

Joshua Callaghan elevates the humble

The sculptor makes art from parking barriers, plastic bottles, bricks, old crutches. He has a knack for stretching the ordinary to a point of absurdity.



Artist-sculptor Joshua Callaghan in his Los Angeles studio. (Brian van der Brug, Los Angeles Times / January 30, 2011)

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The courtyard in front of Joshua Callaghan's studio, in a small complex of studios along a gritty stretch of San Fernando Boulevard near Elysian Park, looks like a Department of Transportation graveyard, cluttered with what appear to be abandoned parking barriers: short, cylindrical posts of varying widths, coated in sloppy layers of paint and grime. They're called bollards, he points out, though few people know this — which is part of why he finds them so compelling.

"Really they have no name," he says. "I say, 'You know the posts in parking lots that keep your car from running into things?' And people are like, 'Oh, yeah, of course.' But if I say a bollard, nobody knows what I'm talking about. I think that's interesting: They're so anonymous they're not even given the status of a name outside of some technical jargon."

These bollards are, in fact, deceptive imitations, made from cardboard and papier-mâché primarily, for "Elysian Parking," Callaghan's second solo show at Steve Turner Contemporary, on view through Feb. 5. Along with the hubcaps that crowd the interior of the studio — real, not fabricated, and festooned like dream catchers with paint, yarn and feathers — they've been a central preoccupation of Callaghan's for months, a humble emblem of contemporary life.

"I just think they're fascinating," he says. "They're really interesting formally. I love the patina that accumulates on them and all the personality they have and how they're all the same yet each one is very unique, it has this real individual story. For me, they say so much about our culture and society and economy and history. They say a lot about the environment that we built and how our society works, social control, space, the world we've created. Yet they're the most banal, invisible, unremarkable things. They're non-objects, totally created out of this function."

Callaghan, 42, came to sculpture by way of video production, after entering UCLA's master of fine arts program six years ago. (Born in Pennsylvania but raised in multiple places, he studied cultural anthropology as an undergrad in North Carolina, then worked in film and video production in the Bay Area as an editor. ("The computer time," he says of video, "That's what killed me. That's why I had to rethink my career. I didn't want to spend my life in front of a screen.") Though older than most of the other students, he came to the program feeling outside of the art world loop, with no real strategy for what he wanted to accomplish. As a result, he says, "I had a really experimental time."

He walked across L.A., taking photographs and collecting bits of trash in plastic bags. He made a documentary about pigeons, a series of works using traffic cones and a massive installation called "Kool Aid Factory" using pieces of discarded children's toys. His practice as a sculptor emerged, one might say, from his interaction with the city, with its spaces and materials, and has remained closely linked ever since.

Tall and loose-limbed, with a thoughtful, unaffected manner, Callaghan has a deep affinity for common objects. He's made art from plastic bottles, bricks, old crutches and walkers, brass bed frames, plastic deck chairs, a halogen lamp, a hand truck and a push broom. The strength of the work lies in his knack for stretching the ordinary to a point of absurdity — often literally. The lamp piece, which appeared in a group show at Night Gallery last summer, consisted of an actual lamp whose trunk stretched through the ceiling to a point 18 feet above the roof, such that it could be turned on and off from a room it did not illuminate — a dorm room cliché transformed into an endearingly shoddy and purposeless beacon.

In the case of the bollards, he's flipped this strategy, not adapting a found object to fantastical ends but fabricating an identically banal fake. The absurdity lies in the effort expended to reproduce a thing that nobody looks at in the first place, the transformation of a "non-object" into a culturally precious commodity, isolated for contemplation in a gallery. As in all of Callaghan's work, however, this note of absurdity should not be confused with a joke. His affection for these objects is real, resulting in a sincere desire to "save them from the anonymity of the trash heap," as he puts it.

There are risks to such a way of working, as Callaghan appears to be well aware. Losing faith in art itself is one. "You see the value in things," he says, "and you can reach this kind of Zen state where you're always having these aesthetic experiences. It can make art redundant because all those experiences are there already. So then you think, 'Do I want to add more stuff to the world?' Maybe it's unethical to add more junk. But I don't think that anymore. I think the junk that's been processed by an artist and hopefully a good one but even a bad one — there's something good about that. It's only by doing stuff that you're going to get to someplace good, so you have to be able to take that risk of creating something unnecessary."

There is the question as well when using found objects of just how much intervention is necessary. "How much do you have to do," as he puts it, "to justify it as a work?" He admits he doesn't know the answer. "I'm always trying to figure that out," he says. He aims by and large for a light touch — though often, as with the bollards, by way of deceptively exacting effort.

"A simple gesture can have more impact than a tour de force of craft and labor," he says. "It's more interesting to see that efficiency, I think. Anything can be made. I mean, some things you have to go through this enormous craft process to get to it, and I'm not going to knock that, I certainly do that myself also. But there's something more compelling to me about the simplicity. And also having all the decision be visible. And maybe that fits in with the way I see the artist. You're not concealing anything.... I like when you can see how it was made and see everything that's there in front of you and still get something out of it. So when I see that in my work, I'm very happy."