

A Table of Curious Elements: Jay Heikes on *Filthy Minds*

BY BARTHOLOMEW RYAN



Jay Heikes, *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* (2013), installed in *Painter Painter*. Photo: Gene Pittman



In *Studio Sessions*, our ongoing web series, the 15 artists in the Walker-organized exhibition *Painter Painter* respond to an open-ended query about their practices. Here Minneapolis-based artist Jay Heikes discusses his contribution to the show with co-curator Bartholomew Ryan.

As he's traveled from studio to studio, Minneapolis-based artist Jay Heikes has carried a wall of tools composed of electric drills, hammers, and saws that he uses in making his work. Always interested in transformation, he began to think about how the tools we use determine the things we make, or more abstractly tie us into certain ways of thinking. Asking himself whether changing the tools could also change the work, Heikes began to invent new implements constructed out of the detritus of the studio: found materials with peculiar provenance, pigments, dyes, fabrics, or negative throwaway forms from previous works. In making *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* (2013), his work in *Painter Painter*, he was

inspired by the history of the avant-garde, and specifically the manifesto as a mode of address, and looked to groups such as the Suprematists, Futurists, or even the Shakers, who used new language to create new realities.

As Heikes assembled his constructed “tools” on a studio wall, he began to think of them as a form of painting. While painters—including Gerhard Richter and Jack Whitten — have long created tools as a means to bypass previous ways of working and arrive at a different kind of mark-making or application, here Heikes’ instruments themselves become the marks — they delineate the paintings’ borders and are the motifs of composition. A number of elements seem poised to be used in some elaborate way, evolving in more recent works toward a greater level of formal abstraction. As the project develops, the usefulness of a tool is situated in its openness to possibility within painting, in its ability to be free of bounded real-world utility. Ultimately, it seems as if Heikes may be shaping a proposition about abstraction as something necessary, to be used and valued as much as anything else.



Jay Heikes with the “sea ball” in *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* (2013). Photo: Gene Pittman

Bartholomew Ryan: Almost everything in *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* seems to involve ready-made materials that you have cut, grafted, painted, dyed, and generally manipulated into something that seems simple and somehow inevitable: Like, “Of course that thing should exist (even though it hasn’t heretofore).” One exception is the little furry ball

that hangs near the top right. You called it a sea ball, but what is it? Where did you get it? Did you do anything to it? Is it still alive?

Jay Heikes: I'm not sure what it is exactly. I found it by the sea in the coastal village of Acciaroli in the south of Italy. The beach was littered with them, and they were just so perfect in their natural state. I had been thinking for a long time of something that is non-narrative and decided that nature is the one thing that doesn't tell a story, that we put a narrative on to it by living within it. But then I realized how off that conclusion was, because it was casting itself in fossils and petrified wood and sculpting things like "sea balls." At times, it feels like a clown nose or a mole, which satisfies my desire for the work to be both creepy and beautiful, although within the larger composition I think it becomes another tool wrapped up in the romantic fate of the readymade. It was there in front of me and made me jealous, in using the tides of the Mediterranean to make a sculpture of dead and dried plant matter.

Ryan: Let's move from the clown nose to the wax ear in the exhibition. Ears, of course, are about listening. Are you interested in listening? In a certain kind of receptivity?

Heikes: The "basics" are something I've been thinking a lot about lately. I get sucked into these structuralist texts from the 1960s with titles like *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern* or *Asbestos: The Silk of the Mineral Kingdom* and find myself understanding the cosmos in a much more personal way. When a text tells me that gold is related to perfection and leads to sin, I immediately get seduced by the passing on of elemental investigations from the old world and try to understand if we are still engaged in the same kind of listening or associative behavior. Are we listening to the materials? At times, I don't think we are. There's a hopeless divorce from the knowledge of where things actually come from, how they are mined and then presented to us as objects or products.

I'm getting away from the question, though. Am I interested in listening? I would say that I want to absorb, which includes listening. As for a receptivity, I look to a time when the limits of knowledge were more naive and up for grabs. When mystical thought and the charlatan were still very persuasive. We live in a time when Science is winning, but people have historically done unexpected things against better judgment. It was not that long ago when people were playing with a handful of mercury like it was a curious toy. You could say that through these mistakes we've built a better, safer world, and I would agree, but my fear is that when the earth has had enough of our tinkering we will be left in a state of complete elemental amnesia. Maybe amnesia is the wrong word because the knowledge was never there in the first place. Maybe this is all either hiding a "back to the basics" objective on my part, but what I'm realizing is that I don't know what the basics are myself, so I'm trying to create a set of tools that will in turn find their own undecided function.

To be more direct about the object itself, the "ear" is made from those little Laughing Cow cheeses, which are covered in a combination of paraffin and micro-crystalline wax. The dirt and shavings pressed into the wax are from my studio floor, and I inserted these map tack heads to look like a trail of piercings running up the side of the ear. It made me think of the severed ear of Vincent van Gogh and the gesture of being out of bounds or doing something crazy — the moment when you cross a line and physically enter the realm of hallucination. A

hallucination that, with van Gogh, could have easily been brought on by the paints he was using, so again an elemental cloud is present.



The "ear" in Jay Heikes' *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* (2013). Photo: Gene Pittman

Ryan: The painter going crazy in his elemental cloud. When I visited your studio recently, you were breaking out in hives, and we suspected it was a reaction to one of the many odd materials you were using or perhaps mold from a work that was caught in a gallery basement during Hurricane Sandy. In a short text I recently wrote on your work, I considered the alchemical nature of your practice, this kind of magical thinking that allows you to play with all kinds of elements and formulas, to arrive at specialized materials that you use in many of your works. Let's talk about the piece you call the wand, at the top left of the composition: a wooden rounded pole with a strand of copper wire at one end. I do like to think of you with a wand, although the notion is faintly embarrassing, because magic is not exactly associated with rigorously critical thinking in contemporary art. But I think one of the things I've always liked about your work is that it is prepared to lay itself bare in some way, to take the plunge into the possibility of a simplistic and reductive read from a public, while also entering terrain that feels very fertile. This is something that attracts me to a lot of artists working today. A re-embrace of the unknown, which some could say is a retrograde step in that it privileges the metaphysical over the material nature of existence, allows for a kind of mythologization of art. I think there is something quite authentically engaged within the way you work, like a sense that you really are searching for possibilities. Another way to look at the tools is to see them as iconographic for different possibilities, from science to magic, from the domestic to the industrial, from the deeply subjective to the objective. This might account for the way in which many people who are engaged in language, writers and poets, etc., seem to really be affected by this piece, or fascinated by it; because they see it as

constructing a language or a system of thought. Do you see the wand as an indicator of one in a range of possible approaches to something? Or are you really dedicated to magic?

Heikes: I can only dream of the day when my work gives people hives. That would be true magic. Like figuring out how to trigger a build-up of histamines without a transfer of fluids or allergens, just a painting or sculpture that creates hives. For a moment, I thought about filling a gallery space with the sulphurlike scent that's added to natural gas known as tert-Butylthiol to simulate a gas leak. There's nothing like the instant thought of possibly exploding to put everyone on edge. In the end, I decided against it. It's silly to talk about some of these ideas, but it gets to the heart of what I think about in the studio and with the wand specifically. I started making work in a performative way about 10 years ago, using existential theater and the work of Jean-Paul Sartre as inspiration for the compulsion that art has in its desire to reject stasis. Sartre talked about spilled treacle, an uncrystallized syrup made during the refining of sugar, as a metaphor for life and the viscosity of all things. It's a substance that is both liquid and solid and denies our basic understandings of material properties. When I'm in that breakthrough moment making something, I think about treacle and try to let the materials be magical to see if an essence reveals itself, even though a lot of my work could melt away in a rainstorm.



The "wand" in Jay Heikes' *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* (2013)

But magic is ultimately funny and I approach it with suspicion, just as any religion or belief system makes me question the presence of invisibility. So with the wand, I'm playing with the irony of using copper in a wand that is not connected to anything so it wouldn't conduct electricity. But I'm not concerned with it conducting electricity per se, just that there is a leap from what could physically conduct. As if a magician was holding the thing that could actually move energy without knowing it. It's a recurring problem for me in addressing things as varied as cosmological background radiation to reincarnation. Do I always have to search for unexplored possibilities or can I just present a kind of deadpan futility that acts as satire? Maybe I'm just an existentialist in denial.

Ryan: Let's talk about the snaking form to the top right of the work. I bring it up because I know you began designing these tools with use as an actual possibility, and this is one of the few that was used in the construction of another work. It was used in one of your paintings from last year that was constructed through layering paper and dried ink, creating an almost stonelike surface, which you then monoprinted with the texture of animal hides. In the painting *Filthy Minds*(2012), there are these hatchings that go up the side that come from using the snake to apply the print. So you have these virtually primitivist paintings that are also composed through these new, distinctly handmade tools. You gave an earlier group of that series titles from various caves around the world, such as *Ear of Dionysus* (2011), which came into the Walker's collection last year. The titles conjure some faintly ridiculous, near pompous classical sensibility, but the works aren't totally ironic. Are these tools meant for use in terms of an applied nature? Or have they become useful for the way in which they help as formal motifs that contribute to the composition of the work on the wall through how they are arranged?



The "snaking" in Jay Heikes' *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds* (2013)

Heikes: I used the snaking on a painting at a moment when I thought I was moving toward using the tools in a performative Gerhard Richter kind of way. In this case, I used it as a stamp, inking it and then applying pressure to the face of a painting that I quickly titled *Filthy Minds*, which differed from all of the paintings that I had titled after existing caves up to that point. It was an important precursor to what became *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds*, which is included in *Painter Painter*, and became the symbol of what I didn't want the tools to become. There was a feeling that they shouldn't play a bit part, that they should be the focus, so by making the painting I realized I had used them in a way that I had hoped to resist. Afterwards, I concluded that the stamp was the content instead of the mark it had made because my focus from the beginning was how to challenge the structure of language at its most primitive starting point. When I was making the tools, I thought about cave people

sitting around sculpting because it was the only available language. I guess grunting and gesturing too, but in the end I saw the painting as a mistake that helped me get to the wall of tools. As for the formal aspects of the snaking, I saw it as a form that could anchor the composition. So yes, the tool had become a motif and held within in it a kind of crooked beauty, but it also reminded me of a jester's leggings, which is maybe an aside from years of thinking about the role of the artist.

Jay Heikes, *Filthy Minds* (2012). Photo: Jason Wyche

I guess it's funny now that I'm making less interesting tools that are leading to more interesting drawings, so the thing I had resisted and the process that the painting hinted at has reversed itself completely. The new drawings feel like musical scores for minor planets, renegotiating how sheet music could look for something so abstract, that of a lifeless floating rock full of possibilities. They're spacey and psychedelic and owe a lot to David Reed, John Cage, and the Japanese avant-garde of the 1960s. But I haven't abandoned the tools completely, they're just becoming less tool-like and more autonomous as wall sculptures that seem more direct and symbolic, like a dirty palette instead of a table of curious elements.