

Anonymity and a Secret Afterlife

by Stanton Hunter

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OPPOSITE: Richie White. Insignificant Historic Object #13, 2007. Part of his series that was censored from an airport terminal exhibition. Cone 10, wood-fired porcelain and stoneware. 32 x 6 x 6 in. Photograph by Richie White.

Artist Richie White seems to have a knack for getting reviews that aren't so much about his work as about what happens to it. The first time this oblique recognition caught my attention was when I read "An Early Departure," by Mike Boehm in the Calendar section of the *Los Angeles Times* (January 15, 2008). According to the article, elements of a work by Richie installed in an airport exhibition were censored because they appeared to depict corpses. Richie said that they were just people having a bad day. I can understand how one might think "death," given that a few of the charred-looking figures were hanging by the scruff of the neck. Reportedly, airport officials were concerned that these sculptures would upset outgoing passengers. An article about controversy related to your work is not quite the same as a review, but as they say, there's no such thing as bad press.

Five years after I read the article, I visited Richie at Saddleback College, where he teaches. He gave me a tour of the studio and the campus, which houses an elegantly flowing, massive veterans' memorial that he and Fred Olsen designed and built – a truly impressive piece of public art. Also on campus were many of Richie's larger-than-life figurative sculptures: coiled abstractions of bodies in postures of repose or stretching, perhaps dancers waiting for the next thing to happen. These headless sculptures are far larger, livelier, and more abstract than the airport sculptures, but both bodies of work convey a mild sense of impending transition. I was struck by how many

and how prominent these campus sculptures were.

"Wow," I said, "free storage." In hindsight, I realize this wasn't the most gracious reaction one could muster. But what artist doesn't have an issue with storage?

"Oh, this is nothing. I've got a bunch of work buried in the desert. That's free storage," Richie replied.

Work buried in the desert? I associate burying with eternal rest, not something intended for exhibitions. In the name of free storage, he has created the potential for an archeological dig – of contemporary art. To me, this idea borders on the magical.

Our conversation continued. "No, I don't take images of my work. I'm bad at marketing," Richie admitted. "No, I didn't document the burying of any of it. I suppose if someone wanted to buy one of the works I could draw them a map of where to find it."

"But how are they going to know it exists to be bought if you didn't at least take a picture of it?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah."

My imagination took off with the idea of a treasure map expertly drawn by Richie himself (he has the capacity) leading into the middle of the desert. That would be deserts, plural: the Mojave and the Anzo Borrego in California.

Fifteen years ago, five years after the initial storing, an unforeseen event changed Richie's buried body of work without any participation by him. After a huge rainstorm, flash floods unearthed



some of the works and carried them downstream, a striking reminder of how clay is made in the first place. Their passage continued in the years after; landowners (friends of Richie's) reported that parts of the sculptures were found scattered up to a mile away from their supposed point of departure.

That Richie allows his work to develop through uncontrolled interactions with natural forces indicates that he doesn't see it as an end in itself as objects to be completed and appreciated in conventional settings. In thinking about this approach, David Nash's wood sculptures come to mind: designed to be carried down rivers and streams, caught up in branches and debris, the art becomes debris, the debris part of the art. Mail art is another example; I myself created an object that "eroded" via multiple UPS shippings (it didn't take many). The Light and Space art movement (1960s and '70s, southern California) also concerned itself with objects and environments, not as ends in themselves, but as facilitators of a direct perceptual experience.

And then there's New York artist Zoe Sheehan Saldana, who buys factory-made clothing at Walmart, takes it home, painstakingly recreates the clothing by hand, puts the barcode on the items, and sneaks them back onto the Walmart rack. Her work goes out anonymously into the world to have its own life, no gallery or museum in sight, bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase "getting your work out there." She highlights economic interactions (and art practices)

taken for granted by turning them on their heads. The handmade disappears into the rack, one-of-a-kindness blends with mass production, fame/fortune/fetishism/preciousness/ elitism dissolve into the everyday. This blurring of lines between art and debris, manipulation and randomness, and between places where art is meant to be seen and where it's found fascinates me.

But whereas Saldana intentionally sets out to have her work taken over by society, Richie seems more the hapless victim of airport officials, high storage fees, and forces of nature. But he's smart and quirky, and lightning has struck too many times. An awareness that a work might produce ripples beyond his initial plan for it and that his method of storage has become just as much an art practice as the sculpting is evident in his approach. There are certainly many other ways he could store his sculptures besides the poetic and labor-intensive act of burying, which references how we humans have been learning about history from potshards for as long as we have been unearthing them.

Our common idea of art is that it is about expression and communication, the creation of work and the building of a reputation to reach a large audience. Saldana's clothing and Richie's buried works are more like an anonymous message in a bottle. Their artwork may never be found, but if one is discovered, it becomes an intimate, private wonder for an audience of one. Perhaps someday Saldana's clothing will be resold at a







Fred Olsen and Richie White. Veterans Memorial, 2010. Cone 4-7 flashing clay, water, lights. 15 x 100 x 100 in. Photograph by Richie White

BELOW AND RIGHT: *Richie White. Untitled Torsos, with artist, 2010-2011. Cone 5 reduction, stoneware. Installed on the campus of Saddleback College.*

Salvation Army outlet, become part of a quilt or a rag to clean a car engine's dipstick. Perhaps some of Richie's work will find its way downstream to the ocean and sink onto an ancient shipwreck; then Richie might be written about for his experiments in time travel as well as for his sculptures of dead people on view

to boarding airline passengers. Perhaps whole and fragmented works will adorn an occupying power's desert palace, or perhaps the desert will be mined and the work ground into gravel for a driveway. Or maybe the pieces will remain at rest (for free), until the end of the world, true earthworks.



Richie's artwork seems to keep reinventing itself the longer it stays buried. By storing the work, Richie has added content to it: the desert has become its vessel, its container. Just knowing the pieces are out there makes me see the desert a little differently; just as my trips to Walmart will never be quite the same thanks to Saldana's work.

Artists have used a great many tricks and strategies to create visual and conceptual power or charisma: the use of scale, contrast, craftsmanship, symmetry/ asymmetry, negative space, symbols, multiples, site specificity, deconstruction . . . all of which one can study in school. But when I first ran into Saldana's work, it knocked me sideways. I couldn't pinpoint why I found it so exciting and powerful. I came to find out that

there were a number of artists working "off-kilter" in various ways, but it wasn't until Richie spoke to me of his storage methods that I had an epiphany about what's at work here (besides a good dose of humor). A secondary performative art practice applied to a primary art practice of object making, mystery through intentional anonymity, and most especially, the uncontrolled evolution of work when placed in an unusual context (and the forces of change this call attention to, which in turn become part of the art) – these are all incredibly powerful strategies that begin to blur the line between life and art. Somewhere in that ambiguity lies the possibility for wonder and delight.

How such a radical approach to art achieves its effects I grasp intuitively, not fully, as I might vaguely understand a great complex poem or last night's dream. As a teacher and an artist, I have always been interested in how context can change work as well as how work can change context. But the change has usually been predictable and in some instances contrived. Predictability and contrivance in the works cited here have been thrown to the wind, larger forces have been exposed. This wildness, which I catch glimpses of out of the corner of my eye is what attracts me most. I can only guess how my experience of this wildness might play out in my own work. In the meantime, I certainly look forward with great excitement to the next incarnation of Richie's buried works.

