

# SAM ANDERSON + URI ARAN =

**URI:** At times I find myself questioning the use of certain terms written or used in relationship to my work, shifting the meaning or my intentions of interpretation. Is there a word or term that your work attracts and that you are allergic to?

**SAM:** Maybe I'm allergic to miniature. The intention of a miniature is to transform a material into a scaled-down version of something. It points to a specific craft culture that doesn't interest me. I use wood, metal, and paint, but also objects like animal skeletons, salt-and-pepper shakers, peanuts, licorice, pool cues, feathers, and teeth—those things are small, but are also life-size. A miniature occasionally enters in, but it's usually a found object: an element in a multipart piece of an installation, which addresses multiple scales.

**URI:** My interest in the properties of language began when I was a graphic design student. Typography in particular highlights the formal qualities of letters, their shape, and their arrangement, and how they can manipulate perception and desire if properly chosen. The infinite possibility for production of meaning within the play between the sign and the signifier—I address this aspect of language through repetition, reorganization, and quotation. In your work I can identify these tendencies—or perhaps I am projecting—but I can most perceptibly relate to it in your use of a grid.

**SAM:** I have thought about social grids like cafés, city districts, smoking sections, jungle gyms, or generic landscapes as starting points. The café is attractive to me because its menu is limited, and therefore the café has a more specific social function than the restaurant, especially in terms of perception and desire.

There is a large sculptural diorama located at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. It belongs to a permanent interactive walk-through exhibit about the Holocaust. It was set up to project several fictionalized thoughts and attitudes—it literally projects lights and recorded voices—onto the sculpted patrons of an imaginary Berlin café, set in the time right before World War Two. The designers of this exhibit used a universally understood setting like the café as a frame, which on the surface seems so harmless, but contains the potential for horrific and heavy narratives to unfold. It's a strange literal design

intended to help people accurately picture something from the past that can actually never fully be comprehended.

My piece Shufflepuck Café projects and dissolves narratives over an imagined frame—not literally—but originates from an ambiguous and stupid concept. I found a description on the back of a computer game box: a salesman's vehicle breaks down on a strange planet in front of a café. He needs to use the telephone to call the "breakdown service," however, he is not permitted to until he has defeated a variety of characters in several air-hockey matches. They're more like empty associations to characters than actual characters—one is an aggressive hog dressed in a army general's suit, another is a woman in a black dress with large breasts and telepathic powers, and another looks a little like Woody Allen. I liked the transparency of this narrative; it's basically useless, an excuse to cobble different things the creators personally fancied to package a very basic game.

I used these ideas to start Shufflepuck Café, but then it veers into another set of sculptures that resemble Terminator-like busts—all in various stages of falling apart. There is a frog skeleton forced into a bartender role, some scattered Alcoholics Anonymous coins. Another section is about nyotaimori, the practice of eating sushi off of a naked body.

**URI:** Your work isn't funny. It can be very sad, in fact, but it is full of humor. There is almost a sense of bleeding sincerity to it in spite of—or maybe in concert with?—a thin and nervous line that in a flimsy way separates participation and irony, if that makes sense . . . .

**SAM:** Sometimes irony in work implies a specific kind of cynicism that doesn't interest me. I don't understand rejecting an idea when you're obviously relishing it. The enjoyment or meaning from irony comes from a jerky process of expectation and negation, whereas with humor it is true and sad. Or just simple, like, someone falls down and you laugh.

**URI:** I am interested in your use of representations of animals and anthropomorphized objects. For me, animals are amoral; they are free of culture and they respond to instinct. They reflect the myth of the artist that way. Animals occupy an idealized, primordial domain from the perspective of society. Like children before a certain age, animals can

be called good or bad and can, in turn, understand those designations, but they cannot be described as or comprehend right and wrong. Anthropomorphizing objects, the use of animal metaphors and their visual representation, projecting language on animals—these are the ways we teach and learn without resistance. This is the only “safe” territory in which truths, stereotypes, and generalizations can be freely applied. The outsiders to language cannot participate in the conversation and can be easily placed in equations as simplified tools for understanding the self. By creating literal visual models based on these ideas, I try to understand the difference between truth and truism and the implications of that difference. In your work it seems like the idea of a lesson is important—not necessarily a specific one, but the story itself being told in order to teach, along with its formal properties.

**SAM:** In fables, animals and objects replace or project very human needs and desires without question, on top of which centuries of bad translations and editions have obfuscated the morals. Fables are quick and cruel; in that sense they are more like animals and less like people. I like the image of the anxious cat balancing the sleeping baby in the cradle that is floating down the river. I also like *The Old Woman and the Wine Jar*, where an old woman finds an empty glass on the ground, smells it, and says, “What memories cling around the instruments of our pleasure.” The moral indicates that it’s about nostalgia, but I think it’s really about being an alcoholic.

**URI:** You are interested in cinema and pop culture, and you work with video and its inherent history and vocabulary at the same time. How does the term suspension of disbelief—perhaps more comfortably used in cinema—come into play in the work, or how do you think about it?

**SAM:** I like to describe something quickly; a rock and sticks can become a boat. Then it goes back to being a rock and sticks. In that way the work is suggested, like giving directions to someone on the street. I know that the talking ape on horseback was created with a computer, but I don’t understand why I am expected to accept this seamless image in place of an animatronic or puppet, or a real ape, or maybe something that is totally not ape-like, or maybe just nothing. The CGI looks interesting, but it never takes me by surprise and doesn’t leave any space for interpretation. I’m not complaining about technology; I’m trying to make a metaphor.

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**URI:** After our initial meeting and conversation we both worked on sound pieces for this project. We both directly addressed the actor and the actor’s world in it. Can you expand about your involvement and relationships with it?

**SAM:** I’m interested in the specific tricks of acting, rather than how to frame a narrative or present a character. Colloquial/filmic language reveals unexpected nuances of the person speaking it. The craft of acting is mainly an

arbitrary set of movements, sounds, and rhythms that have predetermined meanings—how small behavioral signposts for emotions evolve, how strongly people trust in them, and to what extent people subconsciously absorb and recycle them.

The character actor, more than a leading lady or man, has a more stylized relationship to language in forms of advice, wisdom, comic relief, etc. Minor characters lurk around, waiting for people to pass by and interact with them. With little context, they quickly appeal to the audience to be loved, hated, feared, etc.

My mother is a character actor. Because of her age and physicality, she is typecast to play maids, truck drivers, waitresses, postal workers, nurses, and at other times government figures, police officers, judges, or social workers. When she was younger, she played a “tough but lovable” prostitute on an early Norman Lear TV show. She made very little money the first thirty years of her career, and refers to herself as a “blue-collar actress.” Her palette is limited. I like working with her for this reason.

Most of her friends are also character actors. I grew up around them and attended many plays and acting classes. In the beginning, I was too young to understand the subjects they performed, but what I remembered were the tones, rhythms, and bits of dialogue that I thought were great but too embarrassing to tolerate outside the theater. These actors’ voices are familiar and relevant to me, familiar and possibly relevant to anyone who has ever watched movies or television in the last forty-five years.

For our sound exchange, I used sections of a play my mother first performed with another actress forty years ago. I asked them both to read it again recently, and I recorded it. I edited and reorganized the recording to approximate the characters’ narcissistic interior monologues, which responds more directly to your sound piece and to our conversations.

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