

2007

## Building a better mousetrap

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# BUILDING A BETTER MOUSETRAP

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
In  
The School of Art

By  
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B.F.A., University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, 2002  
May, 2007

## PREFACE

*Building a Better Mousetrap* illuminates two divergent aspects of my life and attempts to describe their overlap: my methodical studio practice that forces me to slow my thought process and focus in on the task at hand, allowing me to be isolated mentally from distractions, and the faster-paced commotion of the world outside of the shop that pulls me in many directions at once. This body of work utilizes quasi-architectural/ mechanical objects that take on the appearance of traps built in an archaic fashion. These contain representational elements that act as analogies for the modern-day conveniences I have reluctantly made a part of my life. My studio practice draws on my experiences in the trades as a mason and carpenter to develop the methods and materials I use to create these objects. It is with this hands-on approach that I intend to illustrate my reverence for hand-made things and the values associated with them in contrast to the mass-produced, throwaway items that facilitate my shift toward the ever-broadening horizon of new technology.

When I view my work I cannot help but see the many things that have inspired its creation, in addition to the experiences that have guided me towards the ideas that I am presenting. My aesthetics and designs have been shaped by numerous sources: Traps I have researched, artists I have looked at, books I have read, structures I admire and countless other influences. I am a person whose thoughts are spurred by visual stimuli and the sculptures I create are compilations of the many things that I see. I could begin to describe how every decision I have made may have been influenced by this piece of sculpture or that author's work but I do not think that would be helpful for viewing this body of work in the way that I have intended. Securing every sculpture in this exhibition to an identifiable source would contradict my goal as an artist, it is my aim to lead the audience in a chosen direction but allow them to reach their own destination. By this I hope to open a dialog with viewers rather than impose a lecture.

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## ABSTRACT

To me the phrase “building a better mousetrap” implies that a needless change has been made to something that already sufficiently serves its purpose. These words identify my thoughts about how over the past three years I have begun to replace trusted means of communication with newer technologies. My thesis work examines my relationship to these new modes of communication and how, as I see others around me making them useful parts of their lives, I am continually snared by the promise of their convenience. Ultimately, however, they distract and frustrate me with the countless hours I allow them to consume, as I am conscious that I often end up at the same place that their antiquated predecessors would have gotten me. This body of work presents quasi-architectural/ mechanical objects that take on the appearance of traps built in an archaic fashion. These contain representational elements that act as analogies for the modern-day conveniences I have reluctantly made a part of my life. In addition to thoughts of my growing reliance on technology, the works that I am presenting demonstrate my appreciation for craft and it is my hope that their carefully considered construction will serve as a reminder that *everything* cannot be done by machines.

## BUILDING A BETTER MOUSETRAP

To me the phrase “building a better mousetrap” implies that a needless change has been made to something that already sufficiently serves its purpose. This phrase, in my mind, conjures up images of overly elaborate contraptions that look sophisticated and complex but ultimately are wrought with frustrating glitches. These words identify my thoughts about how over the past three years I have begun to replace trusted means of communication with newer technologies, enabling me to be available to more people than before and reach them faster, while simultaneously leaving me with the feeling that I have started something I cannot stop. My thesis work examines my relationship to these new modes of communication and how, as I see others around me making them useful parts of their lives, I am continually snared by the promise of their convenience. Ultimately, however, they distract and frustrate me with the countless hours I allow them to consume, as I am conscious that I often end up at the same place that their antiquated predecessors would have gotten me. In addition to thoughts of my growing reliance on technology, the works that I am presenting demonstrate my appreciation for craft and it is my hope that their carefully considered construction will serve as a reminder that *everything* cannot be done by machines. The subtle imperfections present in these sculptures act as evidence of the human maker.

Before continuing, I should address how I define new or modern technology in relation to this paper and my work. By these terms, which I will use interchangeably, I am referring to technologies that have become prevalent in American culture beginning in the 1990’s. Some of the ideas I will explore have earlier roots but were not available to the mass population or overwhelmingly accepted by it until the past fifteen years or so.

It is also important to note, I do not stand in opposition to the advancement of technology, nor do I endorse its rejection. I accept it as beneficial, but I wish I had the interest in understanding its workings like I do with analog technologies. For me a mechanical system is intriguing. I am captivated by the aesthetics of mechanisms I can watch each individualized part performing its function; I can associate different shapes with certain operations, I can witness potential energy changed to kinetic energy, and I can conceivably create my own systems by

looking at examples. Conversely, electronic technology seems too similar looking to me. The inside of a television remote does not seem so dissimilar from the guts of an MP3 player. In addition, an unappealing plastic shell normally covers the working parts of electronics, so I cannot easily look at a microprocessor to see exactly how it works, nor do I have the desire to.

The cages and traps that I have constructed as major elements of my sculptures serve as references to the way I view my ever-growing reliance on electronic means of communication. I am a curious person and enticed by new things, so with my thesis work I present some of the aspects of my life that I feel “trap” me and steal time that could be spent more productively. In some ways these are my guilty pleasures. They are the things that I allow to distract me from what I think I should be doing.

### **A Decision**

The first questions I should address are: Why have I chosen the forms of traps and cages to present my experiences with technology? And why construct them in an archaic fashion if they are intended to speak about modern advancement?

Cages and traps act as recognizable containers and serve as images loaded with possible interpretations for viewers. A cage conjures up images of being tricked and unknowingly held against one’s will, as the bait distracts the prey and holds its attention inside the trap, imprisoned in a sense, by one’s own curiosity to go after the prize inside. Although I intend for viewers to interpret these forms in countless individual ways I am confident that their final assessment will be that it is better not to be lured into a cage.

A cage is also a vessel whose interior is easily viewed. Its walls create a physical barrier between inside and outside but do not offer any privacy. I have disguised my traps and cages with elements that reference the home, embellishing their exteriors with semblances of dwellings and furnishing their interiors with imagery that implies a domestic setting. With this I impart the sense of false security I have when I am interacting with technology. Cell phone signals occasionally cross allowing others to hear private conversations, my Internet searches are all recorded on my computer and can be monitored by people I do not know, bank transactions are cataloged, and purchases are scrutinized by security software. I was made aware of this when I had a payment declined because it did not fit into my “check writing profile”. I am constantly

aware that when I am communicating through electronic means there is a possibility that I am unknowingly being monitored. And even though there is a potential for my privacy to be compromised, I still talk on my cell phone, search the Internet, and use my debit card, fully realizing that I have placed myself into a vulnerable position by being enticed by the lure of convenience.

I have built these cages out of roughly split wood lashed together with thread. With this approach I aim to convey immediacy to their construction, and contrast the more refined elements that are references to architecture. These materials convey a resourceful nature to the building process, and with them I am able to achieve a loose gestural appearance with this material even though the placement of these splintered strips of wood are carefully laid out in predictable patterns. This method of construction offers accessibility to the viewer. There are no hidden parts or connections that disguise their function and the materials used are identifiable, creating a tension between the forms and the spaces they contain. These cages create an organic presence while the objects contained by them are renderings of standardized, factory-produced wares.

By presenting my ideas through objects that utilize highly detailed miniature architectural references, combined with cages that are of a scale to trap small animals, I entice viewers to look inside of my works. One goal is to hold their attention with what is placed inside, I offer viewers a space in which to project themselves and consume a bit of their time with representations of what I allow to consume mine. My second goal for this representation of the interior space as a domestic environment and the use of viewing devices is to impart a sense of voyeurism; the viewer is now peering into a space that is normally considered private. This reinforces the idea that as communication technologies advance, opportunities for eavesdropping become more abundant.

### **The Lure of Technology**

As I examined my life in preparation for building this work, I had to ask myself what traps me? And more importantly, what do I mean by “trap”?



By the term “trap,” I am referring to things that I allow to occupy more of my time than the little voice in the back of my mind tells me they should, as well as things that I am now required to do because non-electronic options are no longer acceptable or viable.

The things that trap me range from always being available via cell phone to spending hours watching cable news. In the past fifteen years the Internet has all but replaced the library, become a center for commerce, a place to interact with friends, and a platform from which to communicate with the entire world. Also within this time portable telephones have become an affordable convenience bordering on necessity, rather than a cumbersome novelty, this has just about eliminated the need for public telephones. In addition to these advancements, there is the trap that I allow to disrupt my life the most, the twenty-four hour news channel. Instead of watching the evening news for an hour each night I am able to see stories unfold in real time all day everyday. These “traps” are the advancements and ultimately the replacements of already existing technology. I believe it is their newness and promise that they are better than their older forms that piques my curiosity, but it is that there is a decrease in simpler alternatives that drives my weariness of becoming reliant on new modes of communication. I am disconcerted that gradually I am losing the ability to participate in society with the antiquated instruments that I favor. The reason I compare my experiences with communication technologies to being trapped is because I feel that once I decided to give them a try, I was no longer able to avoid their use. I know that I can choose to get rid of my cell phone, stop watching television, and do my research at the library, and my life will go on, but I have decided that their benefits outweigh their downside. I have chosen convenience over simplicity.

The objects that take on the role of “bait” present analogies for the things to which I devote hours of my life. I view them simply as analogies, rather than actual portrayals, for three reasons. First, the work I am presenting employs a variety of materials combined within each sculpture. By simplifying the elements contained by these elaborate sculptures to stylized images, I am able to offer viewers easily identifiable objects rather than overly complicated representations. Second, the depictions of technology I have used are modeled after the antiquated predecessors that have been replaced in my life by modern counterparts. This is because the older versions are more familiar to me; for most of my life their designs were

basically homogeneous, and I feel that they are more recognizable as references to their function for viewers as well. Currently, design is moving just as fast as technology. An example of this is cell phones. My cell phone that is six years old, looks old-fashioned by today's standards; moreover there are so many different designs available that it is difficult to decide what the generic cell phone should look like. Conversely the basic telephone design has not changed very much since World War II, a slightly arched handle with a round earpiece and round mouthpiece is easily identifiable. Finally, people viewing my work have often asked: Why the rabbit ears and not a flat screen television? Why a card catalog and not a computer? Or why have you used an analog telephone receiver and not a cell phone? Even though these objects do not directly reflect today's technology I am confident that the viewers understand the concepts that I am addressing with them and I am able to present the audience with questions to answer on their own. I have titled this exhibition *Building a Better Mousetrap*. As I previously stated I feel that this phrase implies a needless change has been made to something that already worked fine. This is relevant because as I change my life to adopt new modes of communication I am a little nostalgic for their former forms.

### **Captive in the Studio**

It is my desire that viewers will appreciate my sculptures for their content as well as their craft and aesthetic qualities. Although I have discussed at length the ideas that have been the impetus for this work I need to assert that as vital as the concept is, the process of making the art is equally as significant. I am an object maker, the reason I have chosen sculpture as my career is because I enjoy putting things together with my hands, combining different materials for the simple reason that I think they compliment each other and I enjoy creating and solving problems in a combined mental and hands-on way rather than a with a completely cerebral process.

The sculptures that I have built for this exhibition have been developed in a way that I have used throughout my career as an artist. I identify thoughts that I want to communicate to the audience and decide on basic representational imagery that I believe will convey that thought. Next I work out shapes and objects that I believe will present my ideas in an interesting and dynamic way, as well as to some extent inform the representational elements and/or place them in a context.

When I began building every one of the sculptures in this exhibition they were unresolved. Rather than continuing the planning until the building process would be a mechanical function of: make this piece, it goes here, make that piece, it goes there, I started building as soon as I had enough figured out that I could be occupied for a couple of days. This method for making sculpture allows me to work to some extent instinctually, responding to parts that I have in front of me, adding and subtracting as I feel it is necessary to complete the work formally as well as conceptually.

The greatest factors in determining what the work would look like was that I would derive most of the objects from traps and cages and split wood would be used in part on almost all of the work. These two elements would allow me to build objects that use organized designs achieved with a material that is irregular and more or less unpredictable. During the process of creating these sculptures I often related it to the routine for building a dry fitted stonewall. To build a wall a mason takes thousands of irregular pieces and arranges them in an organized way by carefully selecting the right stone for each place in the line. The objects I have created similarly required me to decide on the right strip of wood for each part of the form and the correct combination of materials for the composition. This method has enabled me to use a structured organization of parts to develop forms that possess a loose gestural quality.

While in my studio the process of splitting wood and lashing it together became a tedious and obsessive act. These sculptures do not only represent the things in my life that distract me from being productive but also embody of the things that hold me captive in my studio when I *am* productive. Every day as I enter the shop I am surrounded by bundles of split strips of wood, bound together these thin splinters of logs create objects that are just as dynamic and beautiful as the structures that I construct. I have incorporated in this exhibition sculptures that focus on the materials I have used in the majority of the pieces by presenting bundles and stacks of this wood as major components of some of the works. As well as the use of bundles as a reference to the materials, I have also incorporated references to tools I associate with manual labor. These elements act as a reference to my experience as a carpenter and mason from which I have drawn heavily to construct the works in this exhibition. These sculptures are intended to relate to the

audience what it is that I am being pulled away from as I attempt to become familiar with the modes of communication I am beginning to rely on.

When working I am continually looking for ways to add subtle details, gifts for attentive viewers, I am always considering the connections and surfaces of every element. My goal is to produce work that is wholly created by me, and offer a contrast to the mass-produced objects that fill my life. Therefore I have a hard time allowing myself to use found objects in my work, so often times I will spend more time than may be necessary on individual parts of sculptures because I feel that by using a store bought or found object I am resigning to the idea that who ever designed and made that object has done it better than I ever can. Except in instances when it is imperative that I use something found or bought to convey an idea that focuses on that particular object, and the differences between the found and made elements. Or when I wish to stress the modifications made to something that is purchased, my hand makes all of the components of my works. This aspect of my sculptures contrasts the ideas that I am presenting, and conveys two sides of my personality; one that can be distracted by electronic communication and the promise of convenience it offers, and one that is consumed by physical labors in order to communicate with an audience.

## **Conclusion**

*Building a Better Mousetrap* is an exhibition that has evolved over the course of its creation. Initially I aimed to articulate aspects of American culture that rely on modern means of communication and through my sculptures criticize this dependence. As I began to form opinions and devise ways of conveying them I realized that my ideas were derived from introspective observations and therefore the focus of my investigation shifted from the world around me to *my* experiences as I slowly adopt new technology. I admit I find it strange that I have a difficult time getting excited about the prospects of an interconnected world, that will enable anyone to communicate with the entire globe instantly. I find it especially odd because I was born in 1980! I have grown up a part of the time that these technologies became available. I am not so old that I could say, "I am set in the ways of my generation" because these things that frustrate me *are* the ways of my generation. My interest lies with physical things that I can touch and manipulate with my hands, not electrical currents passing through wires and circuits. The

work in this exhibition illustrates that as the objects I build value a slow-paced articulation and exploitation of traditional materials and construction methods, I live in a world that is shaped by innovation and an ability to gather massive amounts of information in short intervals of time. Although I am not enthralled by it, I do acknowledge the benefits and conveniences that modern advancements in communication have recently brought. I feel it is necessary for me to explore their possibilities as I strive to function as a part of society rather than segregate myself by refusing to take part in it. This work conveys my curiosity with technology as well as my reservations, as I attempt to understand it and make it a useful part of my life rather than a frustrating nuisance. It is my hope that viewers of this work will recognize some similarities to their lives as they are lured into examining the detailed sculptures I have built. As well as appreciate the hand crafted nature of my work as divergent from the mass produced objects that fill their environment.

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## VITA

Born in Canton, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, Jonathan Pellitteri, son of an architect and grandson of masons, grew up with an admiration and respect for construction, craftsmanship, and manual labor. This up-bringing, coupled with a desire to communicate with the public, steered him toward a career in the visual arts.

Jonathan Pellitteri began his formal art training at The University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth in 1998. While there, he studied many disciplines within the realm of the fine arts. He found sculpture to be the best vehicle for creating a dialog between him and his audience. Combining a classical art training with the skills he learned working in the trades; Pellitteri was able to maintain his laborer's mentality while working in an academic field.

In 2001, Pellitteri spent one semester studying stone carving and bronze casting in Cortona, Italy. This experience provided him with an understanding of the long history of art, and a deep respect for the traditions of sculptors who came before him. After his return, Pellitteri graduated from The University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, *Magna Cum Laude*, with a bachelor's degree in fine art.

After earning his bachelor's degree, Pellitteri remained in the northeast, creating and exhibiting his sculptures throughout the region. In 2004 he completed a one and one half times life-sized bronze figure commissioned by the town of Dartmouth, Massachusetts, to honor a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient who fought in the Civil War. While working on the project Pellitteri was given a special commendation from the town for his efforts in bringing art to the public.

Later in 2004 Pellitteri decided to return to school in order to earn a master's degree, this time leaving his native Massachusetts for Louisiana State University in order to let a new environment influence his work. Since moving to Louisiana Pellitteri has been involved with the local art scene, showing his work in a number of exhibitions. He will earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in May of 2007.