

PLAY

BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

There's half a page devoted to the word *play* in my dictionary. It can mean anything from amusement, sport, or other recreation to something that "seems to move quickly, lightly, or irregularly: *The breeze played on the water.*"

The minute I pick up a stick my dog Chlöe is ready to go at it. Psychologists fill volumes trying to describe it. There are countless kinds of play. But I'm interested in play that's more like a breeze than a sport with a goal in mind.

For this article I focused on artistic play, more about process than product, what I think of as *pure play*. It involves discovery, expression, innovation, and spontaneity. Children (if allowed to play freely) and artists tend to be good at it.

Some people are lucky enough to consider their work a form of play, creating their lives and livelihoods around it, but most of us toil away at labor. We seem increasingly bound to the cycle of production and consumption. I too often hear people boast about their ability to multi-task, but never hear anybody brag about his ability to multi-play. Machines can be programmed to multi-task. Since when did the value of human beings become directly proportionate to their ability to perform like a machine? Can machines play?

Let me say this: We should all work more at play — pure play.

A friend laments that her children are lost without batteries or electricity to run digital gadgets. They crave tech gizmos. If they don't get the latest they feel deprived. Even though these toys are designed for play and may improve certain cognitive skills, it's a highly structured, often digitally-animated form of play that directs the child into a particular activity. It's as though the toy is playing the child. That's a little like the thought police. Are we losing our capacity for pure play?

Work less. Play more.

I set out to find examples of pure play and selected three venues where it's thriving: R&F Handmade Paints in Kingston, the Universal Building Systems (UBS) facility in Red Hook (which houses exhibition and studio space at Bard College), and an exhibition of sculptural assemblages by Lee Musselman at David Dew Brunner Design, Hudson, New York.

R&F HANDMADE PAINTS

Entering R&F Handmade Paints is like walking into a giant candy box where the bonbons are jewel-toned and glow from within with a jellybean clarity and sheen. Internationally known for their encaustics (wax-based paints) and oil-based pigment sticks, R&F is a perfect juncture between play and work. Their product is used by art world notables, but their soul is pure play. The facility includes a retail operation (products are also sold via R&F's impressive online catalog), the paint factory, a gallery/exhibition space, and a studio where visiting artists specializing in encaustics give workshops. (Encaustic is a type of paint composed of pigment, beeswax and resin. It has been around since the 5th century B.C. It is applied molten to a surface and fused, to create a variety of effects. It's impervious to moisture and water and, as a result, lasts a very long time.)



There's a palpable buzz to the flow of creative energy in the materials-to-methods-under-one-roof scene that gives R&F a Renaissance integrity. Affable and knowledgeable Gallery Manager Laura Moriarty guided me first to the factory, where I met two art-

ist/technicians testing a batch of "Indian Yellow." The factory, like the company, fuses work and play in a space that's a cross between chemistry lab and artist's studio.

The materials are opulent — sumptuous. The pigments and deeply saturated colors have names like "Sanguine Earth Deep," "Veronese Green," and "French Mauve," and recall the luminous beauty of Flemish and Venetian paintings. The encaustic medium has both a two- and three-dimensional quality, and can be worked into a sculptural impasto — almost bas relief — or burnished to a gloss or dry fresco finish. The urge to play is uncontrollable. The encaustic crayons look good enough to eat! These materials spark a pure-play impulse, and for many artists that's how the process begins. There's ample proof of that at the UBS facility in Red Hook, a sprawling warehouse complex housing exhibition space and studios for senior and graduate fine art students at Bard College.

UBS AT BARD COLLEGE

The UBS space is a hive of energy and ideas where improvisation and discovery reign. It's pure, pure play. I spent most of a morning with Laura Battle, who has taught painting at Bard College for more than 20 years. She responded to my quest for play by guiding me through this center of artistic experimentation that's like a giant playroom. There are many different materials, forms, and styles of artwork-in-progress being developed for the annual senior show in May (see sidebar for schedule).



"POCAHONTAS" by Johanna Povirk-Znoy (Mixed media work on paper)

Examples range from figurative to abstract drawing, formal minimalist installations, to funky, cutting-edge assemblages that combine two- and three-dimensional elements — both in painting and sculpture. One student morphs cartoon drawings, coloring

KATHY GRIFFIN
JUNE 20
8 PM

Tickets:
 19 Clinton Ave. Palace Box Office,
 Albany, NY 12207 518-476-1000,
 palacealbany.com Ticketmaster.com

PLAY

R&F
 Handmade Paints
 84 Ten Broeck Ave.
 Kingston, NY 12401
 800.206.8088

UBS
 Exhibition Center,
 Bard College
 7408 South Broadway
 Red Hook, NY 12504
 Senior Exhibitions:
 April 12-26
 & May 3-17
 Contact:
 Melody Goodwin at
 845.758.7674

Lee Musselman
 David Dew Bruner
 Design
 621 Warren St.
 Hudson, NY 12534
 914.466.4857

Red Art GALLERY

invites you to experience more deeply
 the worlds of

Mariene Wiedenbaum
Joan Mellon
Liz Inver
Cynthia Hall
Michael Gold

Opening
 reception
 Saturday,
 May 17th 6-8 pm
 May 17th - June 15th 2008

159 Sullivan Street, Wurtsboro, NY
 845-888-2519
 Hours: Fri. - Mon. 12-6pm,
 Tues. -Thurs. 12-3pm & by Appt.
 www.RedArtGallery.com

books, religious icons and Barbie doll paraphernalia into single figures — playing with, and restructuring, narratives about form and identity.

In another corner, a wacky chain-ladder anchored in a concrete slab leads to a secret loft in the ceiling. There's a pyramid stack of cardboard boxes piled 12 feet high. Another room houses a system of construction framing with an elaborate ramp. The context for most work at UBS is "no context," and an almost irreverent — playful — disregard for traditional art categories. Architecture, audio, sculpture, construction, film, painting, and decorating meld. New categories and discoveries about form and identity emerge as provocative, playful, and maybe even revolutionary.

Back on Bard's main campus at the Fisher Arts Center (not to be confused with Frank Gehry-designed Fisher Performing Art Center), I chatted with Battle about play in art and the art of play.

"There are certain 'eureka' moments which occur amidst play," she said, "when one is engaged in a task that is neither too demanding as to cause frustration, nor too simpleminded as to induce boredom. Finding the right balance

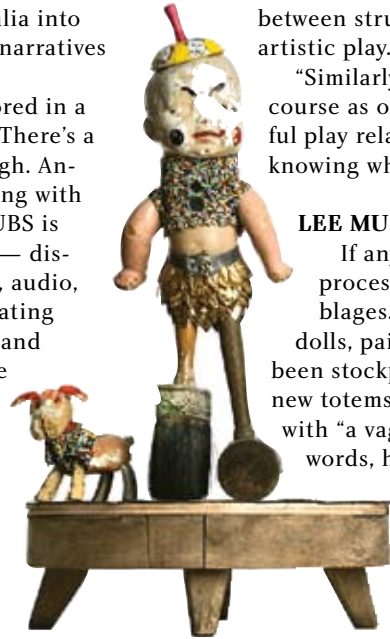
between structure and intuition is the key to productive artistic play."

"Similarly, allowing for one's initial plan to veer off course as one engages with materials is crucial. Meaningful play relates to the artistic process in that it is all about knowing when to let loose, and when to pull in, the reigns.

LEE MUSSELMAN

If any artist lets loose the reigns in the creative process, it's Lee Musselman with his sculptural assemblages. Musselman uses iconic objects of play — toys, dolls, paintbrushes and the like — and *objets trouvés* he's been stockpiling for years. Pieces are assembled into whole new totems, figures he considers "spirit guides." He starts with "a vague idea, to see if things work or don't." In other words, he plays.

"It's a give and take with the materials, a dance," he says. A delicate bisque doll's head sprouts deer's antlers on composite bodies fashioned out of found objects, or intricate outfits Musselman has made, like a hand-woven telephone-wire tutu. Their hands and feet are often crafted from mallets, brushes or menacing iron implements like pitchforks



"Stump and His Best Friend" Mixed Media
Lee Musselman

and shovels — the better to kick butt against bad mojo — that distort, dismember, and deform the figures. But it's OK to stare. It's slightly and delightfully reminiscent of Joseph Cornell.

Cornell was an American artist and sculptor, influenced by the Surrealists and one of the pioneers and most celebrated exponents of assemblage. But unlike Cornell, whose often intricate assemblages were usually contained within a shadow box, Musselman's have come out of the box. We're allowed to touch. And Musselman's figures ("dolls") also fulfill a desire to play without gender limitation.

Musselman's a surrealist whose mostly self-taught techniques were nevertheless tempered by time spent in Cologne, Germany, where he was influenced by the photography of Hans Bellmer. Years on the Provincetown gallery scene and a stint in Gambia, Africa, studying African tribal work, wood-carving, and batik were his MFA equivalency. Why haven't you heard of him before? Because his devotion to process, and pure play, as well as his nearly shamanistic approach and reverence for his art, are deeply private. Although he has shown his work before, he hasn't followed the path and careerist ambitions many artists do, and has remained somewhat obscure as a result.

While efficiency and productivity may be crucial in the workplace, these qualities represent only fractions of human capability and potential. We've been so highly influenced by the corporate model that determines a person's worth in direct proportion to his performance in the marketplace, that many of us have come to believe that's true. Similarly, the problem of art as commodity — a product whose worth is determined by its commercial success — is a meager assessment of the true value of art. This measure of both human value and art as commodity is lethal to the spirit and process of pure play, innovative ideas, and creative genius.

Great human achievements in the arts and culture, humanities, literature, science, mathematics, and even business, have rarely been accomplished by people who function like machines along assembly lines, spitting out the same product

day in and day out. Look up at the sky, at the stars, at our planet and other planets in our solar system rotating in space, hurtling through the galaxy — and you'll see what I mean. ❖



Philip Alvaré specializes in writing about decorative, fine arts and design. For 10 years he distinguished himself as owner of BOTANICVS Antiques & Fine Arts in Hudson, N.Y., a gallery of late - 18th and 19th - century antiques and decorative elements for the garden. His background includes film, television and print production, where he earned various credits including PBS, ABC, NBC and MGM-FOX.

VOLKMANN - STUDIO

PORTRAIT - COMMERCIAL
WWW.VOLKMANN-PHOTO.COM
518-828-2512
HUDSON

RALPH STOUT, TIDAL POOL, 2008, ACRYLIC ON LINEN, 36 X 48

CARRIEHADDADGALLERY.COM
■ HUDSON, NEW YORK ■

MELISSA ETHERIDGE
The Revival Tour 2008
LIVE

Saturday
June 28

MAGIC CITY PRODUCTIONS
PALACE THEATRE
19 Clinton Ave.
Albany, NY
MELISSAETHERIDGE.COM

Tickets:
Palace Box Office
518-476-1000
Ticketmaster.com