

TOM LOESER

FLOTILLA

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Flotilla: Tom Loeser and the Art of Displacement

Jim Jarmusch's film *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (2000), chronicles the intertwining relationship between members of two dying breeds of 'honorable men' living somewhat mythic lives played against a backdrop of gritty hip hop urbanism. In one of the film's memorable scenes, the protagonist's best friend, a French-speaking ice cream vendor named Raymond, drags him to a nearby rooftop to see something that has caught his attention. The two approach the parapet at the edge of the roof and as they peer over and across the alley they see a wooden boat, mid-construction, and a man laboring over it on the neighboring rooftop. The scene is quiet and the camera lingers allowing the viewer to take in the view of this urban Noah and his modest ark. Finally, both characters mutter in their native tongues, that it is the most beautiful thing they have ever seen.

My parents hail from suburban Detroit and in their tales of growing up, there is one that features a neighbor spontaneously digging a large earthen ramp and punching a sizable hole in the basement wall in order to drag a wooden boat from the depths. Notable boats figured in my past as well. Upon high school graduation, a friend enrolled in boat building school. After completing his studies he rented a warehouse on the fairgrounds in Paso Robles and during the following year he constructed a wooden sailboat. When it was finished he set sail and I never saw nor heard of him again. During construction, berthed in their maker's suburban basements or moored to their sheltering rooftops, these boats serve as escape vehicles from the everyday. In their ideal voyage on the open water, they suggest freedom from the confines of the built environment.

The genesis of Flotilla is yet another instance of a self-made escape vehicle, built in an improbable locale. During the spring semester of 2005, Tom Loeser arranged for the University of Wisconsin Wood Program to host Josh Swan as a resident artist and boat builder. During his stay, Swan constructed a 13.5' rowboat known as a Maine 'peapod'. To appreciate the odd nature of this endeavor, one benefits from familiarity with the UW Wood Program's home. The program is housed on the 7th floor of the Humanities Building, a Brutalist construction renowned on campus for its impenetrable design. Envision a boat being built seven floors up and navigating a series of labyrinthine halls and traveling through two freight elevators (in which it fit by fractions of an inch) and a basement passage, to be born unto the world and subsequently lake Mendota.

Swan's boat had anchored itself in Loeser's psyche, and in the summer of 2006, he began his own boatbuilding enterprise alongside two of his graduate students, Matthias Pliessnig and Benjamin Wooten. The three had elected to each construct a Whitehall 12, incorporating a building system developed by boat-builder Platt Montfort of Maine. The system, what Montfort calls Geodesic Aerolite construction, is to build a lightweight frame using traditional techniques

(steam-bent oak ribs and straight grain fir or cedar stringers running the length of the boat), triangulate and stiffen the resultant wood frame with Kevlar thread, and finally skin the boat with heat shrink aircraft Dacron. The system creates a boat that is semitransparent and ultralight. They are a joy to row and move through the water quickly and gracefully.

During the process of crafting this boat and another during a Summer 2007 workshop at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Loeser gained valuable insight into the formal logic of boat construction. By first generating a series of stations to define key cross sections of the boat, then joining and blending these stations using lengthwise stringers allows for the creation of compound curves. On this, Loeser remarks, "It is a very different way to generate 3 dimensional form from most furniture making techniques, and it is a wonderful way to develop compound forms where everything is curved in more than one direction." In Flotilla, Loeser explores the form generating nature of the stations, treating them as an open-ended system that can be manipulated to unexpected effect. However, instead of treating this system as means to pure formal experimentation, Loeser has maintained the ties to the boat's functional roots. In Loeser's hands the techniques intended to create boat forms have been turned inside out to, dare I say, deconstruct the boat form.

The form of a boat speaks of displacement, movement, and direction. In the individual pieces that constitute Flotilla, we see the result of Loeser's experimentation with stations and their arrangement in space. In their finished form, the keel runs the length, along the 'bottom' of the boat and the ribs cross it at intervals, the stringers then cross the ribs lengthwise creating the 'interior' volume and the imagined displacement without. In this visual hierarchy, the keel is the organizing principle. Through his modulation of the stations, Loeser is able to change the path of the keel through space and to radically change the resultant form while still referencing the concept 'boat'. Here Loeser explores how changing the organizing principle of the boat changes its hypothetical function and performance. In so doing he creates a series of propositions. Q: What if the keel is kinked to the left? From which we may make an educated guess based on the skeletal forms we see and the foreknowledge we bring to the gallery. A: Well, then the boat goes in counter clockwise circles... forever.

The results of Loeser's experimentation are both engaging and humorous. The members of Flotilla simultaneously appear to be failed design proposals for boats, evolutionary missteps, or the skeletons of boat shaped aquatic animals frozen in the act of locomotion. In 'Screw,' which is created by placing the stations around a faceted central shaft, one can imagine the pilot of such a vessel rotating within the interior vortex. 'Eddy', which was formed by placing the stations on the outside face of a disc, brings to mind the playful underwater summersault of a sea otter. In this way, the forms are evocative of both biological and technological evolution.

In Flotilla, Loeser is working with very old concepts and techniques that have, not surprisingly, been incorporated into 3d modeling software. Currently, there is a lot of cheerleading about the potential of computer-aided design (CAD) and manufacturing (CAM) to create previously unrealizable forms. Algorithmic architecture is a design approach that uses the computer to create complex geometric forms through scripting. The approach taps into the computational power of the computer, and employs it as a sort of 'brute force' to create complex forms. Typically the designs take the form of crystalline or other 'organic' patterns. While the results are conceivably attainable without the computer, the computer is seen as a force for making them economically feasible. For the most part, this technology has been used to create surface patterning in architecture, although it has also been employed in the creation of novel forms for buildings, designed objects, and art.

Loeser is engaging in his own variation on algorithmic architecture. His constants are the elemental components of boat construction: keels, ribs and stringers. His variables: the stations' relative locations in space. Instead of bringing brute force to the table, he brings the sensitivity of a craftsman who is tuned to the impact of subtle variations within the system. As in 'Right', where Loeser deflects the path of the stations ever so slightly in order to create a boat form that would never sail straight. The members of the Flotilla are reminiscent of the wireframe diagrams created in most CAD programs. As a result they are akin to three-dimensional sketches of potential products, but also to ghosts. Yet, like the wooden boats they refer to, they have a presence and materiality that speaks to the much older forms of production than digital fabrication. Loeser has suspended Flotilla in these uncharted waters between the time-honored techniques of old and the iterative tendencies of the present, and it is within this tumult that the viewer can set their own bearings, hoist the main sail, and set off towards the horizon.

Please Join Us for the Opening Reception:

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