

MUSE



The Fisher Fine Arts Library at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Room to Think

by Julian Hoerber

UPON ENTERING the Fisher Library at the University of Pennsylvania in my childhood home of Philadelphia, one is confronted with a pair of leaded glass windows separating the vestibule from the entrance hall. Across the middle of the windows, in precise lettering, one reads, *TALKERS ARE NO GREAT DOERS*. It's a cheeky way to tell people to keep quiet, but it's also a strange call to action: more doing, less talking! But the action in a library is all words. The window is a decorative speech act telling the visitor that deeds are more important than words, so go forth into this palace of words and act. The architect, Frank Furness, had a sense of humor.

Originally the main library of the university, the Fisher has since become the fine arts and architecture library. It had been slated for demolition until it was saved in the 1950s by Frank Lloyd Wright's assessment of the place as a true work of art. Its design is like that of a cathedral, cribbing from spaces of worship and meditation. The reading room has

sandstone arches and a ceiling that soars four stories high. The floors of the stacks are glass brick, allowing light to flow from above. The building is a temple for ruminating, mulling words, looking at pictures. Talkers are no great doers, but thinkers, worriers, and readers may be another story. The logic knot posed by the quote in the vestibule is solved as soon as one understands that contemplation is action.

My parents bought a house when I was three years old and fixed it up. During the renovation process, they learned that Furness was the architect of the brownstone, and my mother had the good sense to keep as much of the old traces of Furness as possible. As a kid I imagined living inside a carved walnut newel post that looked like a miniature gothic tower. I remember staring at an expanse of plaster filigree on the ceiling and wondering about what the world could be. In recent years I've tried to make work the way that daydreaming kid would have,

COMING SOON

Julian Hoerber's work at Antenna Space, Shanghai, Mar. 16–late April.

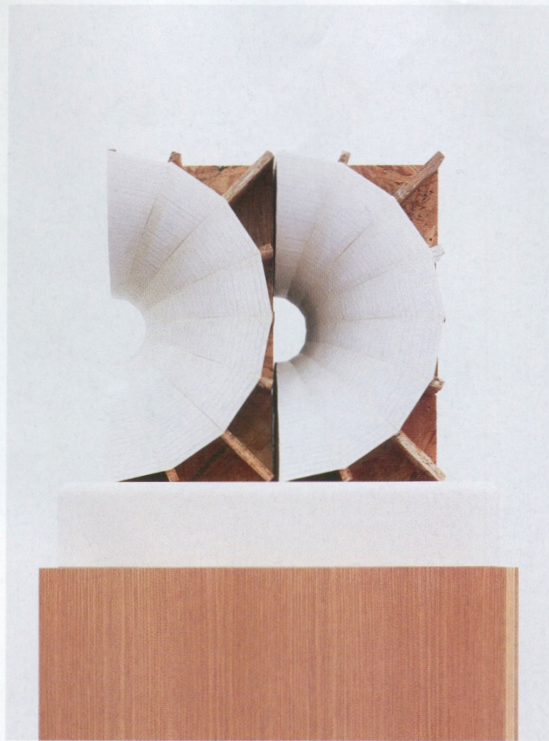
JULIAN HOEBER is an artist based in Los Angeles. See Contributors page.

but maintaining a quiet space for fantastical and idiosyncratic thought is increasingly difficult.

In grad school I read an Allan Kaprow essay on Pop art, written in the '60s. It was an old Xerox from a class taken last century and no amount of internet searching is getting me any closer to locating it. If I'm remembering right, he said Pop was important because it allowed commercial art to move into the *contemplative space* of fine art and be seen in a different light. The Kaprow of my imagination claimed that art, as an institution, could reframe the meaning of other segments of the world and help us understand them anew. Fine art provided a place for commercial art to be considered instead of consumed. For Kaprow, Pop art uncoupled commercial art from its purpose of convincing one to invest in a product outside of the image, and to invest instead in the image itself. Who needs Brillo to polish things when you've got Brillo Boxes?

Using art as a contemplative space pushes one to perustrate the world and to make what was once banal, or invisible, bright and shiny, but since the '60s the boundary between art and the rest of the world has eroded. The avant-garde that is free from the corruptions of the market or from kitsch seems like an ancient myth. The use of any and all parts of culture by art, and the use of art by any part of culture has become a given. Louis Vuitton handbags bearing Yayoi Kusama designs gleefully invert the Pop equation—the Kusama painting, which once drew interest only to itself, now draws attention to a luxury product and a lifestyle. Louis Vuitton makes Kusama bright and new for people who are introduced to her work in this context, and Kusama offers a veneer of high culture to accessories.

Art's ability to put a frame around the rest of culture in order to discuss it is only useful if our understanding is deepened. The separation of art and other fields is what allows us to recontextualize, refresh, or illuminate other things. That



Julian Hoerber:
*Rotational Space
Negative (Nested
Shells)*, 2016, foam
core, rice paper,
shellac, particle
board, and lacquer,
16 by 12½ by 16¼
inches. Courtesy
Jessica Silverman
Gallery, San
Francisco. Photo
Heather Rasmussen.

illumination can be understood very broadly: it can be to make visible, to brighten, to make comprehensible, to make radiant. This is, for me, what art is meant to do. If art is indistinguishable from the flood of information, images, and transactions that define the rest of culture, it loses this power.

In parts of museums, where the cell phone reception is bad and there are few people, I can muster sufficient focus to see what a work of art is doing. It takes effort. Separating out your own thoughts from the cacophony requires some safety and remove, be it achieved through architectural or social means. When college students demand safe spaces, perhaps they are demanding distance from the flood of authoritative information so that they can process their own experience. Establishing one's own way of understanding is a form of resistance.

Art, as I'm trying to use it, can be a way to draw a boundary between oneself and the rest of the world in order to think against the authority of the loudest noise. The idea of building a contemplative space—out of bricks, out of agreed-upon behaviors and rituals, out of images—is what drives me in art-making. The Fisher Library is one contemplative space, but there are others: the studio, the therapist's office, the critique class, the private space you carve out for yourself to read on the subway, the dinner table shared with a community that understands you, the playroom where a stick becomes a hobby horse (or, in my case, a newel post turns into a castle tower). It's wherever there is room to develop ideas that are both outlandish and deep, where the idiosyncratic isn't tethered to transgression and there's room to slowly come to one's own thoughts. ○

Doors leading to
the Fisher Library
at the University of
Pennsylvania.

