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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, interest in the artist/conservator collaborative process has gained considerable momentum in the field of conservation (Wharton 2009). This article explores the collaboration between the author and the artist, James Magee, in preparation for the 2010 exhibition, *Revelation: The Art of James Magee*, hosted by the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. Issues related to the conservation of contemporary works in the context of the artist/conservator collaboration are presented with the goal of extending the current literature base that guides similar endeavors. Within this context two specific aspects of the collaborative process will be highlighted: (1) setting the stage for a successful collaboration and (2) choosing/assessing the scope of collaboration.

2. BACKGROUND

As the sculpture conservator of the Nasher Sculpture Center, the author embarked on a trip to El Paso, Texas, in January 2010 in preparation for James Magee's exhibition, *Revelation: The Art of James Magee*, scheduled for later that year. The primary purpose of this initial trip was to become acquainted with the artist and the works in his El Paso studio under consideration for exhibition. The trip also included a visit to *The Hill*, Magee's ambitious and majestic site-specific work, in preparation for a catalog to accompany the exhibition. Over the course of three days, approximately 12 hours of discussion were digitally recorded, covering topics related to the preservation and conservation issues of works in Magee's studio and at *The Hill*. Although not all artists share the same interest in and enthusiasm for discussing the conservation of their works, Magee appreciated being able to talk about his work and receive feedback from a conservation perspective, especially given the unique materials he uses, as will become clear below. Although this visit resulted in extensive information gathering, it also marked the beginning of a partnership between conservator and artist.

LIVING ARTISTS AND THE CONSERVATION OF CONTEMPORARY OBJECTS: PRESERVING AN AESTHETIC OF DECAY

JOHN T. CAMPBELL

ABSTRACT

This article examines the conservation of contemporary sculpture in the context of the artist/conservator collaboration using the work of artist James Magee as a case study. Magee is a Texas-based artist known primarily for a decades-long project called *The Hill*—a site-specific architectural installation in the desert outside of El Paso. Magee's exploration of beauty through the product of decay combined with the use of a wide array of organic and inorganic materials all set within the rugged environment of the Chihuahuan Desert provides unique challenges to the conservator in preserving the material aspect of the work. Through specific examples, this article emphasizes the importance of an artist's voice and intent in the development of treatment and preservation strategies related to their work. This article demonstrates how initial groundwork for the artist/conservator collaboration, including assessment of artist interest, knowledge, and goals related to the conservation of their work, can enhance the artist interview guidelines developed by the conservation community over the last two decades. The article concludes by examining the variables and compromise that determined the scope of the author's collaboration with Magee.
2.1 THE HILL

_The Hill_ is a site-specific work located 90 mi. east of El Paso in the Chihuahuan Desert. Pilgrimage to the site requires a 1.5-hour drive from El Paso, followed by a 15-minute walk from the road to installation site. The complex of four rectangular buildings sits on 2000 acres of desert wilderness. The buildings, set roughly at the points of the compass, are 40 ft. long and 17 ft. tall and are connected by raised stone walkways (figs. 1a, 1b).

Figs. 1a and 1b. Views of _The Hill_ (© Tom Jenkins, courtesy of Lisa L. Jenkins. All rights reserved)
The architectural aspect of *The Hill* is impressive. At 52,000 square ft., it is not unlike an earthwork. It was constructed by the artist, with minimal assistance, over 25 years from native shale taken from the ancient seabed that encompasses the surrounding area. Integral to this architectural complex are sculptures housed inside each building. Illuminated solely by natural light, it is easy to understand why Magee refers to these installations as “jewels in boxes” (Magee 2010).

With the artist as guide, *The Hill* was revealed to the author as a performative experience. Moving through the site from Building One (the South Building) to Building Three (the East Building), the sculptural installations increase in complexity, requiring the manipulation of articulated elements to reveal the contents within. The mechanics were so complex in Building Three that the artist required assistance manipulating them (fig. 2).

Still in progress, Building Four (the West Building) is slated to host the most complex sculptural installation at *The Hill*. Having already dedicated over a quarter century to realize his vision in the desert, the artist estimated that the interior of Building Four would take an additional 20 years to complete (fig. 3) (Magee 2010).

### 2.2 THE STUDIO

Not all of Magee’s sculpture makes it up to *The Hill*. He also creates work on a gallery/exhibition scale. His studio is a modified industrial warehouse outfitted with wood and metal fabrication equipment, a large drafting table, and shelves filled with various hand tools and hardware (figs. 4a, 4b).

Oftentimes the works he creates in the studio are the result of research and development of ideas for sculptural programs at *The Hill*. Almost as much an exhibition space as a workspace, Magee has filled the walls of the studio, the hallway to his office, and even the washroom with art. Having run out of wall space, he converted a shipping container into an ingenious large rolling storage unit. At the foot of the walls lay many more works in different stages of fabrication and realization. The sheer number of iterations or pieces confirms the vast amount of exploration and experimentation Magee undergoes to produce his work.

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*Fig. 2. Interior of Building Three (East) showing sculptural elements within (© Tom Jenkins, courtesy of Lisa L. Jenkins. All rights reserved)*
Fig. 3. Interior of Building Four (West) showing work in progress (Courtesy of John T. Campbell)
Figs. 4a and 4b. Views of Magee’s studio (Courtesy of John T. Campbell)
2.3 MATERIALS: A UNIQUE CHALLENGE

The materials Magee incorporates into his artworks originate from a range of sources, including repositories of discarded scrap, purveyors of industrial supplies, stalls at open-air markets, and the shelves of traditional art supply vendors. These sources provide a wide variety of inorganic materials, such as diverse types of stock metal, various forms of glass (e.g., windshields, blasting media, shatter proof glass, wire reinforced glass, and beverage bottles), antique car bodies, barbed wire, metal shot, and melted lead. These inorganic materials convey an overall industrial feel to the works, but closer examination also reveals a distinct connection to the organic world. Housed inside glazed iron frames are dried hibiscus flowers, paprika, honey, wax, paper of varying quality, sea shells, interior wood trim, and animal bones.

Most of the materials used in Magee’s sculptures are selected to convey an aesthetic marked by weathering and neglect, giving his works a patina reminiscent of ancient artifacts. Magee explains that he sees beauty both in the process and the products of decay, and material selection is critical to capturing this desired aesthetic (Magee 2010).

Sections of antique car bodies, for example, are seen by the artist as “painted skins” weathered by the desert sun to a shadow of what initially rolled off the assembly line (fig. 5) (Magee 2010). These objects are prized by Magee for their “beautiful” muted colors, replacing showroom gloss with a delicate, natural satin finish (Magee 2010). During the author’s visit to Magee’s studio, a stack of antique car hoods, stored side by side, stood waiting to be incorporated into sculptures. There is no hurry to bring

Fig. 5. Antique car bodies outside Magee’s studio (Courtesy of John T. Campbell)
them inside. Instead, they wait outside the studio in the harsh elements of El Paso and continue to develop their prized patina until the artist is ready to use them.

Magee is well aware that the same natural processes that deteriorate his source materials to achieve their patinas will eventually prey upon his finished works. In the future, the rusty fulcrum on which these sculptures balance will be reduced to a mound of crumbled oxides. Magee clearly articulates that maintenance is a distinct aspect of his work (Magee 2010). In fact, he finds beauty in the effort to ward off the inevitable (Magee 2010).

From the conservator’s point of view, Magee’s aesthetic of decay creates a challenge in differentiating between intentional vs. unintentional degradation. At face value, the condition of the artwork is clear: stone and mortar are weathered by the desert climate, paint on reclaimed industrial scrap is sun bleached and friable, much of the stock steel features rust, and organic materials are desiccated and oxidized. The task of identifying recent change in the condition of the work is quite difficult at best. Many of the works are in their intended state, but without the artist’s guidance, assessing this would be almost impossible. Thus, it quickly became clear that a constructive conservator/artist collaboration would greatly enhance the success of the upcoming exhibition and future treatments.

3. COLLABORATION PROCESS

Magee’s works exemplify the critical importance that conservator/artist collaborations can have on preservation and treatment outcomes. Collaboration allows the conservator insight into the artist’s intentions and preferences regarding their artworks. It also provides conservators the opportunity to understand and document what is essential and what is less critical in preserving the meaning of a work as well as its overall aesthetic. Conservators are thus armed with the necessary information to better distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable changes in condition and are therefore more likely to make sound treatment decisions.

Open dialogue with Magee, for example, revealed that the thick layer of fine desert dust that collects on his works is not considered integral to each piece (Magee 2010). Further, unlike artworks by David Hammons, such as High Falutin’2 (1990), and the late Gordon Matta-Clark’s Splitting: Four Corners (1974) (Scheidemann 2007), Magee’s works can be safely dusted. Additional discussion also revealed that although Magee’s sculptures are often constructed from naturally weathered materials and subsequently housed in a harsh and inhospitable environment, much like the towers of vulnerable candy busts stacked in the late artist Dieter Roth’s damp “Schimmelmuseum” (Mould Museum). Unlike Roth, however, once Magee’s works are complete, their aesthetic is not to be dictated by the process of decay as a melancholy display of transience and mortality; their condition is meant to remain static (Magee 2010). Such information was invaluable for guarding against incorrect condition diagnosis and corresponding treatment decisions in preparation for the Nasher exhibition, and documentation will also inform future endeavors in preserving the artist’s legacy.

3.1 PREPARATION FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

To enhance the potential for success and increase the likelihood for a productive artist/conservator collaboration, it is necessary to understand the artist’s interest, knowledge, and goals regarding the conservation process. Therefore, before going down a conservation checklist related to a specific object, initial efforts should focus on developing an understanding of each party’s expectations and goals. Examples of early questions to consider for promoting groundwork dialogue may include: (1) What is the artist’s experience with and understanding of conservation? (2) What has worked in the past when collaborating with conservators and what could be improved upon? (3) How interested is the artist in being involved with the conservation process? (4) What is the artist’s level of interest in the
object? (5) How familiar is the artist with the materials used to create the work? and (6) What would be the ideal outcome of this collaboration? Spending this initial time to lay the groundwork for the collaboration can expose potential areas ripe for misunderstanding and clear up misconceptions about the process.

3.1.1 Assessing Interest

James Magee had a strong interest in discussing conservation and preservation issues related to his work and appreciated the potential benefit of collaborating with a conservator. He had positive interactions with conservators in the past, the most recent of which was troubleshooting a condition issue via correspondence. Due to its remote location, however, few conservators are able to visit The Hill. Over time, Magee had compiled a list of concerns and was eager to receive feedback.

Of course, not all artists are as interested as Magee in embarking upon a collaborative process with a conservator. Indeed, in the author’s experience, some have claimed not to care about the conservation of their work and responded to inquiries regarding different treatment approaches with, “I don’t know, aren’t you supposed to be the expert?” Such comments originate from different places, one being that the direction of the artist’s work has shifted significantly and earlier pieces are no longer of interest. In such cases, the collaborative process may be minimal or have different goals than with an artist who is more keenly invested in the process.

Tact is crucial when engaging in preliminary discussions. Education and training provide conservators with a technical perspective that may directly contrast with that of the artist. It is important to avoid making assumptions about the extent of an artist’s technical knowledge of specific techniques or materials used. A lack of information may be due to a practical reason rather than a reflection of the value the artist places on the work. For example, it may have been a long time since the artist thought intently about the work in question, or if the artist was not present for the manufacture of works constructed by fabricators he/she may not have firsthand information about process and materials.

3.1.2 Assessing Knowledge

To further set the stage for a successful collaboration, it is important to gauge an artist’s knowledge and understanding of conservation and the role of the conservator. Magee’s prior experience with conservation gave him a firm understanding of the field. This minimized the need for preliminary explanations and allowed more time for the development of a working relationship and the assessment of works.

However, not all artists have such experience or understanding. To determine artists’ perceptions of the conservator’s role, it can be helpful to first identify their expectations and goals for the treatment of specific artworks. For example, as a graduate student, the author had interviewed the late artist, Alena Ort, who had no prior experience with conservation. When asking the artist for her recommendation regarding the treatment of a minor, but noticeable, loss to the large stone used in her 1997 work Treasure Rock, she suggested covering the loss with a patch constructed from rusted steel bands and hammered rivets, similar to those already wrapped around the stone (fig. 6) (Ort 2001). In this case, the response highlighted a limited understanding of what conservators do and the need to provide more basic information before discussing treatment approach. Following a discussion regarding the role of the conservator, the artist amended her original suggestion and recommended that the repair be made invisible (Ort 2001). This demonstrates that a small investment in education can produce satisfactory results for both conservator and artist.

In addition to a general overview, the conservator also contributes knowledge of materials and experience in the ethical treatment and preservation of artworks. Educating artists in a user-friendly way about the tenants of the AIC Code of Ethics may be helpful in this regard.
Even with a constructive initial dialogue, the interview process can still be challenging for artists, forcing them to contemplate and articulate aspects of their works in a foreign mindset with unfamiliar terms. It may take time to arrive at a common language. Artists may also have difficulty offering input regarding the preservation of the aesthetic aspects of their work. For example, Magee attributed initial challenges to an inability to “stand outside his work” (Magee 2010). Thus, even when an artist is interested in collaboration, challenges persist.

3.2 SETTING GOALS AND DETERMINING SCOPE

After assessing the artist’s interest and knowledge, the next step is to determine the scope of the collaboration and set agreed upon goals. The scope is generally determined by whether the collaboration is focused on one work, multiple works, an exhibition, or an entire body of work. In the author’s experience, most artist/conservator interactions focus on a single work. Often the goal of such collaborations is to answer a question about a specific issue, such as color, finish, or an appropriate replacement for an outdated component. In such cases, documentation of the collaboration may consist of e-mail correspondence, a note in a treatment report, or a memo in the artist’s file.

Granted, a single work can consist of multiple components, such as sound, light, and audio. In such cases, it is ideal to sit down with the artist and clarify as many variables and outcomes as possible. Not surprisingly, the greater the detail that goes into the discussion of an object, the more likely the original aesthetic of the piece and the voice of the artist will be preserved. That said, it is often beneficial to consider the necessary scope of collaboration and weigh the time available against desired results to ensure a constructive interaction.

Fig. 6. View of Alena Ort’s Treasure Rock on display at Socrates Sculpture Park as part of the International 97 exhibition (Courtesy of Socrates Sculpture Park)
The purpose of the author’s trip to El Paso was to prepare for an exhibition of 16 of Magee’s works. Working in the role of exhibition conservator, the author’s expectation was to utilize the object cut-list provided by the curator to assess 36 prospective works in the studio, assessing overall condition, documenting hanging requirements, and identifying vulnerabilities associated with packing, shipping, and exhibition. In contrast, however, Magee’s primary concern was obtaining feedback on recent condition changes to works at The Hill. Thus the overall scope of the collaboration during the trip became one of compromise between artist and conservator.

Both armed with their lists of questions, the conversation took place during artist-guided tours of The Hill and the studio rather than as a formal interview. With a digital recorder in hand, Magee introduced his work, discussing materials, techniques, trials (both successful and unsuccessful), artistic goals and intent, as well as issues of concern related to conservation and preservation. This informal process allowed both parties to focus on various issues, highlighting what was essential and less critical for the overall aesthetic of Magee’s work. Although the visit to The Hill took time away from specific exhibition-related responsibilities in the studio, the result was to gain additional insight into the artist’s process and intent that greatly informed understanding of his work.

Magee was specifically interested in developing a “maintenance manual” for The Hill (Magee 2010). Balanced between creation and destruction due to its desert location, maintenance is a continuous battle, making The Hill a constant work in progress. Since lack of resources (i.e., time and money) often hinder the development of a conservation protocol for ongoing maintenance on such a scale, the transcribed digital recording was offered to the artist as an interim measure until a more formal document could be developed. The 102-page transcript contains significant insight regarding the material aspect of Magee’s art and will encourage correct condition assessments and possible treatments for future conservators.

4. CONCLUSION

Artist/conservator collaborations can be invaluable to the process of preservation and treatment by providing insight into artists’ intentions and preferences regarding their work. Investing the time to prepare for collaborations in a systematic and thoughtful way can increase the potential for successful outcomes. Artists will have varied levels of interest in the conservation of their work and may have limited experience with the field of conservation. Conservators can avoid misunderstandings and limit barriers by meeting artists where they are, gauging their interest, knowledge, expectations, and goals before engaging in more technical discussions.

James Magee’s aesthetic of decay created a conservation challenge by needing to differentiate between intentional vs. unintentional degradation. In collaboration with the artist, valuable insight and knowledge were shared that helped not only support a specific exhibition but also the preservation of Magee’s work for years to come.

This case study of the initial discussion and beginning of an artist/conservator collaboration provides a rich example of how artist interviews can enhance the success of conservation documentation and treatment. This article contributes to the ongoing effort aimed at developing a comprehensive framework to assist and guide conservators through artist/conservator collaborations.

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NOTES

1. A surge of interest in the development of both theory and practice related to the conservation of modern and contemporary works of art occurred beginning in the mid 1990s, leading to numerous symposia, research projects, and publications.

One such research project, initiated in 1998 and continued until 2005, provided the foundations for the pioneering text *The Artist Interview: For conservation and preservation of contemporary art guidelines and practice*, published in 2012. A hands-on textbook providing guidelines for a structured approach to the most extensive form of an artist interview, “the oeuvre interview,” as well as several examples of actual artist interviews taken directly from the research project noted in this article. This text also provides an excellent selected bibliography.

In addition, an earlier 1997 symposium *Modern Art: Who Cares?,* organized by the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art and held in Amsterdam, inspired the formation of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) in 1999. Subsequently, regional groups were established, including INCCA-North America (INCCA-NA) in 2006. Dedicated to the preservation of modern and contemporary art, INCCA-NA provides education programs, such as their Artist Interview Workshops, of which the author was a past participant, as well as invaluable resources such as the Artist Interview Resources page on their website (www.incca-na.org).

2. During the author’s employment at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, conservation staff were faced with the challenge of preserving existing dust on the surface of artist David Hammons’ work, *High Falutin*, when deciding where to brace the work in its shipping crate. Preservation of the dust was mandatory as the artist considered it integral to the piece.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


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