorn, rather than having people assume quotidian or ordinary kinds of gestures, I see them more symphonic and ballet-like. In some recent installations I worked with dancers, which was a very rewarding experience.

DD: Do unforeseen things happen during the process?

SS: Things are always changing. If I knew what the piece was going to look like six months before I started, there would be no sense of fun or interest in making it. So I generally avoid fully resolved preliminary drawings, preferring to work spontaneously as much as possible.

Right now I'm fascinated by how popcorn kernels resemble snowflakes. Each one is unique – the result of a little primal explosion. And I love the philosophical reverberations of this kind of investigation into arcane areas of reality, because in the big picture, they're just as relevant as, say, Einstein's theory of relativity.

DD: Does a piece start with a title, or do titles evolve along the way?

SS: Titles arrive differently for each piece. *Breathing Glass*, for instance, began with a commitment to glass, to making glass vibrate and move and the inappropriateness and scariness of that. Breathing was a term I felt embodied the notion of glass moving.

Walking on Eggshells (1997) came about at the same time as the idea of using eggshells. I just loved the cross-cultural implications of such a simple phrase, which says so much about what life is like.

For that piece, I knew I was going to work six to nine months on something whose perfection in the end would be disturbed, crushed by people walking on the eggshells.

DD: *Walking on Eggshells* was in process during my last visit to your studio, in 1996. You were then working on the hieroglyphic line drawings for the walls.

SS: I felt like an art historian doing the research for those drawings. A lot of my process has to do with intentionally putting myself in situations that create a kind of irony. These are not necessarily artistic situations; they're life situations, where I set out to understand something unknown to me. I incorporate this dynamic into my work. And it's actually very uncomfortable.

DD: Always or at times?

SS: It's almost always uncomfortable, even irritating. Usually, there comes a point when I ask myself why I'm doing this, which inevitably raises the issue of comfort and discomfort in the art-making process. Most people are under the impression that artists, for the most part, are happy doing what they do. In my case, though, the process can be very unsettling.

DD: Is that because your process is about continually asking questions, whose answers may be deflected by ever-changing circumstances?

SS: That's right. And I get bored easily. It's hard to look at the finished work. I'm more interested in what's in front of my face, focusing on the process, and pushing in different ways to complete the piece. It can be very cathartic, though. Initially, there's this feeling of inner necessity, of forcing yourself to have an internal dialogue about what has to be done, even if certain details, like calling this person or that person about a material or procedure, or going here or there in search of something, are sometimes stressful. And then there's a feeling of relief once I've made my way through that period of information gathering, a certain peacefulness that comes about once the flow exists. At this point, I'm working with known processes and a feeling of predictability. But then, with the introduction of photography, the process veers into the unknown again. Photography, as a moment in time, introduces rigid pictorialism into the multiple viewpoints of sculptural perception. An installation is a lot more forgiving than the photographic element, which requires endless fussing with details as they appear within the frame. There's a discerning eye that comes into play because photography translates sculpture in a totally different way.

DD: Are you visualizing the photograph simultaneously with the making of the installation, or does the photographic process activate at a certain threshold?

SS: At a certain threshold; otherwise it might paralyze the process. When I start an installation, I don't worry about photography, because I'm more concerned with sculptural materials, even if the piece is temporary and not intended to travel: How materials behave. What they can do. How long they can last and what happens to them over time. With *Spirituality in the Flesh* (1992), I bought a lot of raw hamburger and kept it in the studio, playing with it, looking at it. I did the same thing with bacon in *Body Limits* (1992). It's all part of the research and development phase, where I experiment with new materials and procedures.

DD: What about your studio practice? Does that remain consistent or does it change with each installation?

SS: It changes. It's hard for me to tell whether a piece is successful or not, because I've been looking at it and working on it for so long that I'm blind to its merits or failures. It generally takes about a year for me to see my work objectively.

DD: Are those dynamics heightened by projects with deadlines?

SS: I don't believe so. When I was doing my early work, I had the same sensation. When I did *Radioactive Cats*, there was no pressure, no pending exhibition, and still I had the same feeling of "Thank God it's done." I sculpted those cats all by myself over many months. As a conceptual artist involved with repetitive processes, when does it really end? So the photograph became a reason to end the repetition. With the early drawings they ended when the sheet of paper was full. When I began to make sculpture, each one was an adventure, a mind-boggling experience of unification with the world.

It wasn't until I started photographing the installations that I realized the frame only accommodates so much visual information. It has always been important to me that the photograph be a complete statement on its own, so that if the installation no longer existed there would still be enough information in the photograph for the viewer to understand it.

DD: At one point in your interview with Robert Rosenblum [in *Sandy Skoglund: Reality Under Siege*], you mentioned that you were a child of the fifties, born into a consumer culture surrounded by things, and that this milieu affected not only your perception of the world but the way your work evolved. In terms of your photographic process, the acquisition, production, and subsequent arrangement of things, be they consumer products or hand-fabricated animals, helps to explain, on a formal level, patternistic tendencies in the work – a spatial strategy within the frame. And there are other levels of meaning as well, especially with the incorporation of animals, in both photographs and installations, where an unruly pack of foxes, dogs, cats, or squirrels creates a sense of menace. All this brings me to an observation and two questions: Your installations and photographs seem to function on a number of levels simultaneously. Do you consciously build in levels of meaning? Do you prefer open-ended situations where various interpretations are possible?

SS: I deliberately keep the work as open-ended as possible but within specific parameters. For instance, I'm very particular about what objects I select; it's this bed and not another. It's always a specific this or that. An image can simultaneously have political, psychological, sociological, and formal levels of meaning, which may or not

impact the viewer depending on how he or she experiences the world.

The ultimate conceptual work for me is playing around in my notebook, investigating all the possibilities on paper. This is the puzzle-making part of the narrative and various questions come up: What kind of space should it be? What are the people doing in the picture and why are they doing it? What else is in the image besides people? What are the materials? What does it mean to use these? I ask all these questions over and over again every morning as I work on the piece. And I scroll through the various meanings that arise. Actually, this is a very constructive element in my process.

DD: Tell me more about this notebook.

SS: I keep a notebook with me at all times, a small logbook, so I can record whatever I'm thinking about at the time. Stream of consciousness, it's all there. Everything I want to remember, though not necessarily drawing. My need to remember ideas has changed over time. When I started out as an artist I would forget concepts and insights, so it became very important to write ideas down the moment they came to me. Now, when I get an idea, it may actually be twenty or thirty years old. The idea of using popcorn in my work occurred that long ago.

DD: In what context?

SS: In graduate school, I stuffed a sewn starfish shape with pink painted popcorn. When the Grinnell project came about, I had forgotten about this. I was interested in the notion of grain and the Midwest – Iowa and corn. I attended the University of Iowa for grad school and will never forget the endless fields of corn and the wonderful sense of equanimity that came as a result of the horizon line being so far away and yet so visible. It left an indelible impression of calmness on me. So on some level, I wanted to deal with that recollection.

DD: Babies at Paradise Pond brought you back to the landscape. With this installation, you're again dealing with the landscape in a way that brings you back to an earlier recollection. In this instance, though, the corn is not an ear of corn but a substance that's undergone a metamorphosis of sorts – the grain has been exploded. So what are we moving toward?

SS: What I like about popcorn is its cultural resonance. In terms of research, it functions on the same level as the drawings I did for *Walking on Eggshells*. For these, I researched representations of the snake and the rabbit through 3,000 years of human culture, the ways in which these animals came to embody different psychological states – power, anxiety, etc. Popcorn, too, is a very old cultural icon, a pan-cultural phenomenon with a long history of meaning, usually celebratory. Archeologists have found fired clay popcorn poppers in the American Southwest that are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old.

These are life-affirming discoveries that take me beyond contemporary cynicism. They're also conceptual fodder for an idea that traces the transformation of the landscape from endless rows of natural corn to something abstracted, exploded, and in the end, highly edible. That said, the exact meaning of all of this undoubtedly will take time to unravel.

DD: Perhaps it's better to leave meaning in flux until the piece is actually finished and you're able to see it from a distance.

SS: What's uncanny to me is how much sense the work seems to make when I finally discuss it, and how biographical implications come to the fore that have been long forgotten.

DD: Perhaps that's the autobiographical overlay, though I'm interested, too, in the sociological subtext that layers certain pieces.

SS: To some extent my role as an artist is not unlike a sociologist of American culture. I try to pretend that I've landed from another planet, which was essentially how I felt as a young person growing up in the suburbs. I wondered how I got there, who I was and about everything around me, like why my mother hung decorative plastic plants above the washing machine. A lot of choices made by adults at that time seemed mysterious and strange. So looking at our culture from the outside in, as a stranger to myself, is a compelling angle to work from. I find American culture exotic. From this perspective, narrative elements acquire an archetypal inflection.

DD: Is the challenge to maintain a clear sense of objectivity, to see the culture we live in through a critical lens?

SS: It all depends on how you observe behavior. Detachment isn't necessarily a bad thing if it brings objective insights.

DD: This is a process question: Do ideas come in a flash or do they tend to evolve naturally out of other installations?

SS: Some come in a grand flash; others come in a little flash which repeats until I have the faith to go with it. Once I have an idea, I have to find ways to make it work. Great ideas can require a lot of hard work to be realized.

DD: With the Grinnell project, what are you going through now in terms of your process? What are you experimenting with? What's the best popcorn around?

SS: Of course there are many kinds. Raining Popcorn started out as a floor piece. It was going to be waves of popcorn strung on long wires, like the lyric-inspired "amber waves of grain." So I started working with white popcorn made by Bearitos – pre-popped, with no oil, salt, or additives. I didn't feel it was important to pop the corn myself. I wanted to work with this popcorn in an unexpected and interesting way. I wanted to surprise myself. At the same time I kept thinking about the weather in Iowa and about the sky. I decided to focus on the feeling of falling, as opposed to flying, because the last two pieces had dealt with flying insects: dragonflies and butterflies. This piece is more about the sky, weather and precipitation, related to the endless horizon of the Midwest. Gradually, the piece evolved from the floor onto the wall, as I became more interested in a vertical space created by endless walls of popcorn woven together.

DD: Will the popcorn be adhered to wood panels?

SS: Yes, woven together with red pipe cleaners, the popcorn starts off on panels, because this element has an animated component to it: the corn appears to move selectively from section the section – the effect being like rain.

DD: Was Breathing Glass the first animated installation you conceived?

SS: Actually, Shimmering Madness (1998), originally created for Rutgers University, was the first piece in which most of the components moved. The last two installations expanded on that principle, which lead me to design and fabricate a network of internal springs in consultation with a spring company.

DD: And what about the conservation issue? You use a brand of popcorn that's free of oil and preservatives. Are you adding anything else to enhance its longevity?

SS: Each kernel is hand-worked and dipped in epoxy resin so that it will hopefully survive as sculpture.

DD: Looking at the panels here in your studio, I sense chaos in the patterns. I also get the impression of a grand tapestry or weaving, whose animation will throw the whole thing into another vector.

SS: That's what distinguishes this piece from the last two. The last two were very minimal in the sense that they were about the disbursal of dragonflies and butterflies. I want this piece to be more complex. The patterning is there but should operate on a different level. And I want the red pipe cleaners to appear integrated into the visual field.

DD: Were trees part of the original design?

SS: Yes, trees were there from the beginning. Now, it's a matter of what kind of trees, where to get them, and what they're going to be made of. They're going to be red, like veins, to contrast with the popcorn and to reinforce the color of the pipe cleaners. At least that's what I'm aiming for.[editor's note: Skoglund changed her mind after this interview, and the trees were never painted red. They were left as natural wood stripped of their bark.

DD: When I think about the landscape you experienced as a graduate student – ever-expanding fields and rows of green corn – the inherent order of that scene contrasts with the corn in Raining Popcorn – a subtle tension between what appears ordered and what's otherwise chaotic.

SS: Think of what a farm is: human beings at work reordering and reorganizing nature. It's a frightening notion but comforting at the same time depending on how you see it. Our ability to transform and control nature is built into our notion of civilization. I try not to be judgmental about it. I'd rather see the whole thing from a sociologist or anthropologist's perspective, to be a creative commentator rather than a political analyst. Still, the idea of people dominating the plains layers the content of the piece; the planting of corn replaced indigenous grasses. In that sense, corn comes to symbolize people's control over and transformation of the natural landscape through domestication.

DD: Are there any other components you're considering?

SS: Even though I'm coming down the homestretch, my process remains open to last-minute changes – more trees less trees, changes of color. The end is when the photograph has been taken. At that point the installation is truly finished, because without the photography, the end is only a relative state of completion.

DD: Have you ever added to an installation after the photograph was taken?

SS: Yes. And I've also exhibited installations before any photography happened.

DD: When?

SS: Shimmering Madness underwent numerous transformations. I made one installation for a show, Almost Warm & Fuzzy [now traveling through Independent Curators International], which was based on an earlier version commissioned by Rutgers University. The original had only adult figures in it. The new version incorporates children as well. Both were conceived and revised before any photography took place.

The opposite was true for The Cocktail Party (1992), an installation revised several times after being photographed. The first time, when I did it for the camera, I didn't know enough about cheese doodles. So when you look at the photograph, you might notice that most of the cheese doodles are not impregnated with epoxy resin or prepped for installation purposes; the entire set up was solely for the camera. Afterwards, I was so enamored with cheese doodles that I incorporated them on to panels and exhibited these as an installation, at the same time reworking the clothing, which had been tailored for real people, and adapting it to mannequins. In this instance, a large body of work came after the photography of that piece.

DD: In your mind's eye, how do you envision the Grinnell installation?

SS: Well, the ultimate excitement will be piling mounds and mounds of popcorn on the floor.