

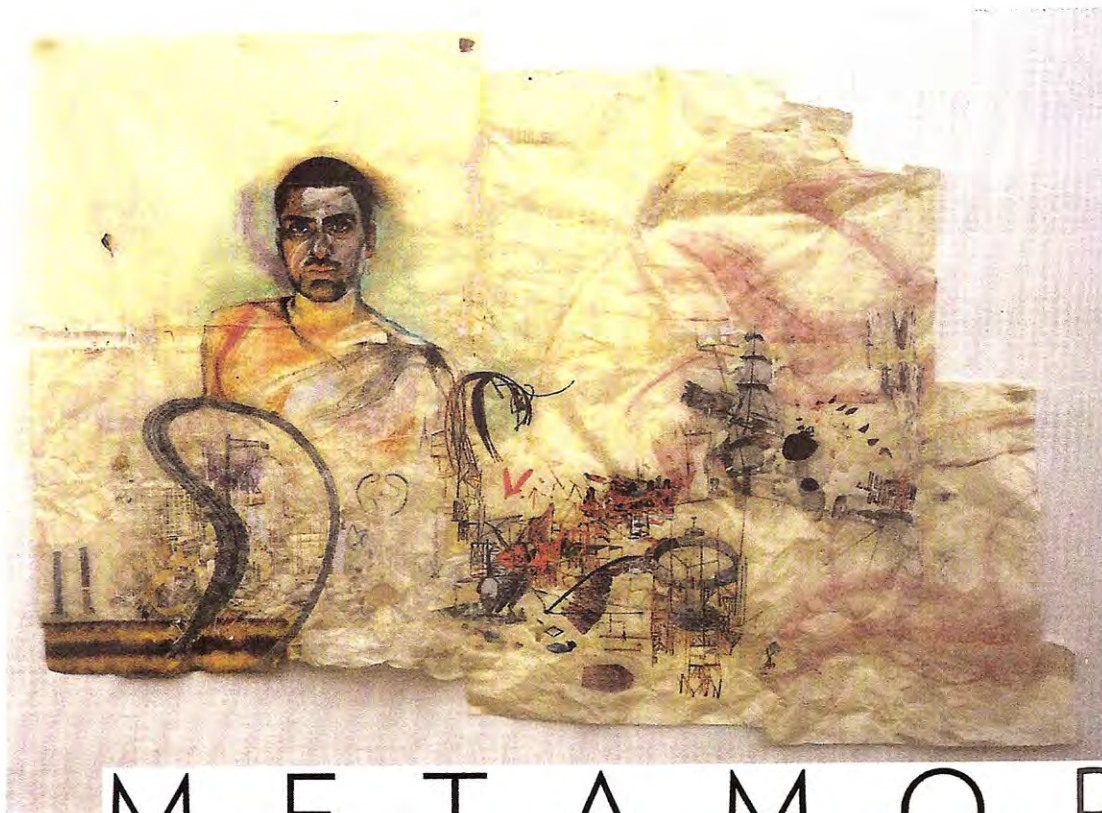
REGEN PROJECTS

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Elliott Hundley



M E T A M O R P H O S E S

INCLUDED IN CHARLES
SAATCHI'S USA TODAY
EXHIBITION, ELLIOTT
HUNDLEY IS OUT TO
TRANSFORM THE NATURE
AND RECEPTION OF
PAINTING AS WE KNOW IT

words: CATHERINE TAFT

LATELY, ELLIOTT Hundley has been entertaining a fantasy in which he is the lovechild of artists Yayoi Kusama and Lucas Samaras. Kusama is a seventy-seven-year-old (often hailed as Japan's greatest living artist) who currently lives (by choice) in a mental hospital in Tokyo, and is renowned for her signature use of polka dots. Samaras is a seventy-year-old Greek-American, best known for his manipulated Polaroid photographs. Roused by their reputed animosity, which sparked during the late 1960s when Kusama alleged that Samaras borrowed liberally from her *oeuvre*, Hundley posits the pair as locked in a sensational union out of which he is born to reconcile their formal differences. As the illegitimate son, he could discretely fashion a 'bastardised' aesthetic – perhaps deploying mirrors, manipulated photos, dotted patterns, self-portraiture or self-obliteration – to new ends. A type of creation myth, Hundley's modern folktale simultaneously embodies the failure of any notion of artistic authorship and a phoenix-like generation of hybrid, if not necessarily innovative, art forms. For now, the story remains kindling for an envisioned artwork intended only for an audience of two: his hypothetical parents, Kusama and Samaras. Though the piece exists in the artist's imagination alone, the invention of his own contemporary mythos underscores the mounting potential of narrative in Hundley's ever-expanding practice.

Based in Los Angeles, Hundley graduated from University of California's Master of Fine Arts programme in June of 2005. Though he has already been included in several group exhibitions and was featured in Los Angeles' Hammer Museum project series, he will have his first solo show with Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York next spring. In the past, Hundley has often rummaged through ancient mythology for allegorical scraps that can be dramatised on the surface of spindly mixed-media assemblages and two-dimensional compositions. The narrative fragments he culls (those of Medea, Aphrodite, and the sibyls for example) fuel obscure tableaux and pointed but clandestine visual stories. Tiny expressionistic bodies, cut out from photographs of models taken in the studio, adorn each deliberately staged scene. In *Hyacinth* (2006), a stilted construction that leans against the gallery wall, nude and clothed figures are fixed with straight pins onto a gesturally painted corkboard façade. Though their images represent both male and female models, gender is downplayed in order to allow each theatrical individual to slip in and out of the plastic roles that Hundley plots. Surrounded by a deluge of found objects – shells, feathers, tattered scarves, paper wings, sequins, and cropped images of plants, symbols, machines, animals, art historical references, architecture, and furniture – the figures seem engaged in some sort of Dionysian festival, albeit performing a series of actions that does not actually recall recognisable Greek myth.

Hundley's Delphic narratives are never literal, yet his impulse to relate a visual story (using his art objects as a kind of stage) materialises on his bricolage surfaces. Shaped by the figurative characters that interact with and within its discrete elements, his epically dense grounds can be read lyrically for possible meanings. Thus his finished works communicate an abstract series of events without having to adhere to a defined chronology.



But as the accumulation of stuff in Hundley's work becomes increasingly complex, his enigmatic narrative threads have become tactfully protracted. In what seems like the ultimate test of the limits of his storytelling, Hundley has been exploring the prospects of double-sided compositions. Working simultaneously on both sides of a piece, the artist aims at dismissing the hierarchy of front versus back while further undermining the restrictions of linear narrative.

The Hanging Garden, The Invention of Drawing (2005), a double-sided work on paper, lays bare the artist's ability to move through the boundaries of pictorial space. On one side is a minute landscape of collaged geometric scaffolding in which the repeated image of a seated figure gestures with his multiple arms. A large, hand-drawn portrait of a man in face paint hovers over the scene. His ghosted visage shows through the lightweight paper onto the opposite side where another frayed landscape of clipped paper structures, pillars, ladders, and small characters is intersected by pink ribbons of colour. Linking the binary composition, the pastel portrait is visible from

either side, though perpetually shown in reverse like a mirrored image. This penetrating device demonstrates Hundley's keen negotiation of a two-dimensional field.

Leaving aspects of its exhibition to chance, Hundley intends for the pictorial episodes of *The Hanging Garden* to be revealed and concealed at will. When he first presented the work at a Museum of Contemporary Art benefit in Los Angeles he offered the piece folded and placed on the gallery floor, with

no direction in its installation. The museum chose to display the work with the portrait side facing out. As Hundley's solution to its current owner's request for a frame, *The Hanging Garden* is now displayed in a custom-built Plexiglas vitrine. At the discretion of the exhibiting institution (in this case, The Saatchi Gallery) the casing can be attached to the wall and flipped over by the viewer to expose either side of the work. It is also possible to position the vitrine at a fixed halfway point so that the two sides are visible to different viewers at the same time. However, Hundley believes that concealing parts of his compositions has a poetic significance; neither side has a greater importance. He claims to remain neutral about the definitive placement of his double-sided works and is interested in conceiving of his viewer as kind of collaborator. The inherent interactivity of *The Hanging Garden's*

AS BOTH TITLE AND PROMPT, THE
WORD 'FIRE' ALSO EMPHASISES
THE OBJECT'S FRAGILE, FLAMMABLE
AND IMPERMANENT MATERIALITY

previous page: *The Hanging Garden, The Invention of Drawing* (2005), collage and charcoal pastel on paper, 142cm x 216cm

above: *Medea's Craft II*, 2005, collage, charcoal pastel, peacock and ostrich feathers, and plastic flowers, 206 x 249 x 18 cm

installation allows viewers to tailor and adapt his or her personal experience of the work.

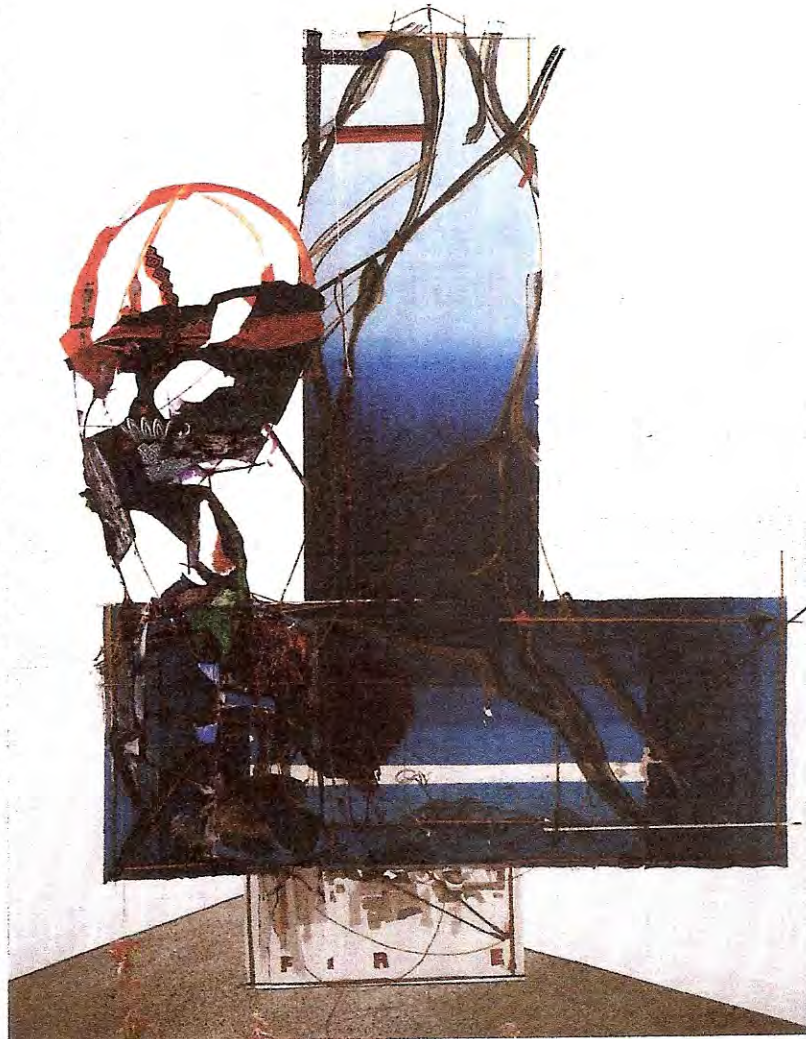
While he continues to experiment with such conceptual operations, Hundley's use of double-sided compositions has extended logically into a series of more overtly sculptural objects. *Proscenium* (2006), for example, uses two opposing planes to resemble a proscenium arch folded in half. Works like this and *Medea's Craft II* (2005) are marked by sketchy representations of theatre architecture that highlight the constructed nature of Hundley's performative studio process. Using many of his sculptural pieces as functional objects, Hundley often arranges the models he photographs in front of the surfaces that their images eventually adorn. Though these sculptures operate as set dressing during his photo shoots, Hundley eliminates the traces of this setting when he clips the figures from the photos.

The illusionistic space of a stage is implied in the basic form of his new work, *Fire* (2006), a sculpture that is hung from the ceiling, proportionate to the viewer's body and eye level, and is visible in the round as it spins on its cable. The work's central scene – an accumulation of images including drapery, screens, ropes, a ladder, a branched tree trunk, a pinwheel, a patterned sheet of paper, and several statuesque figures in white body paint – is displayed on a horizontal rectangle, while an elaborate paper, wood, coral and string armature is built on its reverse. Partitioned by vertical blue striations, the dramatic focal point seems contained by curtain-like folds covering the two wings of a stage. Hundley puns on this idea by attaching paper bird wings and arcing wood forms on the reverse side. A second rectangular field rises above the scene as if referring to a sprawling fly space, the area above a stage that conceals a system of cables, pulleys, and counterweights used to seamlessly move scenery in and out of view. While crafting subtly illustrative analogies for the architectural space of theatre, *Fire* also probes the theatricality of language.

At the bottom of the construct are four arbitrarily spaced red letters spelling out the word 'fire'. Though abstracted text – lifted from the stylised lettering of album covers and printed matter – has played out in Hundley's older works, this is his first (and most potent) use of legible text in his practice. The textual move directs the viewer to activate the sculpture, intending that he or she imagine the work on fire when reading the word. In effect, Hundley orchestrates a semantic play in which the signifier masquerades as the signified. The word 'fire', as both title and prompt, also emphasises the object's fragile, flammable and impermanent materiality. *Fire* was recently shown at Art Basel adjacent to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' endless paper stack, *Untitled (Loverboy)* (1990). Channelling an intimate and historical dialogue, this specific juxtaposition distils the importance of transience rather than permanence inherent to *Fire*. Unlike his

other assemblages that absorb the heavy physicality of earthly stuff, this work uses temporality and illusory disintegration to engender a new sensibility. ❧

Elliott Hundley is included in *USA Today* at the Royal Academy Of Arts, London from 6 October to 4 November www.royalacademy.org.uk



right (from top): *Fire*, 2006, paper, bamboo, string, wire, charcoal, pastel, silk and coral, 254 x 163 x 36 cm. *Fire*, 2006, detail. All images © Elliott Hundley, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York