
INTERLOCUTOR

RYAN SARAH MURPHY

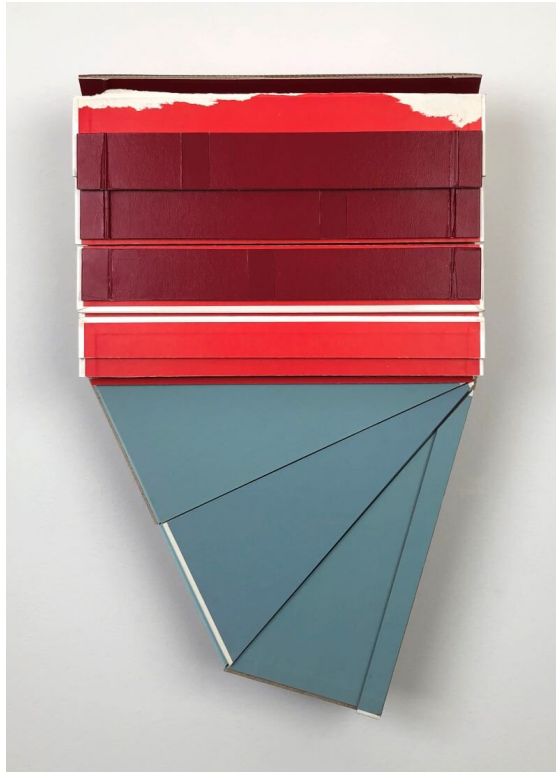
Tyler Nesler
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Photo by Daniel Krieger

Ryan Sarah Murphy's three-dimensional pieces have their roots in a sculptural practice that incorporates found objects. In these works made entirely of repurposed cardboard that she finds in dumpsters, alleyways and curbside stacks throughout New York City, Murphy embodies a kind of optimistic alchemy that perceives beauty where others see only trash.

Starting with the colors that initially draw her to the materials she gathers, she simultaneously builds out multiple pieces at a time, tearing out any logos and printed characters to work with only the raw, colored cardboard shapes. Although some of her sculptures do lead to architectural or landscape references in their titles, these ideas emerge organically from the process of stacking and juxtaposing the layered elements. At their heart, these works are an abstract expression of the energy of the city that produced them, an homage to the notion that there is value to be found in the most common elements in our midst, if only we take the time to envision them differently.

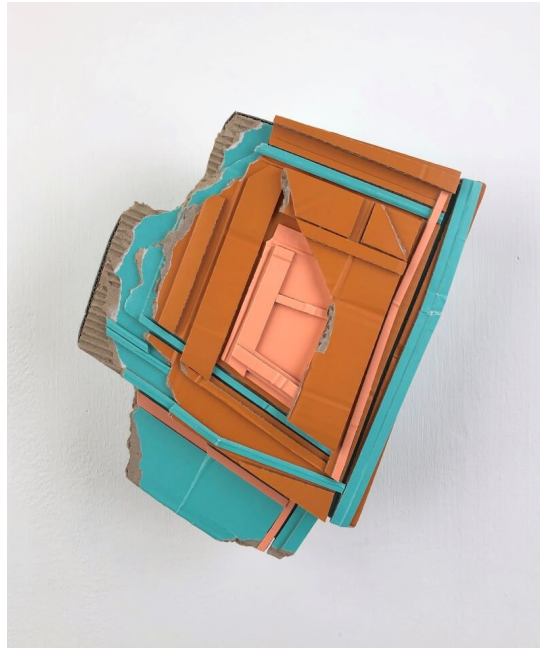


“Course-correct”, 2019. Cut book covers, unpainted cardboard, foamcore 19.25 x 12 x 3.75in. (48.9 x 30.5 x 9.5cm)

You’ve written that your work is a response to the “inherent energy within discarded and repurposed objects.” To you, what is the essence of the “inherent energy” within these objects, and what are some properties of these energies that attract you?

New objects have a static feeling to them, a preciousness, a weightiness, a sense of responsibility in ownership – there’s the burden of maintenance, having to keep the thing perfect and spotless. Discarded objects have been rendered valueless, yet there is still a continuous flow within them. Old, throwaway objects carry a kind of history, they contain a memory of past utility and purpose. They have a looseness, a transience that opens them up in way. You can let them go as easily as you acquired them since discarded objects have lost any true ownership; they are not really yours, you are just a temporary handler or holder of the thing.

In my work, I pay attention to a particular feeling or vibe that an object or material exudes. I’ll meet the object with my own internal force, collaborating with it in a sense, and transforming or repurposing it into a new form. My process is about combining that shared internal energy and transferring it back out into the world. Ideally the viewer will see a finished piece and if it happens to be something they internally connect with, then the transference of energy shifts on to them.

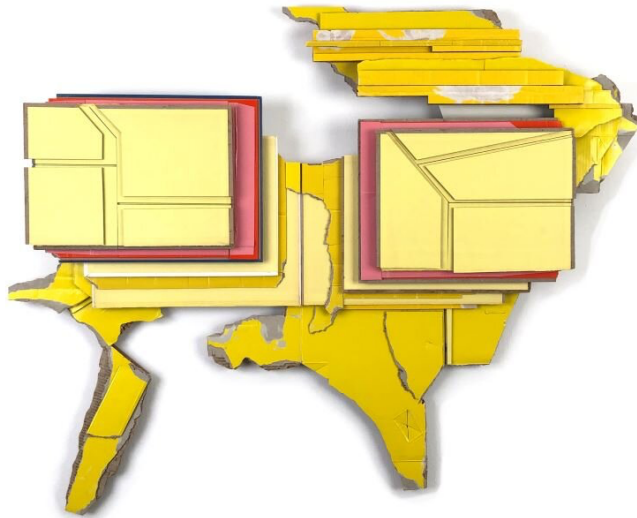


“Grade”, 2021. Found (unpainted) cardboard, foamcore 8.5 x 8 x 3.5in. (21.6 x 20.3 x 8.9cm)

Your work emerges from a very specific process that is rooted in sculptural practice. Did you have any formal training in sculpture, and what are the origins of your approach to using found objects so extensively in your work?

I got my BFA from the School of Visual Arts where I concentrated in sculpture for my last two years. I think the school really emphasized painting as the end-all and be-all of the fine arts program, so I spent a whole lot of time early on staring at big white canvases that I found completely paralyzing. A blank canvas was never an entry point for me. I was never turned on by store-bought, traditional art materials, they always felt too precious or something.

When I shifted to sculpture, I'd instinctively lug stuff in off the street and into my studio — random pieces of wood, bottles, scrap metal — anything that caught my attention and provided that jitter of possibility. As a kid I'd make little sculptures from stuff I'd find around the house, or from little treasures I'd find at yard sales and flea markets. Growing up, the emphasis was more on appreciating the unique thrift store find over consuming the “brand new.” Shopping for new stuff always felt tedious, and having to maintain new stuff felt like an unwanted responsibility, a burden really. But serendipitously “finding” a thing felt great. Being geared towards secondhand stuff also ingrained a certain non-attachment to things as well — objects can come and go, their utility can be fleeting, your care or interest in an item doesn't have to last forever. I love donating or giving things away when a stagnant feeling sets in on some household thing I've got, and knowing that the object's energy may be picked up and harnessed by someone else for a time. And so on it goes.



“En route”, 2019. Found (unpainted) cardboard, cut book covers, foamcore 26.5 x 34 x 2.5in. (67.3 x 86.4 x 6.4cm)

You don't add any additional color to the surfaces of your cardboard works, and you also remove any text, printing, or graphics and use only what remains. When you are out searching for discarded cardboard to repurpose, do you ever have a color or design scheme in mind to help you focus the search, or is it all a much more random process? Does the overall design and color scheme for each piece only really begin to take form in the studio?

Yes, the piece only takes shape when I'm working on it in the studio, there is no plan or desired outcome made ahead of time. Once I cut or tear away the logos, etc., the remaining fragments of color are what I use to start. I never know how long a piece will take to complete, there's never a quantifiable time frame.

Sometimes a few cardboard fragments can hang on the wall for months and then suddenly they get my attention and start to coalesce. I don't really look for specific color schemes when I'm out and about, but certainly pinks and yellows catch my eye more as they are much harder to come by. There are some colors and types of boxes that you come across a lot (orange Nike sneaker boxes, for example) and generally I'll pass those up as I've got quite the surplus at this point.

In your time hunting in the city for discarded objects to repurpose, what have been some unique or unexpected discoveries, in the sense of the best places to source a wide variety of cardboard or other objects?

Liquor and wine stores are probably the best spots to get a bunch of colorful cardboard all in one shot — their boxes are always flattened and neatly bundled up, ready for a quick sort-through and easy pickup! Often flower shops toss out some pretty interesting boxes too. Probably the most memorable cardboard I've come across was this gigantic, bright orange box put out on the street in front of a residential building in Brooklyn. I think it was packaging for some sleek baby stroller, so the box had few design elements to cut away and just big sections of solid orange color. Having that much of a singular color really boosted the scale of the piece that came out of it.



“Carrier (Outside Courts)”, 2020. Found (unpainted) cardboard, cut book covers, foamcore, wood dowels 20.5 x 11 x 11.5in. (52.1 x 27.9 x 29.2cm)

You’ve called your work a “subconscious examination of space,” and many of your pieces suggest depictions of maps of urban terrains, or fragments of machinery or architecture. In what manner do you feel that these pieces reflect the ways that the subconscious processes and navigates through urban terrains and post-industrial landscapes?

In nature you can look to the changing seasons for a pretty clear understanding of impermanence and transition. In the city you must look to the endless construction and demolition of all the man-made structures you’re entrenched in. It’s always a slightly jarring sensation to walk through a neighborhood you don’t often frequent and suddenly you see that a whole building is missing. Or a cozy stretch of scaffolding that has covered your block for months seemingly disappears overnight and you’ve got to adjust to that sudden feeling of exposure overhead. But it’s odd how quickly we adapt to both the minor and major shifts in the cityscape, and how you can’t help but accept the constant flux of it all.

The compositions I arrive at in this series of work reflect this ever-shifting ground and my need to find some kind of balance living within such an environment. My process calls for building up the structure while simultaneously tearing sections of it apart; covering up certain marks or perceived imperfections in the material, then often rotating the whole thing every which way as I’m constructing it until it eventually finds its desired position. Each step in the making of a piece is a move towards balance, a succinct meeting of architectural and abstract elements.

Who are some designer and sculptor influences for you? Are there any specific artists or schools of thought that have directly inspired your work and creative approach?

The first time I saw a Tony Cragg found plastic installation when I was a kid was pretty profound. I didn't realize it at the time but that probably set it all into motion for me. I've always felt an affinity to arte povera and the Mono-ha movement when first starting out. Louise Nevelson, Rachel Whiteread, Alma Thomas, Roni Horn and Lucy Williams are all in the mix. I also find International Style architecture and Shaker aesthetics to be equally calming and enjoyable to look at.

In what ways do you feel the work you currently have up at C24 Gallery's *Street Life* group exhibition fits into the overall theme of the show? How do you think your work compliments or parallels the work presented by the artists Coby Kennedy and Lisbeth Firman?

In the work presented in our show at C24, Coby, Lisbeth and I all expressly look to the streets for our materials, subject matter and concepts. These bodies of work are drawn directly from each of our lived experiences of this environment. I rely on the streets around me to provide the materials that generate my work.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/9/14/ryan-sarah-murphy-interview-street-life-exhibition-c24-gallery>