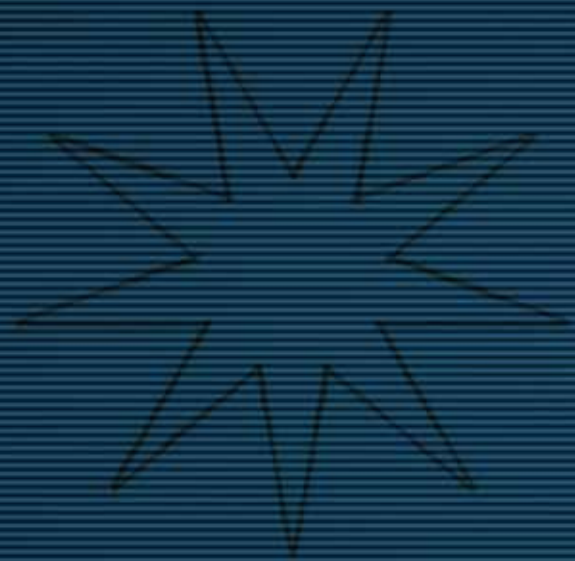






enpapers: ***You are Here: Center of the Universe (Transmitter, front and Receptor, back)***, 2011
mixed media, 8 x 11 inches
photo: P.D. Rearick
Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit

REMAIN CALM

The Art of Graem Whyte

Oakland University Art Gallery

Curated by Dick Goody

shot of the yard at Popps Packing during the exhibit
The Golden Casket of Earthly Delights, 2009
photo: Marvin Shaouni Photography





Venue for Advanced Conflict Resolution, 2011
modified ping pong table, bronze
42 x 96 x 49 inches
photo: P.D. Rearick
Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit

Remain Calm: *The Art of Graem Whyte*

“I’d like to think that we CAN change the course of history if we really want to, even if it seems impossible.” — Graem Whyte

The artistic practice of Graem Whyte lies at the intersection of family, community, collaboration, craftsmanship, metaphysics and the imaginative repurposing of materials. The compound where he lives and works, Popp’s Packing, a former meatpacking business, is a model for the integration of art and life. A home, studio, gallery and de facto community center, it lies at the northern rim of Hamtramck, a multicultural enclave within the massive, shifting metropolis of Detroit. Here, amid an evolutionary transition from urban-industrialism to post-capital cooperativism (and along with it, a return to the land and its values), art and life thrive at the confluence of project-based and production-based artistic practices. Whyte produces work in a variety of scale from small, domestic-sized sculptures to mid sized assemblages to larger collaborative projects. An analytical exploration of his

oeuvre reveals his interests and practices; in turn, these uncover a series of conditions unique to him, which are a result of both his commitment to his locale and his desire to engage the greater world.

“It comes down to taking something pre-existing and modifying it to suit my needs, whether those needs are functional or aesthetic. It becomes about reimagining the world around us.”

The **first condition** of Whyte's art, then, is a meditation on pre-existing forms. *You Are Here: Center of the Universe*, 2011, for example, uses repurposed vinyl LPs beneath cast polyurethane Romanesco broccoli cauliflowers. In larger works, the pre-existing forms can incorporate something as immense as a piece of land.



You Are Here: Center of the Universe (receptor), 2011



You are Here: Center of the Universe (transmittor), 2011

Hybridization of landscape and locale is a recurring theme. His ruminations on landscape, whether in miniature maquette-like sculptures or large *in situ* cooperative forms that carve up the actual landscape, underscore his commitment to his community. The exterior space around Popps Packing is one such place. Across the road from the compound are two satellite houses. One is an ongoing exhibition space for visiting artists; the other houses the artists during their residencies. Popps Packing and these additional buildings are the production spaces. At their center, Whyte directs the action.

“‘The table’ serves as a locus for play or fellowship, and so a sense of community is implied.”



Venue for Advanced Conflict Resolution (detail), 2011



Even the Omnipotent Need a Coffee Break, 2011
mixed media, 36 x 28 x 62 inches
photo: P.D. Rearick
Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit

The **second condition** of Whyte's oeuvre is play, or, rather, the assembling of something interactive around which participatory or relational activity can be enacted: an earth barrow, a single-family house gutted and converted into a squash court, a coffee-making coffee table, or an adapted post-cubist table tennis table. We are proactively invited to participate in his work, to be part of a collaboration, which is so central to the artist's practice.

"Everything is okay. Don't worry. There's so much going on in the world and everybody's connected and there's this world of chaos around us, but it's okay because it's about finding a personal meditative space."

The **third condition** is the absence of the possibility of failure; he lives in a self-created, failure-proof world — a post-failure world, if you will. "To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail..." This Beckettism, oft-quoted in the literature surrounding artistic failure, carries the embedded pre-modernist idea that the job of an artist is to make a masterpiece and then everything else must measure up to this paragon of success. But with Whyte we are in the presence of an artist where

Memory Field, collaboration with Faina Lerman, 2010
earth, cistern, groundcover
3 x 100 feet in diameter



one work leads into another — where some works are recycled into others. There is but one thing: continuity and the ongoing body of works in progress — and Whyte's maxim that we must “remain calm” in the face of potential catastrophes. All this ensures that his is a fail-safe approach to art production. And when he involves himself in the risky business of collaboration — and it is risky, with all its potential for drama and letdowns — he does not become unhinged by calamity because in his unflappable milieu there is no such thing as disappointment.

*“To quote Robert Fripp (of the band King Crimson),
‘A beginning is invisible.’”*

Condition four is the unpredictable or transitional nature surrounding a work in progress, or, to put it another way, the condition of not knowing at the beginning the outcome of a particular work. The four major works in this exhibition paralleling themes in the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* have gone through various permutations, adaptations and adjustments leading up to their completion. This open-ended approach allows for flexibility, capitalizes on providence, and uses the unforeseen as a positive force.

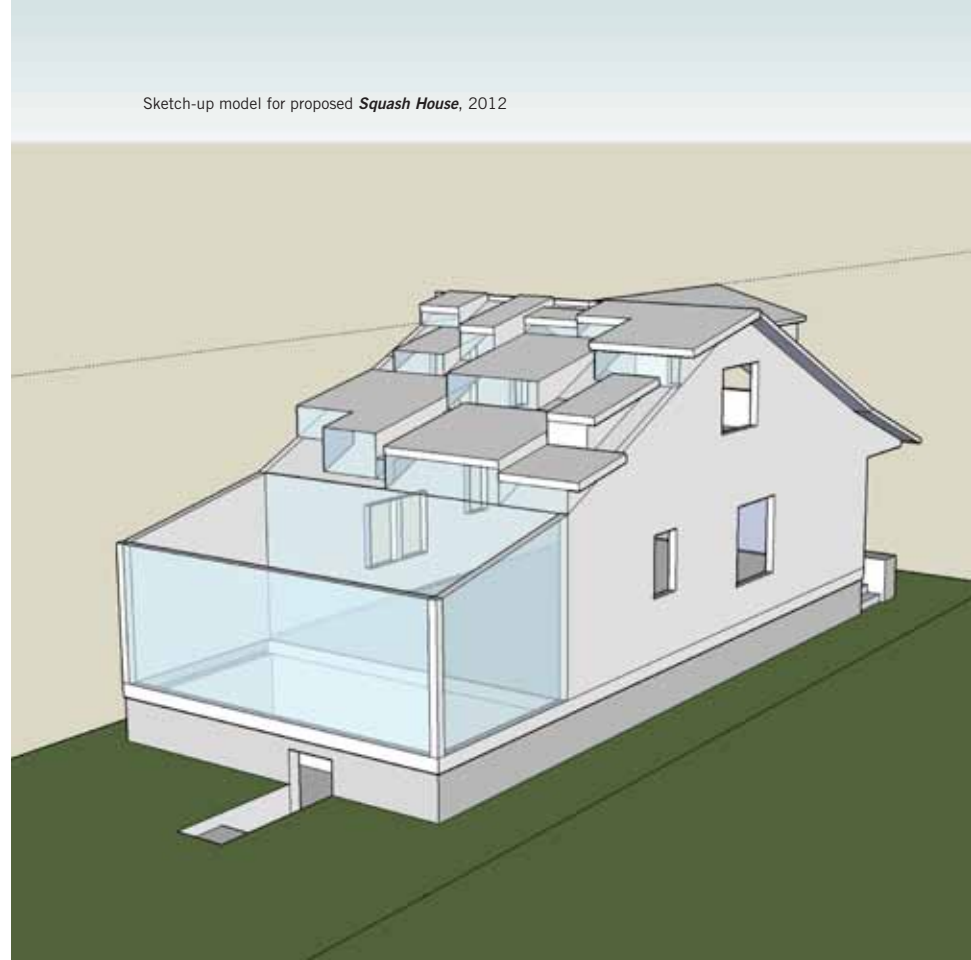
“What I think of as project-based art generally isn’t made to be sold (at least in my experience), although the documentation of it might. That’s not to say that money isn’t made — it just might be pre-funded as opposed to post-funded.”

Feasibility is the **fifth condition**. If failure is impossible, then during unstable economic times, when the commercial viability of artistic practice comes under threat, Whyte’s solution is to increase his involvement in project-based art. This type of practice has its own feasibility, economics, legitimacy and logic, and he has learned to negotiate the political realm of private and public funding.

‘Before’ image of **Squash House**, 2011
photo: Mitch Cope



Sketch-up model for proposed **Squash House**, 2012





video still from *Squash House* fundraising video, 2011
photo: Mitch Cope

“I’m generally of the opinion that positive thoughts go a long way in determining our futures.”

A productive artist is defined by his or her invincible optimism, leading us to the **sixth condition** of Graem Whyte’s process, which is optimism in the face of difficulty. If a project has a hazy future because we cannot know what will happen to it in five years’ time (in Detroit, anything could happen to a house or a park) — or if resources might dry-up during the manufacturing stage — well, it may be ultimately something unrealizable, then he is a protagonist and will adapt, retool and move on. To aspire to succeed against the cynical forces controlling success and failure is the point, which brings us back full circle to Samuel Beckett’s preoccupation with failure and Whyte’s chivalrous preoccupation with continuity.

“I like to allow for improvisation as a response to a problem that may arise, or say, material availability.”

Improvisation is the **seventh condition**. Provisional, conditional and temporary arrangements mediate Whyte’s aesthetic decisions. If there is an interim feel to his



The Hole, ongoing collaborative installation with Scott Hocking, 2010 – present
 earth and light, approximately 8 x 8 x 8 feet
 photo: Greg Holm

works in progress, their latency awaits the next find, the subsequent trove, cache, or reserve of matériel: the unknown hoard awaiting discovery and repurposing.

Condition eight is relatable to matériel and its configuration(s). Let us call this state that of the *apparatus*. Whyte builds objects that function, i.e., they have purposefulness. A table tennis table functions as a platform for play, but it is also an instrument of war. His works operate as apparatuses in two ways: they allow relational involvement (one does not erect a wall between oneself and the work), and with such works one cannot merely contemplate, one must participate and engage. Secondly, his works are receptors. Some appear like funnels or lighting rods. Never didactic, they receive our thoughts, our hermeneutic designs. Our dialectical involvement is essential to their completion.



“I saw Anish Kapoor’s installation [Marsyas] at the Tate in London back in 2003, and I was just amazed at the sheer scale of it all.”

The **ninth condition** is scale. Imagine, from the dizzying heights of a spire to its earthen foundations, the scale of something as simple and practical as a lightning rod. Scale is just as efficient and unobtrusive in Whyte's work; never is it ostentatious. It too has its own logic. The lightning rod example relates to *Beyond Europa: In Search of the Unknown*, a sculpture he made in 2009. The rod metaphor is appropriate because his objects are conductors of an ideas: political, emotional, spiritual. There is a proficient transparency in how his formal and conceptual ideas flow through his various apparatuses.

"Anything that conjures a sense of wonder, of magic, of otherworldliness ... Some call it religion, others call it myth, and others call it spirituality."

Condition ten is myth — that is to say, use of ideological narratives. In Whyte's case we could almost call it allegory, because the devices he uses to convey information are invariably metaphorical. However, he is very clear that he does not want to preach, instruct or lecture. For him, the viewer always completes the work. The myths in *Remain Calm* are vessels, or, better yet armatures, which loosely support his riffing on particular themes. When he explores war, death, famine and conquest,



Beyond Europa, 2009
mixed media, 132 x 4 x 8 inches
detail above, image right
photo: P.D. Rearick

Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit



drawn from the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, he does so broadly using the overarching theme of death as a means of presenting its opposite: life. In practical terms he presents each theme and then transposes it into something positive. Hence, “war” becomes “play,” “death” “sleep,” “famine” “purification,” and “conquest” becomes “enlightenment.”

“Questioning who we are and where we’re headed as a society is important for our quality of life.”

These conditions allow us to appreciate the universality in Graem Whyte's work. In this exhibition he engages the world, its history and contradictions, and, with it, his own sense of morality, optimism and mortality. This work, seen in the context of an institutional exhibition space, made in Detroit, broadcasts its mission to the global network.



From the Hole the Power Pyramid was Born,
collaboration with Scott Hocking, 2011
mixed media

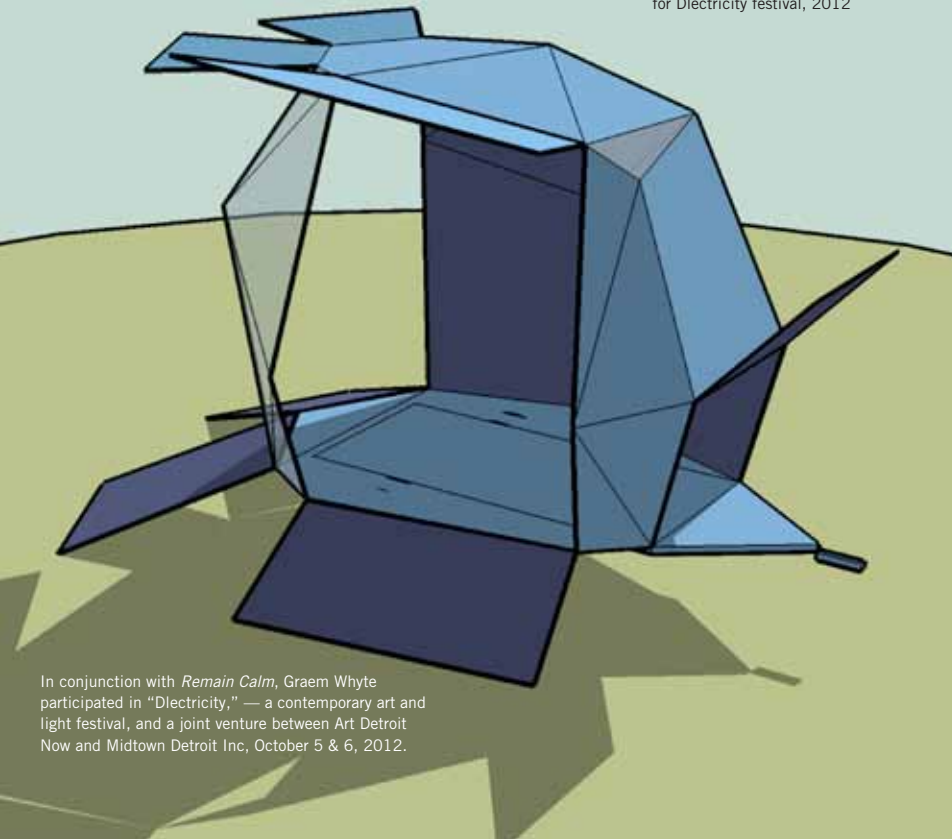


shot from the **2011 Popps**
Packing Pinewood Derby



installation at Re:View Contemporary,
Detroit, 2011
photo: P.D. Rearick

Sketch-up model of *The Ice Cave*
for Dlectricity festival, 2012



In conjunction with *Remain Calm*, Graem Whyte participated in "Dlectricity," — a contemporary art and light festival, and a joint venture between Art Detroit Now and Midtown Detroit Inc, October 5 & 6, 2012.



collaborative light installation
with Mitch Cope, 2007



pages 28-31
works in progress, 2012
photos: Robert Divers Herrick





United Rambler, 2010
mixed media
120 x 48 x 24 inches
photo: P.D. Rearick
Courtesy of the Artist and
Re:View Contemporary, Detroit



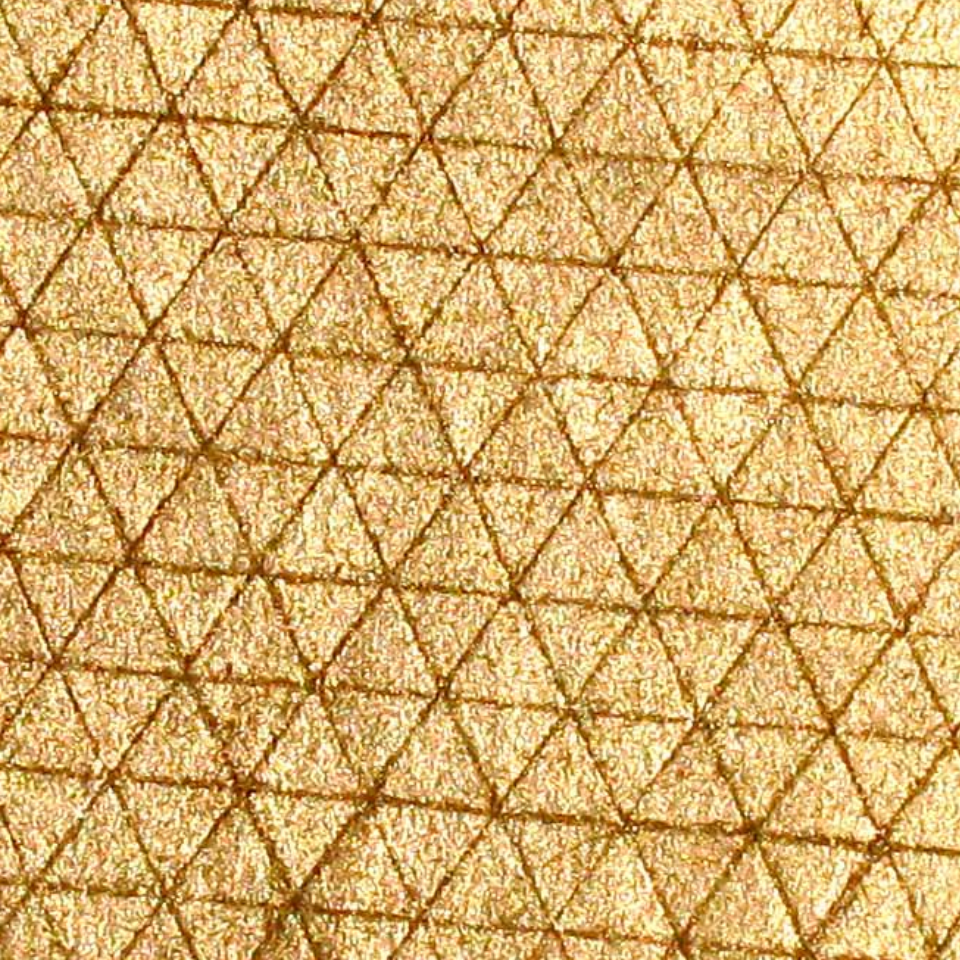
Memory Stone, 2010 (work in progress)
cast bronze
32 x 48 inches in diameter



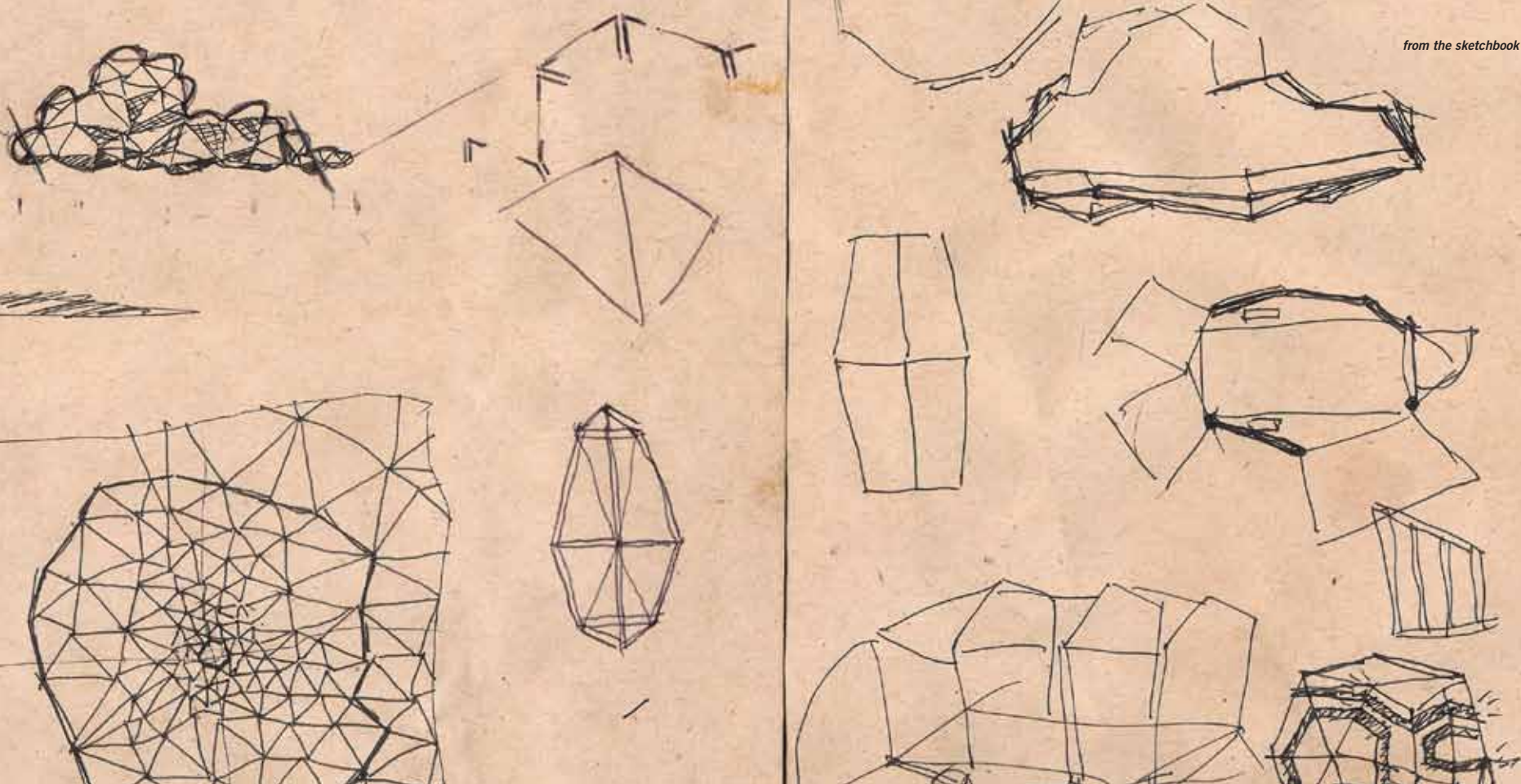
Offering For the Gods of the New Era, 2010
wood, urethane rubber, aluminum, rubber chicken
54 x 24 x 30 inches
photo: P.D. Rearick
Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit



in the studio



artwork for the album *To Shatter*
All Accord by Discipline, 2011
paper, paint, glue
1.5 x 8 inches in diameter

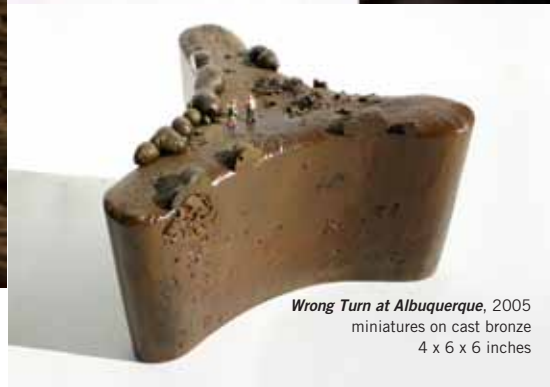




Memory Field in progress

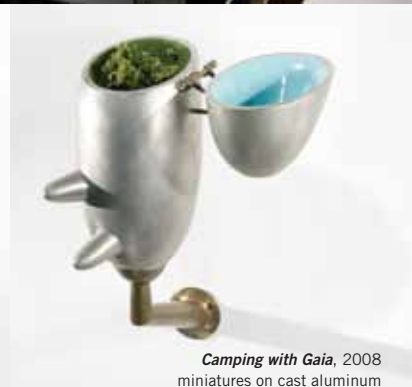


Let Yourself Go, 2006
mixed media, 53 x 24 x 16 inches



Wrong Turn at Albuquerque, 2005
miniatures on cast bronze
4 x 6 x 6 inches

All works on this page courtesy of the
Artist and Re:View Contemporary



Camping with Gaia, 2008
miniatures on cast aluminum
18 x 5 x 9 inches

***Chewy on the Astral Plane*, 2004**

cast bronze

14 x 9 x 3 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit



***Hurricane*, 2002**

carved bowling ball

8.5 inches in diameter

*Courtesy of the Artist and
Re:View Contemporary, Detroit*



***Vortex of Universal Coalescence*, 2012**

aluminum

14 inches in diameter

Courtesy of the Artist and Re:View Contemporary, Detroit



works in progress, 2012
photos: Robert Divers Herrick



Graem Whyte is a sculptor born and raised in Metro Detroit, now based in Hamtramck, Michigan. His career started in the field of architecture, later shifted to fine art, and now hybridizes both disciplines. Whyte and his wife, Faina Lerman, own and operate the experimental art space Poppa Packing. His work utilizes a wide variety of materials, and often combines mythology, patterns of mathematics and nature with a wry sense of humor.



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Curated by Dick Goody

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OAKLAND
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REMAIN CALM

The Art of Graem Whyte

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cover: *Untitled*, 2012, vector drawing