



Pam Rosenblatt

Medford artist/curator Ted Ollier: embracing his calling

On a cold Tuesday, November 12, 2013 afternoon, Wilderness House Literary Review's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt had the wonderful opportunity to interview Medford artist/curator Ted Ollier at the Nave Annex Gallery in Davis Square, Somerville, Massachusetts. They sat down at a small table in one of the rooms and began the one hour long interview that discussed Ollier's childhood love of art and science up through his adulthood love of art and science.

Art is often thought to be simply the result of a creative energy. Science is usually considered to be the product of practical thought. What happens when you mix the two subjects together? Just ask Medford's artist/curator Ted Ollier who enjoys making scientific and science-based art.

"From a very early age, I was into astronomy. I knew the planets when I was five years old. I was always reading science fiction and science articles and science books, etc.," Ollier said.

Ollier enjoys science so much that, as a high school student, he went to the Science Academy at LBJ High School in Austin, Texas. "The thing is, at the time, I didn't think that I was getting a terribly scientific education. LBJ actually had, for a mostly minority school in the east part of Austin, a pretty strong English department and a pretty strong Art department.

But when I got to college, I switched from the sciences to liberal arts. I discovered that I knew a lot more about science than most of my peers. The sciences that I really gravitated toward were astronomy, particle physics, paleontology and the geologic history of the Earth. There's really not a bit of science that I'm not interested in."

But, while Ollier's academic tendencies leaned towards the sciences, he always found himself in tune with art as well. Ollier began to take art classes at the Toledo Art Museum in Toledo, Ohio, in his early childhood. "But I never actually considered myself an artist. I was trending more toward a scientist and then later more toward a writer. Looking back, of course, I realize that I was really basically an artist the entire time. It was just that I was resisting it. It wasn't until I went back to college to get a design degree in 2000 and I started taking art classes and dealing with other artists that I realized that [art] was what I really was what I'd been doing. I'd just been avoiding it."

Ollier was an adult when he began to focus on art as a career. "I finally began to embrace my calling," he said. "And do something about it. I was about 32 or 33 before I really began to embrace it. [That's when] I put the word 'artist' next to my name."

He attended the communications design program at Texas State University in Saint Marcos where he found a group of fellow artists who were

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“pragmatic, practical people interested in solving problems with their art and finding solutions interesting – not necessarily beautiful or pretty but interesting and compelling,” he said. “I contrasted that with the young art directors I was in class with. I preferred the company of artists than the design people. So that was another thing that made me switch.” He received a B.F.A. from Texas State University in San Marcos, 2004, and an M.F.A. from Massachusetts College of Art in Design, 2008.

Since delving into the art world, Ollier has become a printmaker, a photographer, an abstract visual arts painter, a metal sculptor, an installation artist, and a teacher. He creates prints of actual water surfaces that exist around the world like San Francisco Bay, the Panama Canal, Chesapeake Bay, and the Mediterranean Sea. While most artworks typically show these bodies of water in blue against a green background, Ollier has taken aerial photographs, actual drawings, like rendered maps, or satellite photographs of these lakes, seas, and oceans and crafts the lake surface’s boundary’s image to make shaped plate reliefs that are hybrids of print-making or metal working from them.

“I take the image of the boundary of the lake surface. I print it out and adhere it to a piece of copper or aluminum or zinc or whatever I have available, as copper’s gotten so expensive. Then I take a jewelry saw and actually cut out the outline of lake in copper so that when I’m done I have a piece of copper that is the same shape as the lake surface. Next I put ink on the copper and I run it through an etching press, which is a high pressure fine art printing press, to transfer the ink and get it embossed.... So what’s on the print is basically a piece of paper that has ink in it and has been embossed by the plate,” he said.

The length of time to complete a shaped plate relief varies depending on its complexity. The San Francisco Bay area shaped plate relief took three to four hours. The Panama Canal shaped plate relief has shorelines that are “crenulated” so the process totaled about 12 hours to create. And the Chesapeake Bay relief demanded a long time to make. With larger prints, he uses a computer and cuts them with a water jet or a laser cutter.

Ollier likes most aspects of art. He likes to create artworks, but he has a special interest that developed while in college. He became a curator.

“I started off [at curating] at Texas State in Saint Marcos when I was getting my B.F.A. The group of like-minded students [whom I mentioned earlier] was kind of hungry and we wanted to do more than just get our degree. We wanted to go out and tackle the art world. So we put together a show at the Gallery at Texas State Student Gallery. Then, in 2005, we managed to rent for two months a former payday loan office in downtown Austin and turned that site into a gallery for three shows.”

His appreciation for curating art shows did not end after graduating from college. When he moved to Somerville in 2008, he volunteered his time at the Nave Gallery on Powderhouse Boulevard, Medford. As of November 2013, Ollier has curated seven shows for the Nave Gallery, Medford/Somerville: *The Second Class*, *Physical Digital*, *Sacred = Art?*, *Invested Landscape*, *Black Ink*, *Entering Somerville*, *Peer-Reviewed Submissions*.

“My experience has been if you come with an open-mind and are ready to work with the other people in the group, the curation can actu-

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ally be very easy," he said. "...You come in with a concept, like this current show at the Nave Annex Gallery is called 'Peer Reviewed Submissions', which is about art that has a scientific or science-based bent. You take that and see what the art that is submitted with tell you about this group of people that have submitted. So you coalesce a show around the people with whom you are working and the material that has been submitted."

The Inner Core

Ted Oiler

26.2" x 0.0625"

Vinyl

2013 - NFS

If the ground below was transparent you would see the Earth's nickel-iron core beneath your feet at about this size.

"About the show 'Peer Reviewed Submissions': I came to art in a roundabout manner, and I have a pretty extensive general science background. My wife is a scientist who has an art background. So I've been thinking about the similarities between art and science practice: both artists and scientists are asking questions of the world, but the

strategies they use and the types of answers they are looking for differ. I use quite a bit of science thought and data in my practice, as does Elisabeth Nicula, my co-curator. So we figured it would be fun and instructive to see who else out there does the same, and the results they got from their own questions," Ollier commented.

Two of Ollier's installations were in the "Peer Reviewed Submissions"



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art exhibition. "One was called 'The Inner Core' and the other was called 'Proportional Moon'. My scientific background shows through. Not only is there a scientific approach to a lot of my art. There's also a didactic approach. I want concept in my art. I want people to think. I want people to contemplate the whole world around them in different way."

"For example, the graphic geography series – the bodies of water like the Panama Canal or the Great Lakes- everyone hears about the Great Lakes or the Panama Canal. Now they have this idea of what they look like. They're usually blue against the green map. And so what I did is I took that shape and I pulled it in an artistic format, but a very graphic format where it's black and white. There's the shape of the lake and there's nothing to tell you what it is or what it means. I find this interesting.

Ollier finds that viewers' responses contrast: "If you're naïve, someone who's not into art or just naïve, or you're someone who knows a bit about art and is savvy, you walk up to one of those pieces and say, 'What is this?' 'This is interesting.' 'This is crazy!' Then you read the title, and you say, 'That's the Panama Canal?' And then you get excited. If you're middle of the road, if you kind of know art and you think you know art, then you walk up and say, 'That's a Rorschach test!' and you don't engage in it."

He has also noticed that "the naïve or the educated people are the ones who really engage with it. The whole point is when you get that shock of recognition - that ah ha moment - then you start pulling from your own ideas what the Panama Canal and that's the shape. What's that mean? You think about colonialism. You think about commerce. You think about land moving. You think about Theodore Roosevelt. You think about yellow fever. There are many things that you can bring to it – that the viewer can bring to it – which I can't dictate. But I can listen. I just want you to think!"

These two installations in "Peer Reviewed Submissions" were conceptual, like much of his work. His "Proportional Moon" is a wooden ball that's one inch and hangs from the ceiling. It's at about eye level. Four small white circles are placed in each corner of the room. When you stood from the place where one of the small white circles were located and then look at the suspended "moon" then the "moon" looks like the actual full moon in the night's sky at 12 a.m. It was an amazing experience!

Then, "The Inner Core" was another intriguing idea. "The Inner Core" is actually a yellow shaped disk that is put on the floor. "When you stand above it," Ollier said. "If you look down at it, if the earth was transparent, if you could see through the earth down to the core of the earth, then the liquid iron core of the earth would be about that size. It would be glowing because it's very hot." This simple art installation had an effective, educational impact.

Ollier's artwork and installations are not simple to understand. Sometimes the viewer has to really concentrate on, really think about what his works - like "Graphic Representation of the Digits of the Transcendental Number e" and "Graphic Representation of the Digits of the Transcendental Number pi" - actually mean and/or represent. "e" and "pi" are pieces that are done in black paint on white paper in various arrangements. It's not that easy to comprehend what he is trying to accomplish, and it takes time to analyze them appropriately. They are complicated.

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His message to people is not complicated, though. "I guess the main thing is that I'm not trying to trick you. Everything I do is because I think it's cool. I think that the concept that I'm trying to portray I find interesting. I find compelling. I find that I want to share it with you. Again, I'm not trying to trick you. I'm not trying to make you feel stupid. I'm not trying to denigrate anyone's intellect. I think that anyone can understand the world if they look at it."

What Ollier seems to be taking complex concepts, like a person informing you that the core of the earth is 1800 miles wide and very far down in the earth, and simplifies them by "throw(ing) a simple piece of vinyl on the floor and say, "That's what it would look like if you were to see it now," explained Ollier. Suddenly the viewer understands that Ollier is educating them to learn about art and science in an abstract way. He said, "It's fun. I find it fun, at least!"

To people interested in art as a career, Ollier suggested, "Just keep working. It's what everyone tells you. But I first decided to become an artist in 2002 – 2003. I got my M.F.A. in 2008. It's been 10 years since I've made these decisions. At this point in time, I can finally say that I've built up enough of a reputation. I've built up enough body of work. People tell you that you'll look back at your graduate work and you'll hate it because it's all silly. I have some graduate pieces that I still love, that I still think work very well. Even your early work can be compelling and interesting work. But it's just that if you only have your Master's work, that's not enough for people to dive into."

