

# ARTWRIT

## 06. JODY ZELLEN ON STEVE RODEN

Steve Roden's work over the last twenty years has been about translation. In Los Angeles, where he lives and works, he is well known as both a sound artist and a painter. Roden allows these divergent mediums to converge and uses the structure and rhythms of creating work in sound (or film) to direct his actions in paint. The influence of one medium upon the other is undeniable. This is not to suggest that Roden's output is only successful when they coexist, but rather that when the static and the dynamic have the opportunity to fuse, something spectacular occurs. Two simultaneous exhibitions allow Los Angeles audiences to view and listen to myriad pieces and begin to understand the complexities of Roden's artistic language.

At Pomona College Art Museum, Roden has created both his largest and smallest works to date. Everything else can be seen at the Armory Art Center where there is a twenty-year survey curated by Howard Fox aptly titled *in between*. Over 100 works spanning two locations confirm that Roden is a prolific artist with a keen intellect. Yet what sets him apart is his refusal to make work that fits neatly into any one category. The paintings have a rough textured surface, the sculptures use found materials, the drawings suggestive without being representational. This is not to say that the works are not beautiful; they are. Roden creates by coming up with a rule set that dictates the color, shape and quantity of his marks, as well as the length of his lines. Often Roden will use a literary text or a musical score as a source, assigning specific relationships between words or notes and the application of paint to the canvas, lines to the page or sections of wood to the structure. His room-sized installation piece *Bowrain* (2010), at Pomona College Art Museum, takes up a diagram he happened upon when perusing a book by Buckminster Fuller as its point of departure. In Fuller's drawing from the 1950s, he specified the use of six numbers, six units and six colors -- the colors of the rainbow -- for the creation of a structure.

To create *Bowrain*, an anagram for 'rainbow,' Roden used Fuller's drawing as a map. He created a system paralleling Fuller's use of sixes that called for different kinds of wood of different lengths, each referencing a specific color. After gathering and preparing the materials, Roden placed six different pieces of paper in a can and randomly drew out one at a time to determine the placement of the wood, building the structure according to chance. *Bowrain* forms a huge lattice, containing 480 pieces of wood, tied together from their ends with colored string. These vertical lengths of wood span the gallery space like a game of giant pick-up sticks. Videos cycling through abstract shapes and colors are projected through the structure onto two adjacent walls, fragmented and interrupted by the shadows cast by the structure, as well as the silhouettes of viewers. Ambient sounds fill the room, emanating from speakers positioned in the corners of the space. By creating an immersive experience, Roden choreographs a synergy of sound, projection and sculpture uniquely affected by our interaction with the space.

In the next room, Roden presents a suite of twenty small paintings (3.75 x 5.5 inches), based on a series of antique travel postcards given to the museum by the artist Fred Hammersley. Text by Michael Ned Holte is juxtaposed with Roden's visual interpretation of the postcards. These humble works distill the originals, transforming them into vibrant abstractions that formally and conceptually reference the locations and structures depicted in the cards. Whether static or dynamic, Roden employs a visual vocabulary of mark-making that consists of dashes and dabs of bright color accumulating on the surface. Similarly, in his films, he applies layers of color to found footage or paints directly on the emulsion. While his film and painted works are bold, his sound works are subtle. Often they are recordings of the empty space that are then digitally manipulated and layered for playback within the space.

While the Pomona College Art Museum displays the large and the small, the Armory Art Center presents everything in between. The Armory exhibition concentrates on his paintings, but also includes drawings, sculptures, a room for film screenings, a small installation and sound works. Though Roden has been producing audio recordings since the mid 1990s, these are disappointingly underrepresented. If the sound pieces are about the nuances of space, the paintings are about how to translate those rhythms into the language of mark making.

In 2004, I invited Steve Roden to participate in *Freewall* where ten artists were asked to create a site-specific work directly on the gallery walls. Roden explained *Some Stereo Paths (Eyes Closed Listening)*, his contribution to the show: "I dragged a microphone around the perimeter of the gallery, recorded myself tapping on metal railings, stepping on grass, carpet, pathways, etc., as well as recording vents and machinery making drones. These recordings were abstracted through electronic manipulation to generate the soundscape that now plays continuously in the space. Once the soundscape was completed, I took the sound into the space via headphones and did drawings on the walls with both hands, listening to the soundscape with my eyes closed -- allowing the sound to generate my hand movements, and thus generating the drawings through my ears and to my fingers."

The experience of the sound is closely related to the visuals, and the process whereby Roden generates sounds is akin to the process by which he generates images. They are often derived from a score or a text from which he creates a specific rule. In *the same sun spinning and fading* (2007-8), for instance, a small section of a classical music score was the catalyst for the image. Here, Roden dissected a single line of musical notation, counted the notes and then used the number of notes to correspond to the application of paint, so that if the line of music had 60 notes then there were 60 decisions that went into making the painting. It is impossible to decipher the system from looking at the piece yet Roden insists his systems do not need to be known to appreciate his work, yet with the added insight that such complex systems are at play, the works take on a different aura. They leave the world of pure abstraction, becoming algorithmic representations.

Chance also plays a large part in Roden's process. While he might use a specific system, the results are never predictable. In this way his works correspond more to John Cage's use of the *I Ching* than to Sol LeWitt's directions for wall drawings. LeWitt, like many artists working in the 1960s and 1970s pared down his process to descriptive tasks that could, in essence, be executed by anyone. Roden's rules are less prescriptive and his use of paint is anything but minimal. While LeWitt was concerned with stripping away and Roden's is a process of accumulation, his work is still in line with the conceptual and process-oriented artists. That Roden alludes to other artists is another aspect of his work that is not apparent at first glance but enriches the piece further. For example *i am sitting in a room* (1996) makes reference to a work by Alvin Lucier who recorded his voice and subsequently played it back into an empty room allowing the recordings to disintegrate over time. Roden's painting combines hand painted letters against a bright orange base; only the title grounds the piece in this association. In paintings like *mallarrmee* (1995), however, the allusion is readily identifiable.

Roden's recent paintings are among his biggest and brightest to date. The surface of *untitled (36/2)* (2009), consisting of concentric lines in blue, orange and green creating overlapping geometric shapes over a deeper green/brown background, has been built up from layering, creating a dizzying array of lines. The *proximities* paintings (2010), created while in residence in Marfa, TX continue Roden's interest in mapping the observable world (whether the built or natural) into a collection of lines and shapes that suggest but do not depict that reality, in this case the patchwork ceilings he encountered at Marfa. Though the paintings in this series are

wholly abstract, the sequencing of lines feels architectural, and the original references are embedded in them in the way that sound or music drives other work.

Roden's paintings and sculptures turn pattern into music. The works have an internal rhythm that pulsates and undulates. His surfaces are richly textured and varied. Lines start, stop, change direction. Colors overlap and intersect. While the works have many textual and often musical and/or literary references, they are not academic and intimidating; rather Roden's work is approachable and accessible. It embraces abstraction, celebrates conceptualism, refutes minimalism, and is devised by personal systems which are quirky and individualistic yet quite precise in their translation of the observable world.

STEVE RODEN: *IN BETWEEN, A 20 YEAR SURVEY*  
ARMORY CENTER FOR THE ARTS, PASADENA  
145 N. Raymond Avenue, Caldwell Gallery  
12 September - 9 January

STEVE RODEN: *WHEN WORDS BECOME FORMS*  
POMONA COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, CLAREMONT  
333 N. College Way  
31 August - 19 December



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