

When Storm Is Collaborator

Personal loss has become subject and challenge for artists hit by disasters like Sandy and Katrina

BY RACHEL WOLFF



Hurricane Sandy struck at an especially fertile moment for Ray Smith and his Brooklyn studio. Smith and his team (a rotating crop of four or so assistants) had been working collaboratively, and their collective voice had just started to emerge. Smith was their leader, their conductor. He established parameters, but the sort of work that was emerging was uniquely its own, something separate from his independent work, which has consisted mainly of folk-art-inflected Neo-Surrealist tableaux.

The studio, which is located in a large 19th-century former icehouse in the Gowanus neighborhood of

The two laminated-plywood sculptures making up Ray Smith's *Mariana*, 2012, floated for hours when the artist's Brooklyn studio was flooded by Sandy.

ADAM COHEN/COURTESY THE ARTIST

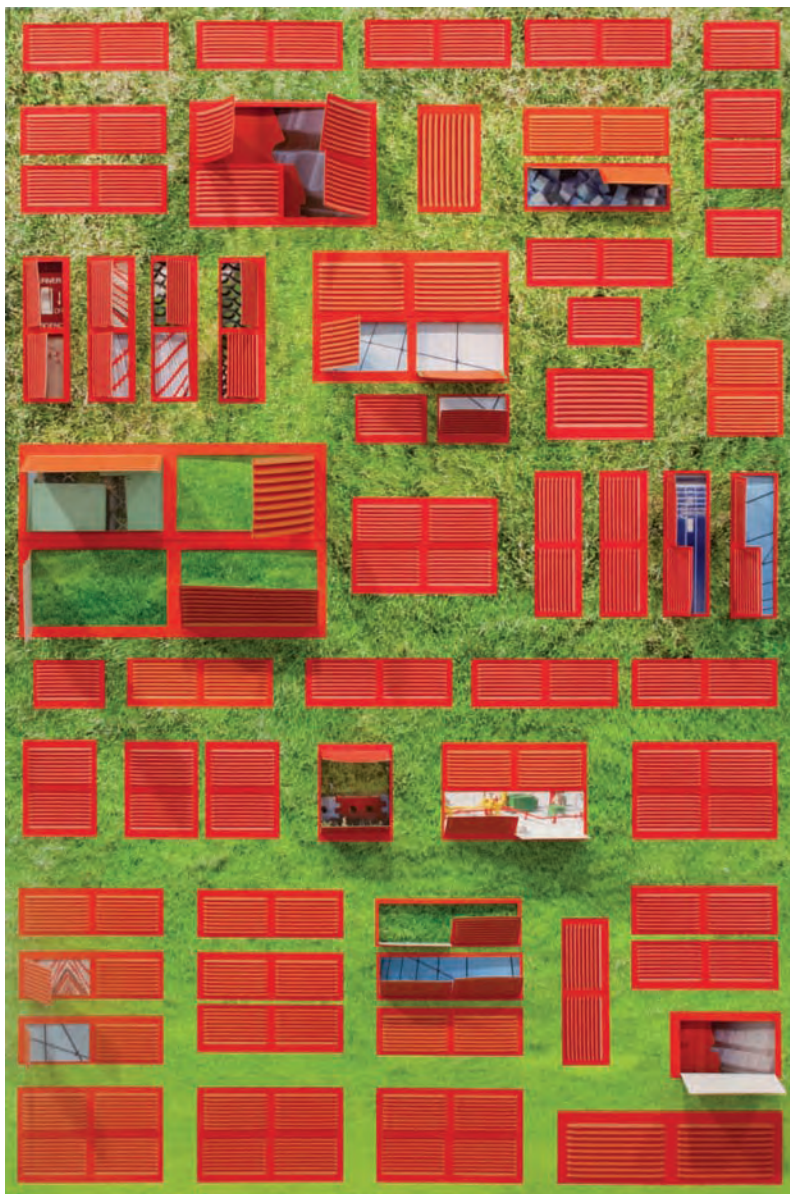
Brooklyn, was full of work. "Exquisite Corpse" paintings (in-studio takes on the famed parlor game) and collaborative sumi-ink doodles lined the walls. Laminated-plywood sculptures were perched throughout—large, curvy constructions evoking abstract monoliths, tribal totems, and oversize heads. Those too were collaborations, with each participant adding to and amending the pieces at will.

Gowanus was one of several art-rich neighborhoods hit hard by the late October superstorm, along with such postindustrial shore-front enclaves as Red Hook and Dumbo, not to mention the West Chelsea gallery district, which suffered unprecedented damage.

Some seven feet of water threw Smith's studio into upheaval. He was initially despondent as older works were swept up into the Sandy swamp of debris along with these recent collaborations. But friends and colleagues helped him clean up and assess the damage. Soon, given the nature of the work he had been making, it dawned on him: Sandy was ultimately a collaborator too.

"There was all this damage that started happening to certain pieces," Smith says. "In essence, it began to fall back into the sort of temperament of the place. It was giving a patina to the work itself."

During the cleanup, one split and warped wooden sculpture was inadvertently left outside. "The sculpture got covered in bird poop," Smith says. But the new texture, the new patina had an appeal. "It seemed acceptable to me—it gained that look of 'shit happens,' so to speak." So the piece was left outside where the birds went at it even more. It will be included in a show of the studio's contents on view through May 5



Diana Cooper, *Untitled*, 2012–13, mixed media with digital prints, from her exhibition "My Eye Travels." The show's title pays homage to a work Cooper lost.

personal loss as subject and as challenge.

There is something different and something essential in how artists react to devastating circumstances—how they survey damaged work and gutted studios and then move on. Hurricane Katrina set a precedent in that sense. "We did a study a year after

Katrina," says Craig Nutt, director of programs at the Craft Emergency Relief Fund and Artists' Emergency Resources, a national organization that has provided aid to Sandy-affected artists as well. "We asked artists if anything positive had happened as a result of the disaster. Eighty-five percent said yes."

"I think it has a lot to do with the attitude of artists," Nutt adds. "They had made adaptations in their work—they had discovered new imagery from

at the exhibition space at Mana Contemporary, a high-end art storage facility in Jersey City that gave Smith substantial help in the cleanup. Afterward, he'd like to cast the sculpture in bronze and preserve the unexpected "paint job" forever.

Several months later, artists in the tristate area have begun to process what Sandy wrought. Dozens lost studios and, because of the extensive damage in Chelsea, hundreds, if not thousands, lost art. For those affected, the loss has manifested itself physically and conceptually in their post-Sandy work and even, in some cases, in their approach to making art in general. Throughout, there seems to be a propensity toward a kind of silver-lining thinking: a lot of artists are taking on

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the disaster. It also helped them prioritize.”

“Artists, more than anyone I know, are capable of making something out of nothing,” adds Michael Royce, executive director of the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), which has been a critical resource for artists in the wake of the storm. “That is what they do all their lives. They find things on the street, they beg, they borrow, or they create brand-new colors, brand-new objects, or brand-new ways of looking at the world. They have within them what I would call a resilient spirit that actually infuses everything they do.”

Many of the artists affected are still in a state of shock, Royce notes, and most are still writing grant proposals and applying for aid. But “when they come out of that survival mode, many will find a way to make use of the experience in a way that empowers them to go deeper into their work.”

Some—like Smith—already have. Diana Cooper’s recent solo exhibition at Postmasters Gallery in Chelsea featured a new series of photo-based constructions. The title of the show, “My Eye Travels,” pays homage to a work Cooper lost when her storage unit flooded during the storm. The original piece was a mixed-media network of undulating topographies and housing-block-like grids, lying somewhere between a motherboard and a map. Its loss thrust her toward a long-considered move into manipulated photography.

Photography “has a relationship with the ephemeral—things that exist today but not tomorrow,” she says. “In a weird way, the Sandy experience gave me more courage to throw myself into that. It made me less fearful of the new.”

Other such post-Sandy efforts were on view in February in the NYFA-organized Chelsea exhibition “After Affects.” Igor Kopystiansky’s *Painting* is a tangled mass of shredded canvas, composed of bits and pieces of the

paintings destroyed in the duo’s art storage unit. Andrea Burgay’s *Woven Threads Drawing Sketchbook* and *Woven Threads Drawing* are mud-and water-stained, quasi-anatomical 2012 sketches altered in the artist’s studio during the storm (in the sketchbook, the mud stains form a riblike structure along the binding, adding to the piece’s effect). New York photographer Larry

Racioppo contributed his images of Queens residents grappling with their own damaged art: an elderly couple disposing of their Sunday paintings, and a man parting with the dollhouse he built for his daughter. Golnar Adili’s *Amber* is a photocolage from a journal salvaged from the artist’s flooded studio. The piece consists of two portraits of a young Iranian woman cut into strips and spliced together. The patches of desaturated color on and around her (the water caused them to bleed onto another page) seem to glow.

Adili, an artist-in-residence at Dumbo’s Smack Mellon, was out of town when the storm hit. The nonprofit moved “anything that looked



In Melissa Rubin’s *Sinking*, 2012, the man-made world is helpless against an attack by both sky and ocean.

like art” out of harm’s way, she says. But they didn’t know that the videotapes, books, documents, snapshots, and other ephemera stored in boxes throughout her given space were just as precious, if not more so: they comprised Adili’s late father’s belongings.

The artist had been sitting on the massive archive for about ten years, since her father’s death. “It was too emotional for me—I just wasn’t ready,” she says. She had just started going through the materials before the storm.

Floodwaters made it seem as if a giant spoon had given the studio a violent stir. But friends came by and salvaged quite a bit. Adili had been cataloguing the archive piece by piece, and suddenly it was all laid bare. “I saw photos and things I had never seen,” she



John Gordon Gauld's *Flooded Bunny*, 2012, was not actually flooded but refers to the inundation.



Larry Racioppo recorded a personal loss: *Bob and the dollhouse he built for his daughter, and used too by his granddaughters, put out for trash pickup, 2012.*



Golnar Adili's *Amber*, 2006, is a photograph from a collage in a journal salvaged from the artist's flooded studio.



Igor Kopystiansky's *Painting*, 2012, from the exhibition "After Affects," is made of shredded canvas from storm-destroyed works.

says, and that would have taken her months, if not years, to see otherwise. “In a way, the flood brought everything together. It gave me so much energy and it made it all so much more urgent.”

I was investigating displacement and loss,” Adili adds.

“This added another layer—it deepened the story.” Adili has several exhibitions on the horizon, and she’s determined to find a way to integrate these materials and her father’s narrative into her craft, which lately has included folding, cutting, and rearranging paper reproductions of her photographs into delicate sculptures.

Like Adili, Brooklyn sculptor Dustin Yellin achieved a level of clarity as the result of his loss, and the events have had an eerie resonance in his work. Yellin makes three-dimensional collages by adorning and then layering dozens of thick glass panes. He’s tired, but inspired. The upheaval he witnessed during the storm—which decimated both his studio and his recently christened space, the Intercourse—has stuck with him. He’s itching to make art again to process what he’s seen.

“Experiencing it was just fantastic,” Yellin says. Like others in the area, he chose not to evacuate during Sandy and tried to protect his studio. When that failed, he watched in awe as the water seeped in.

“To see the refrigerator float up and on to its back and open up and the food come out and everything becoming this soup was incredible,” he says. “I don’t think I’d give that up. I feel lucky to have experienced it. Even though there’s so much damage and turmoil and loss that came with it. It’s also one of the most exhilarating and visceral memories I’ll probably have in my life.”

Stacks of glass panels that survived the surge and a few of Yellin’s recent works are scattered throughout the Intercourse for safekeeping (his new studio is still



Christoper Saucedo's *Fluid Container Inventory*, 2011, aluminum on wood, was made after he lost his New Orleans home and studio to Katrina.

under construction), including *The Triptych*, a 12-ton colossus of a piece that I first saw when I came by for a sneak peek at the Intercourse before it opened last year. Today, the piece seems more like a self-fulfilling prophecy. It depicts an apocalyptic underwater hell-scape, as man, beast, and everything in between are tossed and toppled by white-capped waves. The chaotic scene (à la Hieronymus Bosch) is spurned by a large sea-witch

of sorts, spewing out an inky, oily, all-consuming toxic substance—not unlike Sandy herself. Musicians, scientists, soldiers, and artists are among the crowd.

It’s ironic that the piece appears to have survived the storm intact. Yellin is more determined than ever to continue working in this vein, to make more of “these crazy drowning worlds, this idea of everything going into this deluge.”

There is “this kind of dynamic pause, this opportunity to suddenly turn the visual language around in a very specific way,” says Dan Cameron, chief curator at the Orange County Museum of Art and founding director of Prospect New Orleans, a sprawling biennial installed throughout the city. Artists, he says, are inclined to embrace disaster, to repurpose it, to give voice to it.

“This is the common philosophy of artists,” says Brooklyn-based painter Bosco Sodi. After the storm, the pigments he uses to make his thick, fibrous monochromes stained the walkway surrounding his waterfront studio bright red; nearly a year’s worth of work was damaged inside. “Artists know how to deal with accidents, how to deal with materials, how to deal with complications,” he says.

“It’s this kind of notion that art may itself be eternal in some way, but life certainly isn’t,” Cameron adds. “Artists right away want to convey that. You have the

need to make it and the need to see it"—not just from the art community but from the local population.

Few know this urge better than Christopher Saucedo, a New York-based artist who lost his home and studio in Hurricane Katrina and then again during Sandy after having relocated to the Rockaways, the devastated beachfront neighborhood in Queens.

The Arts Council of New Orleans commissioned Saucedo to make a monument to Katrina. The resulting piece features an 8,000-pound slab of granite carved with 1,836 waves to memorialize the dead, and rests on the kind of sturdy wooden rollers used to move construction materials in earlier days. The stone had been underwater during Katrina too.

"I had had it for a very long time," Saucedo says. "It was such a beautiful thing, I was always afraid to use it, afraid that whatever I did would not be worthy of that stone. After Katrina, I had this newfound courage. Had it not happened, I imagine it would still be sitting in my yard, and I'd still be waiting for the subject to appear."

But perhaps the most poignant examples of Saucedo's storm-spurred output are several pieces that came out of a discovery the artist made while surveying the damage in his New Orleans home. A cabinet had survived the surge intact and the glasses inside were full to the brim with Katrina floodwater. He photographed the vessels and saved the water in a separate container. The

imagery from this odd found memorial recently made its way into Saucedo's work. He rendered the glasses on the ends of cattle-branding devices and burned their images onto black-and-white photographs of his brother, a firefighter, whom he lost on September 11, 2001. He also branded these containers into a floating composition on a wood panel and, in another piece, rendered them with thin strips of aluminum. The work was shown in September 2011 at the cooperatively run Good Children Gallery in New Orleans, which itself was a storm by-product.

Saucedo and his family were evacuated to Houston during the storm, "so there was this emptiness of not knowing what happened firsthand in Katrina," he says. "These glasses of water were residue; they were clues left behind."

The branded-wood piece was underwater during Sandy, and Saucedo doused it with Red Cross-supplied bleach to stave off mold, then branded it yet again. "It allowed me to make something richer," he says of the piece, which now has a more expressive look of a relic. "A full-on crisis removes any reluctance or cautious hesitancy in experimentation."

Plus, he adds, "the provenance keeps me closer to the work. Both the work and I survived the storm. We are linked." ■



Flood Marker, 2007, is Saucedo's monument to the hurricane. The granite slab is carved with 1,836 waves to memorialize the dead.