

Modern Painters February 2012

Nari Ward

By Scott Indrisek

The Harlem building, an old firehouse, was the perfect place to showcase Nari Ward's assemblage of abandoned baby carriages. He'd been collecting them in the neighborhood in order to turn them, along with lengths of fire hose, into a sculptural installation. After that exhibition in 1995, he started renting the space and later bought it. "There was no water or heat," he says. "We got the electricity from the church next door. Keep in mind this was when the city was trying to get people to buy these buildings for a dollar with the impetus that you would live here. This was a whole different time and place. It's interesting to see the change." Ward now works in the front room and lives in the back with his family.

During our visit, a lovely aroma wafts through the studio-Barack Obama incense, Ward tells us. He is in the process of brainstorming for a March show at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery on the Lower East Side, in New York. Against the cultural backdrop of Occupy Wall Street, he's been thinking a great deal about the police-specifically, the oddly sci-fi-looking "tactical platforms" used by law enforcement to literally tower over a crowd. "It's that old-school metaphor of 'We have the authority, the power. Look: We're taller, we're bigger,'" Ward says. He intends to build a version of one such platform using offbeat materials, including plastic tarps (omnipresent during the encampment in Zuccotti Park, in Manhattan's financial district) and laser pointers.

"Making it look elegant and funky at the same time-that's kind of my goal and what my aesthetic is," he explains. "I want to braid hair-from African American to blond, gray to white-a braid of hair that's going to float to the ground, almost as if someone's in the tower, like a fairy tale."

SEED SHINE "This is my version of a crucifixion. It's about potentiality. There's all this tying down but at the same time its trying to spring up. It's made of a crutch, there's a fan in the middle-there's so much in there. It's sprayed with silver paint. The piece had to be charged."

A SCULPTURE FROM "ALL STARS" "For me it was about referencing cotton picking, but also that I could combine something dealing with violence-this primal club-with something dealing with healing, which was cotton. What I did was dip the cotton into sugar and then iron and burn the edges. I was subjugating the club. It became this ritualized object for me, giving it some power."

RUM BOTTLES "This is from a project I did in Cuba. I collected rum bottles, and then I'd go along the beach and pick up anything that was small enough to put into them. I found more bullets than anything else. There's some really strange stuff: screws, rubber balloons, cards, batteries, plastic flowers."

DRAWN-ON BASKETBALL CARDS "I negate every thing including the ball except the players' hands and heads. It accentuates the gesture. It's meditative. I get into another world when I'm doing it, like therapy. There's a sense of completion when I finish each card that feels really nice, and then I tile them or quilt them together into a grid."

TAXIDERMIED FOX WITH AFRO WIG TAIL, NAMED AFTER CORNEL WEST

"I got Cornel on eBay. The seller was in Philadelphia. I went to this weird suburban neighborhood to pick it up. There was this estate sale or something. The whole place was ransacked, and this guy was on his computer looking all caffeinated or drugged up. I was like, 'Give me the fox! The taxi is waiting!' For a while I was kind of stuck and had all this anxiety about my Lehmann Maupin show. Once I got this fox, I knew what I was going to do. It's truly the mascot, this great, cunning presence that doesn't make any real sense at all."