

*The Space Between: Pieces within a Puzzle*  
—Morgan Marentic

John Corbin has a highly refined and distinctive sense of structure that often manifests itself as pieces of a puzzle inserted into a space—the space between that is both metaphoric and literal—these structures are a synthesizer of ideas that might not be connected except for Corbin’s imaginative juxtapositions. Most of his work is modular, consisting of many small parts like a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic made out of various materials fitted together to create a whole, a format he often uses. This gives the viewer a sense of trial and error and is representative of Corbin’s philosophy that “there cannot be art without failure.”

The Detroit based artist (with a BFA from Wayne State University in Detroit, and a MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York) now works out of a studio in East Detroit that he had created out of a once-vacant storefront. Corbin has exhibited widely in New York, Michigan and Italy and collaborates frequently with poets, writers and other artists. This new installation of *Drift* shown at CUE Art Foundation in New York is a further exploration of genetic drift, which inspired the previous *Drift* exhibition in the Spring of 2010 at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Ferndale, Michigan. His work, overall, is an assemblage of visual and conceptual complexity that speculates about origins, ethnicity, culture, science and technology—visual theories of everything.

Some of Corbin’s early works such as *1000 Plateaus, Molecule* (1999) have presented concepts that have evolved into the present installation. *1000 Plateaus, Molecule*, is composed of several glowing, large-scale molecular models of glucose and fructose that, when combined, create sucrose, or table sugar, a different substance and another instance of synthesis and transformation. Corbin typically merges aspects of his many interests and inspirations: mathematics, biology, puzzles and literature—especially the novels of Vladimir Nabokov. He is fascinated by the theory of “genetic drift,” defined as the variation in the gene pool of a small population that is strictly random and, with natural selection, a force in the evolution of the species. Genetic drift takes place over time when a small population is isolated and certain traits become pronounced—in Corbin’s words: “it has become a closed system.” With this theory in mind, Corbin brings together seemingly unrelated entities and systems into his own version of genetic drift. In so doing, he discovers characteristics that they share but were previously unseen or unnoticed.

In the earlier installation of *Drift*, the image of the hexagon—which Corbin continues to use in the new installation as a structure with the potential for infinite stability—was repeated throughout the show, in particular in two works, both called *Drift* (2010). One piece was based on Shakespeare’s plays and consists of countless short sections of cut-off, white PVC pipes, some of which are filled with a round of colored-coded beeswax (green, for instance) that represents a character type (prince) but not a specific character (Hamlet). The sections are arranged in a pattern of multiple hexagons in which each hexagon signifies a play and visualizes the emergence of unsuspected common traits within a closed system, as occurs in genetic drift.

The other *Drift* is based on the Fibonacci code and it is apparent that a struggle to return to simplicity and a perfect whole is in progress. Corbin presents the code as a sequence of organically grouped cardboard cylinders of different heights and diameters. As the sequence proceeds, the symmetry breaks down and the organization of each set becomes more and more chaotic. The final form, however, is a hexagon and returns to a state of stability, indicated by the dimensions of the cylinder sections, now all the same size.

Corbin's hexagons can also flow, as they do throughout the works in the installation. That flow can be seen especially in *Flaneur* (2009-2010), where Corbin has built a net-like form with linen tape and collaged map that drapes across the wall. The hexagons seem to lose their structural integrity in this arrangement as they shrink and expand, angles askew, only to reform again into the unexpected beauty of chaos. This breakdown in structure mirrors the breakdown in geographical boundaries that Corbin is exploring as well as the blurring of cultural differentiation and ethnic identities. Further illustrating dissolution—and in this instance, re-formation—*Gierlmandy* (2010) combines the outlines of Germany and Ireland, replicating the merger of the two country's names in the title. A horizontal piece raised off the floor to the height of a coffee table, the surface is a pattern of warped and re-constituted hexagons. The sides are shelves filled with books by Irish and German writers, the whole an invented landmass born through a synthesis based on the autobiographical—Corbin is of Irish and German ancestry.

*Sorrows of the Artist As A Young Man* 2010 is another conflated project that refers to linguistic synthesis. In the form of a book, it alternates chapters of Goethe's, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1917).

This exploration of national and cultural identities is continued in *Sara* (2010), *Hazel* (2010), and *Samantha* (1993-2010), named after friends that he represents by manipulated maps of the multiple countries of their origins. Made of colored acrylic medium similar to stained glass and based again on a hexagonal structure, these and other works form an atlas of sorts, immersing the viewer in a provocative creation of new, overlapping geographies and increasingly hybrid ethnicities.

John Corbin has a great affinity for structural manipulation and latent chaos. Searching for the factual as well as the metaphoric, his art is an encyclopedic massing of concepts that expand the designation of the in-between through the use of both proliferating patterns and degenerative structures with their unpredictable outcomes. The current installation of *Drift* is a microcosm of forces—of actions and reactions—that are shaping and transforming today's world.

The writer, **Morgan Marentic**, is a recent graduate of College for Creative Studies in Detroit, MI. Her paintings have been displayed in local exhibitions and publications in the Detroit area. She is currently working on a minor in Critical Theory and researching prospective graduate programs to earn an MFA.

The mentors were **Lilly Wei** and **Barbara A. McAdam**. Lilly Wei is a New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who contributes to many publications in the United States and abroad. She has

written regularly for *Art in America* since 1982 and is a contributing editor at *ARTnews*. Barbara A. MacAdam is deputy editor of *ARTnews*, where she has worked for nearly 20 years. She has also worked as executive editor of *Art + Auction*, and was an editor of *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* and of *New York* magazine. She has written on design for *ID* magazine, reviewed books on art and literature for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *Newsday*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, and has written for a number of other magazines and newspapers on art, design and literature. She has also curated art exhibitions at nonprofit spaces.