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Long's Shot: A young Canadian artist takes on New York — and J.D. Salinger

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Gareth Long: Untitled (Books), 2008: Four books. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

Despite the current downturn in the New York art market, the Big Apple is still the city out of which every ambitious young artist hopes to take a bite. Gareth Long, a young Canadian artist currently based in Brooklyn, recently opened his first solo exhibition at Kate Werble Gallery, located in Tribeca. Kate Werble, for her part, opened her gallery just as the economic downturn hit. Both spoke with Magenta's Executive Editor, Bill Clarke, about what it's like for a young artist to dive into such choppy, intimidating waters, and how, as a young art dealer, to navigate them successfully. BC: Kate, let's start with you. You opened your gallery at the start of a really tough time for the New York art market, but came up with a unique strategy for coping with the situation. Can you tell us a bit about that?



Gareth Long: Boo Boo, 2010: Lenticular print. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

KW: I opened my space with little experience in running a gallery, and within two weeks of my gallery's first opening, Lehman Brothers collapsed. I realized that I would be establishing my gallery during one of the worst economic downturns in my lifetime. At the same time, though, there was something incredibly freeing about this realization. I could begin exhibitions without having to follow the established model of a commercial space. For the first year, I organized six,

two-person exhibitions with an evening event between each show, including a slide show of artists presenting their work from their high school and college years, and lending my space to a dance choreographer for a performance. The idea was to give myself time to prepare a program and to get people excited about coming in and looking at art in my space. It was almost as if I was trying to explain why I think it is important to have a commercial contemporary gallery as a venue for looking at art, and to establish what my gallery was interested in during a period when there wasn't much hype about looking at art.

BC: What made you decide that the time was right for your first exhibition by a single artist?

KW: It was a decision that, in 2010, I was ready to have a few solo shows. Plus, I had met Gareth and realized very quickly that he was ready for a solo exhibition.

BC: Where did you and Gareth meet?

KW: I met Gareth at Artist's Space, a non-profit art space in Soho. I'd already seen his work, but we were attending a discussion about the next steps for that institution, and I liked how he reacted and responded. We set a date for a studio visit, and I added him to a group show this past September with the idea that, if it worked out, we would do a larger project together.

BC: Gareth, how do you decide whether you want to work with a gallery?

GL: It's largely intuitive. You get a feeling for a gallery. It is partly based on watching the programming — the artists and works shown. Some is in how you relate with the person running the gallery, if you are able to converse about things in general, and about your work, specifically. I had been watching Kate's gallery. I generally liked what she had been showing. A lot of the work was more difficult conceptually, and also in terms of the market. Considering what the past year-and-a-half have been like in the New York art market, that showed, well...balls. It could have been safer for a new gallery like Kate's to focus on works that were a bit more sellable. And, in a climate where a lot of galleries closed, Kate stuck through it.

Gareth Long and Kate Werble take a momentary break during installation.
BC: And Kate, what makes you want to work with an artist?

KW: Generally speaking, I work with artists who are clear with their desires and whose artwork I can talk about almost as well as they can. Gareth is curious and incredibly articulate. He is fantastic to work with, and we've been able to communicate about all the issues that can arise between an artist and a dealer.

BC: Your work, Gareth, reflects an appreciation for books and the act of reading. What is it about those things that appeal to you?

GL: I guess I believe in a sort of bibliomancy, but not in the book-as-divination-tool kind of way. Rather, I feel like books contain some sort of magical essence, something unnameable that makes them special.

BC: You have produced work derived from books before, such as Don Quixote. Do the books you choose have any particular meaning for you?

GL: I usually choose the books because something about their content matches up with whatever gesture I'm working towards. I do read and re-read them, read books about them. So, yes, they end up having particular meaning to me. Don Quixote is a beautiful and genius book, and I love it even more now that I've worked with it so closely.

BC: I believe a copy of your Don Quixote book is in the library collection of the Museum of

Modern Art in New York.

GL: Yes. With *Don Quixote*, I turned an audiobook back into a book-book, using speech recognition software. *Don Quixote* was perfect for this gesture because it is often considered the first Modernist novel. It seemed ideal for my explorations into the question of text, medium specificity and reception because it is so meta-aware of itself as a book - a book you're meant to sit down with and read. You're to, in some sense, mimic the action that drove Alonso Quijano mad and made him become *Don Quixote*. The novel itself exists in the text (in the second half they run into characters who recognize *Don Quixote* and *Sancho Panza* only because they read the first half). But, there are also other books that are found and read aloud in the text, such as *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious*, and these books are treated differently. They point to the differences between a heard and a read text. And, all of these meta-aware elements in *Don Quixote* made it the perfect vehicle for the audiobook-to-book gesture. Since it is so focused on being a book about books and reading, not listening, how does the text function as an audiobook? Is it already a bastard form of the text? Though the text itself is the same in the audiobook and the book, the reception of it is so totally different. I hoped that my version - flawed and mostly unreadable due to its translation through my made-up process — would act as a sort of index for that gap in receptions.

BC: Why did you use this particular edition of J.D. Salinger's books for your most recent projects?

GL: Because this cover design has become, in a sense, a sort of brand for Salinger, which is tricky for a couple of reasons. This jacket design was used for Salinger's four published books: *The Catcher in the Rye* (1945), *Nine Stories* (1948), *Franny and Zooey* (1955), and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters & Seymour: An Introduction* (1955). Most people I've spoken to assume this cover design is from the 1960s or early 1970s. Part of that might be due to a sense of nostalgia one gets when reading the books, but I'd suggest that it's because the design takes up some very recognizable Modernist elements. The rainbow stripes look straight out of a Frank Stella geometric abstraction, or some of the design-art of the period. And then, in researching this design, I discovered that it was produced in 1991, which surprises people. It is from this point I decided to work with this design.

BC: Do you know who designed this book jacket?

GL: No, not a specific person, but Little, Brown & Co. is the publisher of these mass-market paperbacks and the jackets were designed in-house. It seems they decided to ascribe this Modernist aesthetic to Salinger's texts after the fact. It's like trying to align him with a particular historical moment. And yes, although he was writing at the same time geometric abstraction was flourishing, I think that Salinger (the man) and his texts were out of step with modernity. For me, his texts function as an early demarcation between American modernist and postmodernist fiction. Look at how Salinger dealt with modernity — by running and hiding. And his characters are all out of step with modernity — think about Seymour's suicide, Franny's nervous breakdown and Zooey's ulcer. So, framing Salinger's texts within this high-modernist design seems like a moment of disjuncture; a moment of slippage. In the catalogue for my 2008 show at the Oakville Galleries, [British artist] Liam Gillick summed up it up nicely:

In each case, [Long] looks for a moment of rupture or misunderstanding, and capitalizes upon it in order to extend and create re-readings of accepted hierarchies and structures. J.D. Salinger, who clearly moved beyond a certain modernist trajectory in literature, became interesting to Long only when he came across recent book jackets. They appeared to align the novels with a particular lucid modernist aesthetic, in contradiction to the neurotic-confessional content of the books.

BC: What are your thoughts on Gareth's work, Kate?

KW: For me, Gareth's work seems to be about small moments of misunderstanding, sometimes

ironic nods to incomplete projects or impossible tasks. I like the way his work developed out of video, but spans a variety of media. He seems indicative of a new generation of artists whose early training has been purely within electronic media. He also has a beautiful formal language that is evident in all of his projects — from the lenticulars to wooden objects. The correspondence between the physical objects and his ideas is very clear to me. And, although he disagrees with me, I even like his drawings.

GL: Seriously, I feel I'm pretty terrible at drawing. I always say that my brother got those genes. Perhaps, my drawing is in the spirit of Bouvard and Pécuchet, mimicking their ultimate amateurishness. Either way, drawing frustrates the hell out of me.

BC: You've also used this cover design for a multiple; did the work you're making for the Kate Werble Gallery show grow out of that project?

GL: I have used this for two multiples, actually. The first is a 16 x 10- inch lenticular print, Untitled (Little Seymour), that was published as a fundraising limited edition for Printed Matter, Inc. last October. The second is an unlimited edition set of the four Salinger books. I sanded off all the text printed on the cover, spine and back of the books, leaving only that rainbow-stripe element on the white background. This multiple was made concurrently with the lenticular works. So, yes, I did consider these as working toward a larger project.

BC: You've used lenticular printing before...



Gareth Long: A Place to Sit. A Place to Read. A Place to Sit and Read, 2009: Plywood and Plexiglas. Installation view at Badischer Kunstverein. Courtesy the artist.

GL: Yes, since 2003. But, this time, I'm using lenticular printing as a way to activate the design elements of the book jacket, using it to emphasize the particular modernist art historical precedents of abstract painters such as Stella and Sol Lewitt, Minimalism, and even Op Art, but without any text at all. So, viewers are still reading, but without a text. The sanded books are a way of over-emphasizing text through its removal and, secondly, by maintaining the text inside the books. A couple of other people have written about these book pieces as being 'reprints', or have assumed that I removed the text inside also, which is not the case. I had hoped that by over-emphasizing the design-element on the cover, I'd heighten the contrast with the books' contents. When I show the books, I expect viewers to handle them. I also think of this as a strategy to help make the lenticular prints a little less opaque, and not just eye-candy. A set of the books should always be exhibited alongside the lenticulars.

BC: Can you tell us a bit about what will be shown at Kate's?

GL: A few things might change slightly, but the show is mostly a continuation of the Salinger-based work. I'm planning on having four or five large lenticular prints in the space. Each print is six-feet tall and almost four-feet wide; the ratio is the paperback books blown-up to human scale. Of course, though, those are only the dimensions; each piece takes up a much greater physical space in that the viewer, in order to activate the lenticular, has to walk around them. The viewing angle or arc is such that the pieces hold much more space than their physical dimensions. Along with the prints, I will be showing the sanded books. These books will be shown on another sculptural work: A Place To Sit, A Place to Read, A Place to Sit and Read, which is a modular seating and book-display sculpture. The units are of varying sizes and look vaguely book-like, and people are able to pick up the books from magazine-rack-like cutouts, and sit and read. They were made for an exhibition at the Badischer Kunstverein in Karlsruhe, Germany, which then toured to P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center here in New York. At Kate's, there will be three of the units, on which I'll be showing a galley-book version of a new piece, The Illustrated Dictionary of Received Ideas that I've been working on with another artist, [Toronto-based] Derek Sullivan, who laughs at how worked up I get about drawing.

BC: Kate, are there any artists who you'd like to work with in the future or who you're admiring right now?

KW: There is a sculptor in England, Liliane Lijn, who is especially interesting to me. She worked in New York in the 1960s, but has lived in Europe since then. I included her in a group show last fall and would love to work with her on a larger scale.

BC: And, Gareth, this is your first solo show in New York at a commercial gallery. As a young artist, what is it like to make that leap, knowing that critics like Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith could stop by the gallery and see your work? Are you feeling any pressure?

GL: Yes, but it's a good kind of pressure. You look a bit more closely at your moves — not exactly second-guessing yourself, but spending more time with things and really focusing. I'm not the kind of artist who sits in his studio, making-making-making. I tend to sit on ideas until I have a venue to show them. So, having a solo show is a great excuse to produce a large body of work, to get it out there, invite many people to experience it and, hopefully, be able to engage with them about it. And, it is a necessary leap — necessary and exciting!