



ARTIST INTERVIEW

MOVING ON

A CONVERSATION WITH JUDITH SHAW

By Katryn Dierksen

St. Louis artist Judith Shaw's exhibition, *Moving On*, exhibited this last March at the Duet Gallery in Midtown's Grand Center. The exhibit was made up entirely of tire treads that had been frayed up and arranged on the walls of the gallery, on pedestals, and on crates set on the floor. The wires from some pieces had been pulled out into curls. The metal cords inside the tires were cut up and splintered. Some pieces had been uniformly curled and trimmed. A pile of about ten tires were arranged in a heap, each was a perfect circle cut from the center of a tire. Others seemed to be living and crawling on the wall. Some were cut in crescents, that resembled a lemon wedge, a moon and a fingernail all at once.

On the night of the exhibition's reception, all of the pieces in their flat monochrome blackness became like the

Rorschach "ink blot" test. One had only to project their psychological state onto the shapes to find their meaning in the viewer's subconscious and in declaration of their finding, define some- thing about their own nature at the same time.

Katryn Dierksen: What made you decide to collect tire treads, and when did you know you wanted to transform them into art?

Judith Shaw: Found objects form the basis of my sculptural practice, so I am always on the look out for interesting materials. [...] When I saw the rubber pieces abandoned by the highway, they called out to me. I was riveted by their raw emotionality and vulnerability. Their dynamic energy was striking. When I finally got up the nerve to collect the tire fragments, I knew I wanted to use them in my artwork but had no idea or visual imagery for

what they would become. I sensed the expressiveness of the material would translate well into the kind of pieces I create and themes I investigate.

KD: How long did it take you to gather the tires for this exhibition?

JS: I collected the tires for several years before starting to work with them. It took a while to figure out the safest way to get them off the highway. While the potency of the tires attracted me right away, I had no idea how to approach the material and fashion it into anything. Gathering the tires for as long as I did gave me the chance to contemplate their meaning and consider fabrication methods.

KD: How did you decide the shapes of the final pieces? How much did you manipulate the

tires? What were your favorite tools?

JS: The raw material dictates my creative process. When I begin, I do not have a vision of a finished piece nor do I have a specific shape or design in mind. A direction gradually emerges as I handle the material. I follow it through until the tire pieces reach their full expression. Instead of manipulating or reconfiguring the material, I set out to release its organic flow. Few tools are used in the process. Cutting and slicing tools disrupt the tires' innate movement and integrity so I work primarily with my hands. Each sculpture is influenced by the emotion and mood I am trying to capture. The rubber has its own current. I look for pieces that embody the energy of what I want to convey. I do have a favorite pair of wire cutters used to snip off unruly sharp ends. When I do not have the strength to pull and peel the metal belting that runs along the underbelly of a rubber piece, I use a needle-nosed pliers to start off the gesture. A pneumatic staple gun and power drill used to attach pieces to the wall, a base or to each other are other favorites.

DK: Did anything go wrong in pursuit or manipulation of a tire?

JS: The biggest hazard of working with the tire pieces is that they are sharp and heavy. Even though I wear gloves, unprotected parts of my body end up with scratches; wrists and ankles in particular and occasionally my face. The exposed, sharp metal cords and fibers in the tires catch my hair and put holes in my clothing. When collecting the raw material, I get so exhilarated by my finds that my adrenaline kicks in and I do not

appreciate how heavy the pieces are until I lift them later. After installing the Duet show and the creative frenzy that preceded it, my whole body ached.

KD: Did you have any help?

JS: Yes, I collect most of the tire material with a dear friend. She drives while I scout. We pull over when we see a good patch of tire scraps ahead. I get out and gather, throw the pieces in the back of the car and we move on. Most of the work in the Duet show was created in Joe Chesla's sculpture studio at Meramec Community College where I take classes. Since I did not know where or how to begin, Chesla, head of sculpture and design at Meramec, encouraged me to play and experiment with different approaches. When I needed guidance or ran into a construction challenge, he helped me resolve it. Other students were generous with feedback which also spurred me on. Since I like working big, I realize that I will need more help if I continue with large scale pieces. I recently started making some that are small and lightweight which are more manageable to maneuver.



Judith Shaw, *Moving On*, installation view (image courtesy of the Duet Gallery)

KD: What is your favorite story associated with the project?

JS: There was a huge, long piece that sat along Forest Park Parkway for months waiting for me. I checked it out numerous times but it was too big and

heavy to drag home alone. It lay there through several seasons, continuing to tempt me. I visited it repeatedly. A friend agreed to get it with me but somehow we never did. Eventually, I went to pick it up with my car and it was impossible to hoist so I gave up. The snake-like scrap kept tugging at me as it lingered along the roadside. Another friend with a truck promised to get it. That never happened either. Determined to have it no matter what it took, I finally grabbed it myself and got it in my car. The piece is relieved to have been rescued and I appreciate its beauty and resilience.

KD: I have heard you personify some of the final pieces--do they develop personalities in your mind as you create them, or do you feel that they already have these personalities when you find them?

JS: They have the personalities when I find them. My job as I work with the tires is to uncover their unique character and bring them back to life.



Judith Shaw, *Moving On*, installation view (image courtesy of the Duet Gallery)