

Harvesting Narratives: Tales of Rural America and Race in the Work of Mitchell Squire

–Elly Fishman

Mitchell Squire's studio is located on the second floor of the Sheldon-Munn Hotel on Main Street, Ames, Iowa. The Sheldon-Munn offers storage space and low-income accommodation for local residents. It is also among the few remaining businesses along the boulevard. In the studio, the tile is spattered with old coffee stains and the persistent remains of misdirected meals, while the walls are marked with remnants of cigarette and stovetop smoke. The three small rooms harbor an atmosphere of feral domesticity and are saturated with history and the evidence of past lives. It makes perfect sense then that Squire would choose this space to make his artwork, concerned as it is with the poetic interaction of loaded objects and materials, echoing across open or abandoned space.

Squire's artistic practice began with an interest in historical artifacts. In 1994, while working toward his Bachelor of Architecture at Iowa State University (where he is now a staff professor), he began collecting obsolete and forsaken objects. Over the next ten years, Squire scoured the countryside, amassing a formidable stockpile of abraded materials with which to conjure the ghosts of former use. Drawn to such things as hog whips and calf weaners, he began building an idiosyncratic collection that explored parallels between the agricultural body and the human body, resulting in the 2004 installation, *The Heaving Floor*, which was arranged like a reliquary of traditional, at times anachronistic, farm tools. Appropriately located in a corncrib at the Westbrook Artists' Site in the Iowan city of Winterset, this work made clear Squire's claim on rural culture as subject matter, a topic that remains one of his key concerns.

Over the same period of time, the artist also assembled a set of domestic artifacts that became the basis for his 2005 installation at Drake University in Des Moines, *Still life with PEACHES (and a little black boy atop a spotted pony)*. The work was displayed on a long, narrow table and included such components as framed antique photographs, arrays of dead flowers stuffed into weathered vases, and candlesticks coated in melted wax. Essentially a meditation on the life of the everyday object and its ability to contain and convey emotional content, *Still Life with Peaches . . .* weaves a deeply affecting narrative from poignant juxtaposition. In early 2006, both of the aforementioned installations were incorporated into a survey show at the University of Northern Iowa, titled *Storied Toy: The Emotional and Imaginative Relationship Between a Boy and His Toys (plus a few other things)*.

For the two "collection" works, Squire left the artifacts untouched. Rather than manipulating them, he simply laid them out in close proximity to each other, like museum displays, organized according to an intriguing logic of association and contradistinction, similarity and difference. "Both collections were intended to support and undermine discourses of the self," Squire explains. "One grappled with collective public life and culture, and the other with individual private life and lineage." While in both instances the works were composed of objects known for their specific applications, Squire's arrangements managed to remain open and poetic.

In late 2008, Squire's formal and conceptual focus began to shift. Rather than mimicking the informational strategies of archival presentation, Squire literally and figuratively narrowed the space between his compositional elements, splicing them together into more purposeful aggregates. The nine works that comprise his CUE Art Foundation show are the result of this process. In these pieces, Squire

has once again chosen to work with things that retain a strong sense of connection to their origins, yet he is now more interested in constructing meaning and orchestrating emotion through direct combination, as opposed to comparative placement. Yet while the work's form is significantly different from that of his earlier pieces, these assemblages or "Combines" to borrow a term from the oeuvre of Robert Rauschenberg (with whose sculptural work Squire's has a certain formal affinity), still trade in the semantic potency of rescued property.

The Annunciation of Johnny Jack Trice (2010), a work that is making its debut at CUE Art Foundation, is at first glance an unassuming, if curious, agglomeration of objects. But on closer examination, the components begin to strike off each other and resonate with new meaning. A small pair of crumpled, mustard yellow football pants with the words *Fight Low* stitched into the inside fabric are placed upon the floor, nestled into a corner. A circular tube-light rests on the pants, illumining the text. The title refers to Iowa State University's first African-American athlete, Johnny "Jack" Trice, who died in 1923 after sustaining severe injuries—widely believed to be racially motivated—in his first College football game. The words *Fight Low* come from a prophetic letter that Trice wrote to himself before the game. He tucked the letter, filled with inspirational, strategic resolutions, into one of the pockets of his suit jacket; it was found while he was being prepared for burial wearing the jacket. The heroic determination of the Trice tale piqued Squire's interest when he was designing Iowa State's new athletic facility, Jack Trice Stadium. Although the work's title anchors it in a particular event, the piece also speaks to a larger theme of personal and cultural struggle that permeates the new body of work. "When I think about this piece . . . I think about achievement, and the moment in which one's achievement feels threatened," states Squire. But of course *The Annunciation* . . . might also function allegorically to engage a history of racial tension and social intolerance in Iowa.

Similarly, *The Intoxication of George Foreman* (2009) places questions of race and culture front and center. Well-worn rope, with many strands twisted into one another like coiled hair, curves up and over the top of a camera tripod. The top section of the rope appears to grow from the three-legged support like flora. Individual pieces of costume jewelry are placed at various intervals along the rope, charging the mostly colorless piece with flashes of brilliance. The rope hangs over two boxing gloves at the base of the tripod. According to the artist, this work ruminates on the 1977 fight between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali, when Ali famously stripped Foreman of his title. The gloves are the only elements that directly tie the work to boxing, yet the accumulation of suggestive detail only adds to an evocation of the sport's legendary struggles. At the base of the work, the rope is woven into one large mass, but as the eye moves upward, it comes undone, until it hangs loosely, even limply, over the top of the tripod. The rope seems to embody both brute strength and distressed fragility, power and exhaustion, representing the pathos of a deposed champion's fall from glory.

In a work similarly freighted with socio-cultural drama, *My Daddy Left Me Plenty But I Aint Got Nothing Now* (2009), a dusty bowling ball sits atop an empty Hunt's tomato sauce can, hovering above a group of white baby shoes that are carefully placed upon a toy ironing board, which, in turn, stands over a child's suit jacket whose arms and collar are stuffed with human hair. While Squire's assemblages offer no interpretive certainty, the perceived connections between the individual items often suggest diabolical scenarios, as subjectively constructed by the viewer as they might be. In this instance, there is an unmistakable and paradoxical sense of dread and tenderness at work. The piled-up baby shoes, whose white leather remains untainted, evoke purity and innocence. However, when lying perilously

beneath a bowling ball and hanging over the edges of a child's ironing board, the work as a whole solicits a melancholic feeling of loss and danger in domesticity.

Drawing more directly on his own cultural experience and immediate environment, Squire's post-collection work is imbued with a searching sense of critique, plumbing psychological undercurrents and local cultural forces. This was apparent as early as 2005 with the transitional work *Targets*, which consists of a series of four, framed stacks of practice targets—acquired from the local police department—that are peppered with bullet holes. The layered targets are mounted with the reverse side facing outward, and with the most heavily shot-up sheets on top. En masse, the holes in the paper form the shape of a figure, with the densest concentration of perforations appearing around the torso area, and secondly, around the head. "*Targets* deals specifically with the conditions of law in Iowa versus the actual practice of life here," explains Squire. "I'm interested in how cultural practices are conditioned through designed and made artifacts." The only words visible in this work are *And Protect*, yet the positioning of the targets effectively places viewers right in the line of fire, exposed and unprotected, at least on a symbolic level. *Targets* is possibly the most overtly political piece in Squire's CUE Art Foundation exhibition, yet the work is not didactic. Rather, through the simple manipulation and arrangement of his materials, Squire presents open-ended considerations of the personal and cultural histories embedded in utilitarian objects.

Perhaps the reflective nature of Squire's work stems partly from his location in Ames, an unusual place for an African-American artist from the west side of Chicago to call home. He relishes the freedom of thought that the relatively slow pace and open spaces of his chosen locale enable, and Iowan culture and politics have become central influences in his work. Additionally, Squire views Ames as an important social context in which to be working as a black artist. "I have a voice from a place where you have the worst of the worst, and the best of the best," he states. Iowa is a place of sweeping contradictions. For example, it leads the country in its ratio of black-to-white incarceration—roughly 14-to-1 versus the national average of 5-to-1. Yet, by contrast, Iowa has also taken a progressive stance in relation to social policy-making around such issues as gay marriage. And ironically, given those prison statistics, it was also one of the first places to pronounce slaves free individuals on crossing the Iowa state line. Squire takes on serious inquiries around society, race, personal narrative, and human attachment to objects. On the basis of the attention that he gives to his chosen materials, comparisons might be drawn to the work of such artists as Fred Wilson and David Hammons. Yet the prevalence of a rural aspect distinguishes Squire's work from the more typically urban outlook of artists working in a similar formal territory.

Some of Squire's works are stark and direct, and others more circumspect. He is not up on a soapbox or preaching from an ideological pulpit, but, rather, he is working in an almost Socratic method, developing his practice organically by posing questions and catalyzing conversation. He filters personal predilections through complicated social issues in ways that draw us into an analytical engagement with who we are and where we stand in relation to each other. Squire's work is therefore ultimately concerned with culture, subjectivity, and place; that is, with the specific and general conditions of his, and our, existence.

The writer, **Elly Fishman**, received her bachelor's degree in English from University of Chicago. Recently she has freelanced for the *Chicago Reader* and several Chicago-based arts websites. Fishman also manages a small artist residency program on Chicago's South Side, and is based in Chicago, IL.

The mentor, **Jeff Gibson**, is an artist and critic who lives and works in New York. A former senior editor of Sydney/Los Angeles-based magazine *Art & Text*, Gibson moved to New York in 1998 to work for *Artforum*, where he is currently managing editor. He has shown, most recently, at The Suburban in Chicago and Stephan Stoyanov Gallery in New York. In January, two of his videos were projected onto the façade of the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, as part of Syracuse University's *Urban Video Project*. He is currently working on two artists' books and another solo show for Stephan Stoyanov Gallery, scheduled for April 2012.