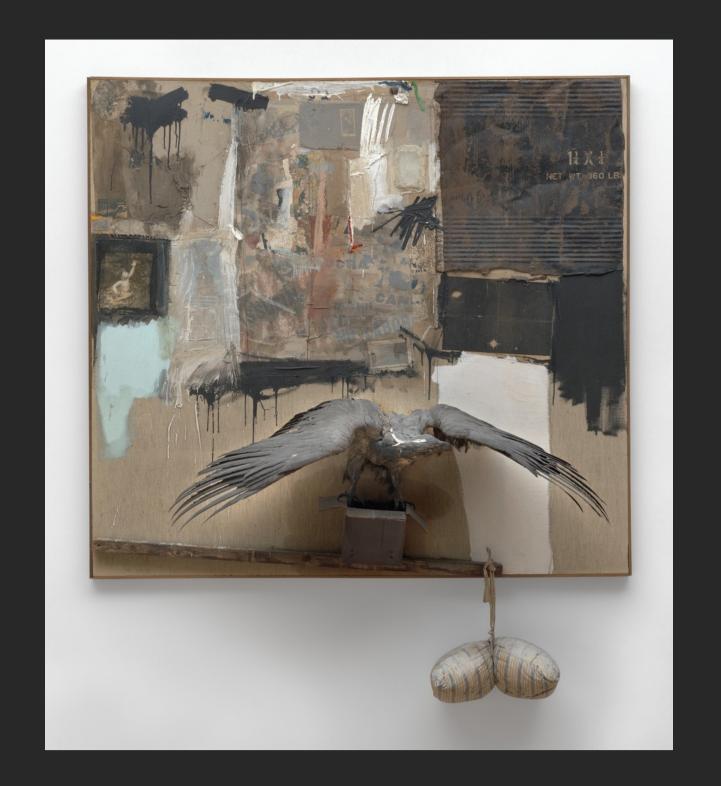
3 - The Making of Unmaking

PART ONE

David Gibson 6 hr ago ♡ 2 ♀ 2 Ĥ



Robert Rauschenberg: *CANYON*, 1959. Oil, pencil, paper, metal, photograph, fabric, wood, canvas, buttons, mirror, taxidermized eagle, cardboard, pillow, paint tube and other materials. $81\frac{3}{4} \times 70 \times 24$ inches. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.

My evolution as an arts professional was for the most part of my own making. I grew up knowing certain things from living with art, and then also from reading about it, in books and art magazines. My family's circle included artists, art dealers, art critics, and curators. It also included gallery assistants, archivists, installers, installation photographers, and gallery painters, all of whom were creatives in their own rights. The art world is like that. Some people get to be in the roster, others on the staff, and still others find a niche of their own in the wider art world community. Sooner or later, they find an opportunity to shine. The engagement with art continues unabated, both socially 'in the scene' and privately, creating endless palimpsests out of the impressions they glean endlessly at all levels of esthetic recognition. In order to make something of themselves they have to unmake an older self that is built upon expectations and wishes.

The process of creating yourself is similar to what the artist undergoes in building a body of work over time, in progressing from a place of limited though well-meaning creative habits, going through the motions, learning and growing. The process of creative development is a lifelong devotion to strengthening one's means of expanded and informed self-expression; it's important to stay active, to always move forward, even if that means traveling into unknown territories. As a critical onlooker I have a unique perspective on this phenomenon. I have learned from other onlookers—curators, art writers, of various stripes—what it also means to understand and describe this process of development. It represents an important cultural touchstone.

Creativity is a fermentation, a rupture, leading either to a masterpiece or to decay and decadence—sometimes all in one. It is an engine that creates so much energy in its wake that it throws off sparks, and these sparks become art. The artist catches them and focuses them into specific expressions. Yet in certain cases, the ferment stays in the sample. It takes on the character of raw power. What results may resemble an artifact, or ruin, or some combination of the two. These aspects may take on an important contribution to the entire process developed by the artist for envisioning and fabricating future works. I see this force in many contemporary artists who are at every stage of their careers. Some have come and gone and are part of history, others are just now beginning to be celebrated by major institutions, while others are still toiling in quieter corners of the art world, making their own energy, fueling their own engine of change to move forward.

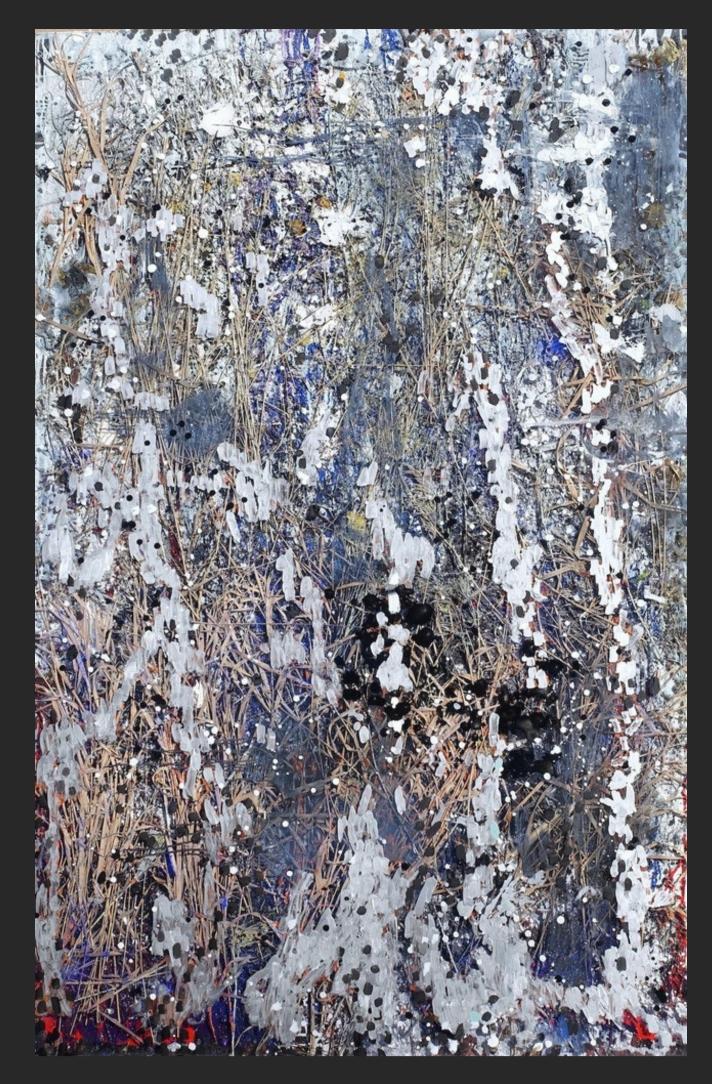
In my adolescence, I had an engagement with the power of chaos and rupture in art orchestrated by my father. We went on regular visits to museums, and one day we visited The Metropolitan Museum of Art. We made our way through the Modern and Contemporary Art section until we reached one particular canvas, which my father told me was his personal inspiration for becoming an art dealer: "Autumn Rhythm" by Jackson Pollock. "I've been looking at this painting for 30 years, "he said. He planted us down on a bench right in front of it and we just sat there and looked, looked, looked, looked. He told me he first saw this painting in the art gallery of Sidney Janis, an important figure who was responsible for enlarging the stature of many of the Abstract Expressionist artists. Two years after he exhibited this work in 1955, it was sold to The Metropolitan Museum, where it has hung ever since, the first major work by a Postwar American painter to be purchased by The Met.

It was clear to me that art mattered very much to my father, not only the selling of it. It was informative to have someone so important in my life share this fact with me in such a way. I began to understand that chaos could be a form of beauty, and could generate masterpieces. I began to look more deeply into the art works I observed. I realized that the process leading to the discovery of such forms was one in which the artist could not merely lay his hand upon the quality of meaning all at once, but had to struggle with traditional forms, deconstructing and minimizing them until all that was left was pure form and the force behind it—interrogatory, emphatic, and primal. Pollock had followed a long path to the great accomplishment of his lifetime. Pollock's painting, his controlled chaos, not only cast a shadow over his own generation, but redefined the demands of the artist for decades to come.

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Another artist I have repeatedly discovered who successfully mined the relationship between ruin and truth is Robert Rauschenberg. He has had several retrospectives that opened up my eyes to what form and appearance could create together. There was one at The Guggenheim Museum in 1997, The Metropolitan Museum in 2005 focusing solely upon his Combines, and one at The Museum of Modern Art in 2017. Each major exhibition revealed aspects of his production that were previously unknown to me. Rauschenberg was revolutionary in his artistic ideas, reaching back to Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism for a new generation, but he went further than his predecessors because he benefitted from aesthetic hindsight as well as living in a more advanced industrial and commercial historical era. Rauschenberg was close with a bunch of creatives in vastly different circles from his own, and he gleaned endless affinities from them. I had an epiphany with his 2005 exhibition, and visited it frequently. Here was a situation in which I might immerse myself in the physical forms and physical relationships between each type of form that Rauschenberg used to achieve a standalone series of works spanning decades of his life. They are each a stunning masterpiece, and even the ones that seem redundant still hold a certain magic. Rauschenberg's vision was prescient and can never be underestimated in historical terms. It's because of him that I like so many different things in contemporary art. Best known among these are works are "Bed" (1955), "Monogram" (1955-59), and "Canyon" (1959), all of which have been on view in local NYC museums for years. These repeatable instances allow many people a viewpoint into his aesthetic, which seems to be infinitely open, though upon closer inspection, there are certain types of commercially printed or industrially fabricated items in each one, endlessly added to every successive sculpture, like an army of fingerprints or fossils marking time.

When I first started curating in 2000, I wanted to discover artists who were making this energy and these choices on their own; whose choices resulted in new ferment. I organized a series of exhibitions focusing upon painterly abstraction; and later, another series on the use of collage. I felt that these forms were still active, fermenting forms and meanings for my creative contemporaries. The artists I want to talk about are a select few whose creative careers embody the concept of making difficult choices that result in not only a making but also an unmaking.



Isolde Kille: "DREAM" (EARTH CAPSULE), 2017. Grass, sage, pigments, enamel paints, foam, Plexi glass on Wood. 75 x 48 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

One of the artists I met then whose work still impresses me formally is ISOLDE KILLE, though her work has undergone several sea changes in the interval of two decades. "Beyond Nothing-Nothing Beyond" from 2000 was a diptych comprised of two large black canvases exhibited over a corner of the gallery. The viewer was forced to perceive them not merely as paired canvases but as opposed energies: an extreme flatness versus an extreme visual depth. In an exhibition filled with gestural flourishes and mark-making they were independently opaque. Kille's current work is partially a product of her current residence in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where the isolation and the presence of the elements has contributed to her process. Now it's filled with the detritus of nature, making trails across its surface like those left by wild creatures; there are still opaque elements but now they operate as voids in the nomenclature of natural detritus that covers her surfaces and enunciates its gestures in a manner that seems seeped in the mystery of elemental time rather than in strategic mark-making. Her new works are like snapshots of the surface of the earth, or the distant cosmic scenery glimpsed in distinct but minute explosions of pure energy and color. Kille has always worked at a deeper and more reflective resolve than many others; her work continues to engage with primal elements, and now she employs the raw materials themselves, for their texture, their symbolism, and their presence. Works from her Earth Capsules series are the ones that most impress me, for they combine the usually toxic materials of painting with natural materials as an accrual of nature presence, a collaboration or conversation between the artists and her immediate environment. Composed at a large scale and hung low to the surface of the floor, they are meant to be confronted in the most direct manner possible. To stand close to them is to likewise be immersed in the ground, to lay on a mountain, or a plain; to stare into an immense emptiness from the bedrock of an immense heaviness and hardness of land. The combined effect of opposed elemental impressions creates a sense memory that begs to be mined and evoked creatively.



Julie Schenkel erg *COWERED*, 2010. Plates, cutlery, crystal, chair, Styrofoam, plaster, 59 x 57 x 48 inches. Courtesy Asya Geisberg Gallery.

I first saw the work of JULIE SCHENKELBERG in 2010, in her very first solo exhibition. It was titled "Bad Blood" and consisted of a series of found object installations that I found compelling. I could imagine the artist visiting, as she stated, decrepit buildings located in the once thriving sections of Vinegar Hill and Navy Yard of Brooklyn, and on uninhabited and desolate North Brother Island where the East River is sandwiched between the South Bronx and Rikers Island. These marginal areas are left over from previous eras and for whatever reason have been left to collapse and rot. They present opportunities for anyone curious enough, like a collector or an artist, to mine the past in its detritus and trash. Schenkelberg has made good use of it. I can imagine her visiting these places, and taking back to her studio stacks of window frames, desks, broken plates, and more. The way that she combines these objects in a work such a "Cowered" (2010) creates a tension that delivers an archeological impression in reverse. The art of ruin is a mining of secrets. The appearance of ruin can be deceiving, for it reveals only the fact that something existed for a time, was destroyed or gradually decayed, and then fell into a state of disrepair. Objects that have lost their utility, or had it shorn from them, cannot retain the full strength they had in use. Age old habitations or structures used for some other communal purpose besides domesticity, such as work or worship, may eventually decay especially when left to the elements, though certain sections, more durably constructed, may remain standing.



Amanda Burgay: *WHAT IS REAL*?, 2020, Acrylic painted paper, magazine and book images, wallpaper samples, UV glaze, 30 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

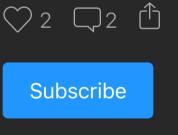
I met ANDREA BURGAY during Bushwick Open Studios in 2018. She had a bunch of small works on display that appealed to me because they did not hew to the rather constrained historical perception that collage is all about putting tiny little pieces together, managing infinitely small and disconnected elements. The common image of the artist is of a magic builder, someone who makes something out of nothing. Every artist is in some way a builder as well as its opposite, a destroyer. The collagist first destroys conventions before building expectations. Burgay's collages presented as paintings, evading use of recognizable print media and composing elementary forms in a dynamically charged foreground. Their action and their depth were both painterly. Burgay uses destruction as much as she does construction in her work; this frees her to be active and even instinctual in her choices. She avoids the overt touchstone that images sourced from media would represent, drawing the eye toward a recognizable form. She wants to create a palimpsest rather than merely manifest a romantic image. We cannot allow ourselves to limit our aesthetic appreciation of any one of her collages to a single element, no matter how recognizable, or redolent with appropriate emotion, it may be. We must allow our attention to swirl around the entire profusion of combined forms. Though the "real" object may act as a centering element, it has to be

a point of both origin and departure.

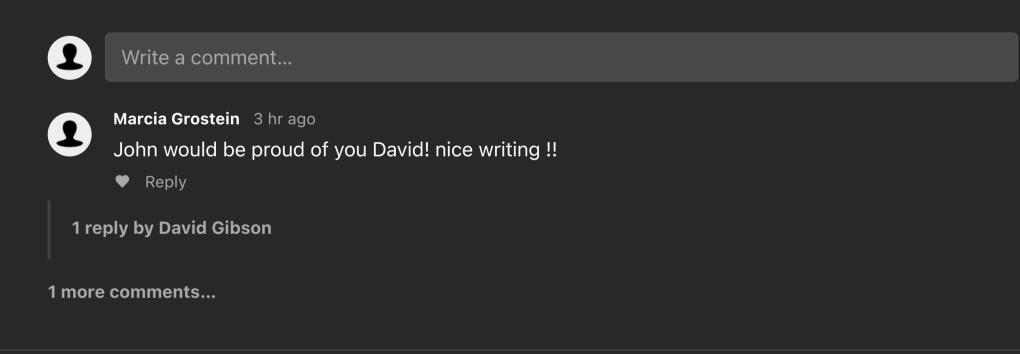
A recent body of work, Burgay's REQUIEM series infuses ruin and monumentality, creating works that court complexity through indirection and messiness, showing all the successive levels of societal development up to the point of crisis. Burgay's details are manifest as archeological or historical facts within layers of matter. Her collages are map-like in their precision and in their flow. There is a specific attempt to create tension between areas of great accumulation and areas where an emptiness or an elision occurs more strongly. Absences take the form of gestures while areas of defined color are like shields or walls. Media based images of real things seem to be haphazardly added, almost as if merely by chance. They occupy space as well as merely take it up, and may only serve as disruptions in the greater palimpsest of formal strategies Burgay intends. One strains to read them, projecting a degree of meaning that is otherwise alien to the dynamic aesthetic action in the work on its face. Is the injection of media necessary, or is it merely to point to its own corrupted qualities? I think that if we can see past its object-relative nature, we can apply what it does as just another conditional form, albeit one that is complicated by being curated into the picture.

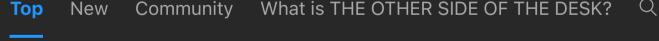
What Burgay achieves is lyrical and evocative, painterly in its effect, rather than either a welter of cultural cross-references floating amidst a sea of unintelligibility or a methodically organized artifice of imperatively esthetic parts. She doesn't want to overcharm or bemuse, but wants to take you on a journey where you can eventually recognize your pleasure in a continued engagement with her forms, one which rewards a dedicated habit of observance over time. Burgay wants to dramatize the natural progression from creativity to normalcy to decadence, decay and finally destruction. To look back over the history of art one must treat it like history, to view not only the obvious plateaus but also the stages of birth and death that accompany true evolution. The substantial details are manifested as archeological or historical facts within layers of matter. There's something very attractive about an object or image that projects ruin. Nothing that is ruined can have escaped having a personal history, and every mark left upon it, or every broken piece, is a clue for us to unravel the mysteries of its previous existence. For Burgay, disorder is the construct that directs all forms. To trust in the forces of destruction, leading to decay or ruin, and leads into a continuum of change that is as endless as it is inexorable.

This theme is to be continued; Part 2 is forthcoming.



← Previous







1 - The View from the DeskAn Extended Introduction
David Gibson
Feb 25 ♥ 10 ♀ 2 ^①



2 - Courting Complexity

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I've spent a great part of my life in the art world dealing with abstractions, both literal, formally demonstrative ones, and also conceptual examples.... David Gibson

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