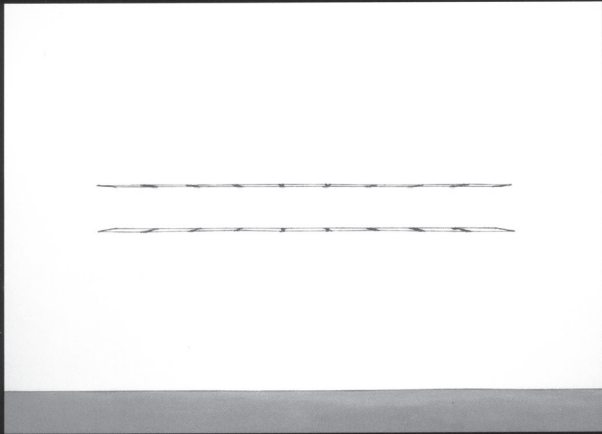


# Paul Lee and Jacob Robichaux



Jacob Robichaux  
Activity for a Dark Room, 2011  
Performance at  
American Contemporary, New York  
Photo credit: Sam Gordon

# Conversation with Paul Lee and Jacob Robichaux



**PART I** **ROBICHAUX** It's funny that you've pointed out the holes and punctures in my work. In anticipation of your visit today, I pulled out a book on Fontana to look at together.

**LEE** It seemed that you like holes. The ribbon is attached through pinholes, and then the drawings look like the insides of holes, and the canvas is more like a scrim; it's got huge holes in it . . . It's a lot of holes. On the way over I was thinking about something that had stuck with me since the last time we talked: the way you talked about magic. It stuck with me because it had made me remember how much I loved magic shows when I was a kid, and I hadn't thought about them since. All of a sudden, the idea of magic felt really important to me again. I was wondering why, and then I realized, oh, magic is like a doorway to an alternate reality, which is something to look at; something to access at times when you were a child, when you were lost, etc.

And that made me think about the negative spaces in your work and how they relate to doorways, alternate spaces, and alternate reality through objects. So now I'm here and seeing your work, and there's holes—it's holes.

When we last met, you were talking about magic and how you would use balloons to float objects, is that right?

**ROBICHAUX** For the performance? Yes. Well, what you are referring to was a performance I did at my last exhibition at Museum 52 in New York. I invited people to collaborate with me in performances using my prop objects, which I also think of as sculptures. That particular performance was with Amy Yao, an artist with whom I've collaborated for performances in the past few years. The floor of the gallery was littered with readymade and altered objects that were used in performances throughout the course of the exhibition. I inflated balloons with a helium tank and tied them to the props, which caused them to levitate, hover, and slowly rise to the ceiling. There was an absurdity to instigating and watching the movement of these objects toward the ceiling. The slowness of it made it pleasurable and funny to watch. I think it was about the pleasure of a group of people looking at things in a state of transformation. At the end, we popped the balloons one by one, and the objects came crashing down. I think I had mentioned to you that I was a magician when I was a kid?

**LEE** That's what it was. Right.

**ROBICHAUX** Once I grew into young adulthood, I was uncomfortable with performing—I felt too self-conscious. I didn't want to be a performer, but I was interested in the props and related objects, the aesthetic language of magic. I didn't understand my relationship to it since I no longer wanted to perform, but I remained fascinated by it.

It's interesting that you described the hole as a portal into an alternate reality because I think that's why I was drawn to magic. It's a specific visual language of objects and gestures with a system of conventions and rules. It was foreign to everything I knew as a child. Magic opened up another space.

**LEE** As you get older and you think about magic, you realize that it's deception, right? Maybe that's why one grows out of the fascination with it, because all of a sudden you realize that it's all about deception. It's not really magic. Then you try to use objects to re-create that magic, but it's more truthful or something.

**ROBICHAUX** The least interesting part of magic is the trick or deceptive element. The trick is an end point; it represents a conclusion. I want the show to go on as an endless activity. I was excited by the stage, the coded objects—the colored silks, tubes, and boxes. The playful concealment and revelation of things. Magic is a structured experience of transformation, perception, and desire, and there's a formal rigor to it. That's what I find exciting and relevant to making and experiencing art.

But this thing about the holes . . . For Fontana, the cuts, punctures, and holes opened up the surface of the painting to a sublime space, a space beyond the painting itself.

**LEE** Behind the screen.

**ROBICHAUX** Yes, behind the screen. The pleasure of watching a magic show isn't the trick; I don't care about the trick. It's the experience of seeing myself seeing, of experiencing myself. The puncture or hole reveals something, something that was concealed. There's pleasure in seeing something in this way, in this moment of desire; it's a reflexive experience.

What's great about a Fontana painting is that it's still a painting. It's a painting with a hole that opens up to the wall and space behind the surface and to everything else beyond the painting.

Making a hole is also a physical act in order to connect to something outside of or beyond myself. I'm exploring materials and processes that allow me to experience myself through tactile activity. I think that the hole is—well, it's difficult not to think of it in a sexual way. It's an intimate connection through the hands and body to the materials and the thing that I am making.

**LEE** Yes. The use of fabric can bring you back to the body. A sense of intimacy that is in your work as well.

Look at the drinking straws in the paintings. I had used straws in some earlier collages and that's how I ended up getting to the can, from the straws. And when I look at

the way you've used it in your paint—the straw in your paintings—it's like the idea of breath. It makes me think of intimacy immediately because it's like having breath pass from one part of the image to another, you know? It's like you're trying to put air inside the painting.

I like this idea of breath as movement across the painting. In the Genet film *Un Chant d'amour*, there's an intensely erotic scene in which the characters are blowing smoke through a straw between their prison cells into one another's mouths. That image has always stayed with me; it's one of the most beautiful, poetic images of longing that I've ever seen.

That's how I respond to the straws on the surface of the canvas. It's just like using breath as part of the image. I like the idea of breath because it's an internal thing, an internal space; an internal space being put into the image, which I think is really nice. I like the way you use that in your paintings.

It's like another way of passing from one point of the canvas to the other. Instead of one's eyes moving from one point to another, it's as if your breath is, like, following your eyes or something. The internal and the external are sort of communicating with each other.

I always think about the body and mind, and I try to pull those two things together in order to find a completeness. When I was growing up I hid a lot of things, as homosexuals used to do. They don't have to do that so much these days. There was a certain deception going on with my feelings; I would separate my body from my physicality, from my mind, how I thought. I was rejecting the feelings of my body. I didn't want it to be doing what it was doing. I sometimes think that the process of making sculpture for me is a way of putting the mind and the body back together.

In addition to putting them together, it's also a way of opening up a new space, a new place, in which there is a truth—a truth in desire that is physical and visual. It is felt and it is real. And it's in front of you, like an anchor or something.

**ROBICHAUX** One of the reasons that I use plastic straws is because they relate to the scale of the hand. They're intimate. I used the smaller-sized straws first. They reminded me of something that children use for sorting, counting, and sequencing. They also have a fundamental quality: They're a unit that can be repeated. I like the connection between the straws and the breath. The straw is a hole that we use to poke into things to connect the external world with the inside of the body.

We talked about some of the processes that I use to make works including using needles to push the fibers of silk or wool through the surface of the painting, poking holes,

sewing, cutting, tying. It's an impulse to connect to things physically. The self, the mind can connect to the world in a direct way.

**LEE** It's like you've taken off the magic gloves. As your metaphor.

**ROBICHAUX** *[laughs]* Yes!

**LEE** These make me think of pockets and pocket fluff. Did you ever think about that? The idea of hands in pockets; the way they are situated when they're in your pockets.

**ROBICHAUX** Pockets and holes. Hands hiding things, cutting things, tying things, opening things, touching things, and revealing things.

The lint-like fluff in my paintings—it's actually dyed wool. It's seductive and it's something we want to touch. It's hair that grew on an animal. I also use magician's silks, which I tear up and attach to the paintings and collages by poking the fibers through the surface of the jute or paper.

**LEE** That's an interesting material to be working with.

**ROBICHAUX** The silks are bright, highly saturated colors that are shiny and seductive, and they're often concealed in the magician's pocket or sleeve. They have optical and material qualities that evoke fluidity, legibility, touch. When they're produced and revealed from a pocket or a sleeve, it's an erotic moment of visibility.

**LEE** When I asked you what the ribbon was, the first thing you said was, oh, it's silk. The quality of it and the natural fiber were important to you. But there is plastic stuff, too, like the straws and plastic leaves . . .

**ROBICHAUX** Yes. Recently I've been using bits and pieces of plastic leaves and flowers. I collect pieces of fake greenery. They're certainly related to the tradition of still life in art and magic. They're funny objects. Of course, there's a humor and absurdity to representing nature through a mass-produced form.

In these works there's also a connection between plants and the generative nature of my process. These works are made with the materials, scraps, and debris from my studio activity and from fragments of other artworks.

**LEE** And it's very much like the process of making. There are pushpins and sewing needles, bits of canvas; the work always refers back to the materials of the making. It's almost like the work is still in the process of being made so it has a kind of openness to the viewer, as if he or she could engage in the process. In seeing the pins, the stitches, the bits of canvas, the viewer is allowed into the work. And then you can follow it—you can follow the string around

and through the straws and stuff. There's something alluring about that.

**ROBICHAUX** I appreciate those qualities in artworks. I'm drawn to works that engage me in the ways that you've described, so I'm happy to hear that you are experiencing my work in this way.

**LEE** Looking into things, looking through things, looking around things.

**ROBICHAUX** That reminds me of an interview with Vincent Fecteau that I was reading yesterday.

**LEE** I'm interested in his work.

**ROBICHAUX** I am, too. He's an amazing artist. He said something simple that stuck with me: "Too often people think ideas generate the work; I think the work generates ideas." I love this, and I think that it's related to what you're talking about. I see it as true for both the maker and the viewer. The experience of making something and looking at something is an activity that is open.

**LEE** I agree.

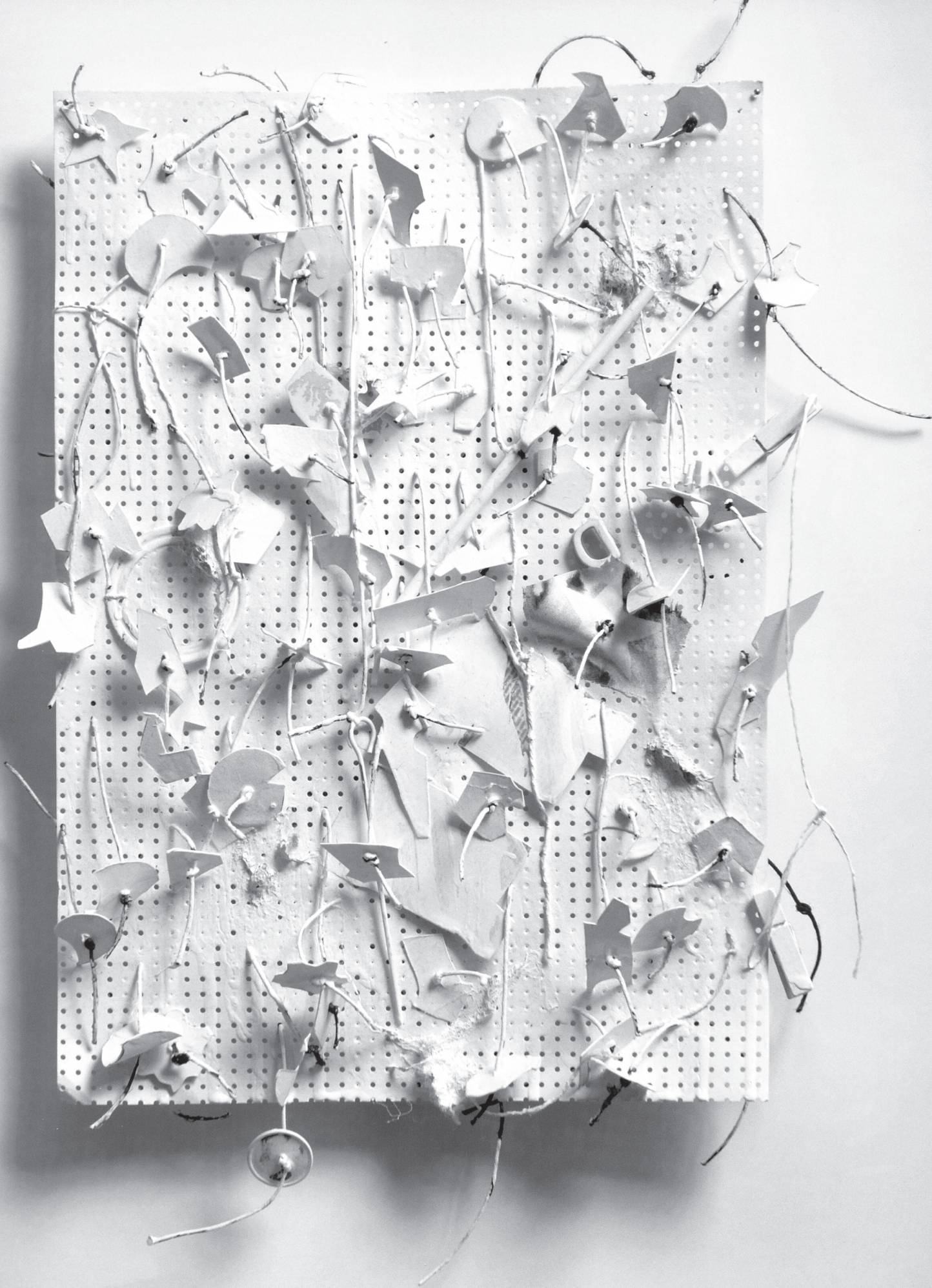
**ROBICHAUX** I'm most interested in art that has this openness. The ideas that surround a work or the meaning of the work aren't finalized and predetermined. When you look at something you're participating in what it is. It's generous to be drawn into an artwork in this way.

**LEE** I've been thinking and working with form and open form. With an open form, it's about looking through and past the object, not at it. So there it is, existing in a space that's between an object and your imagination, or the object exists between you and a destination. It's like it enters into your imagination, you know? It allows you to look past it because it's so open. You engage with it.

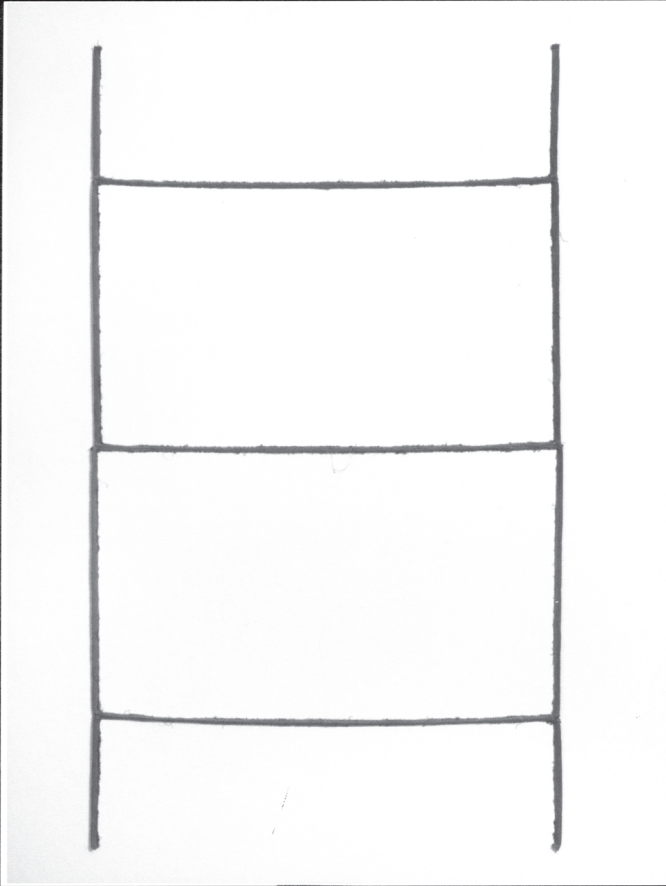
END OF RECORDING I

Jacob Robichaux  
White Index, 2008  
Mixed media

Courtesy of American Contemporary, New York



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**LEE** You put that whole thing of magic in my head, which I had totally forgotten about; something that was my favorite thing to watch as a kid. There's something about that time in history during our childhood—Mickey Mouse, magic on television, and now the whole thing of magic disappearing. Mickey Mouse was a magician, right? I guess he was in *Fantasia*.

**ROBICHAUX** Oh, he was more of a wizard.

**LEE** A wizard. Right.

**ROBICHAUX** Well, Disney certainly relates to the idea of portals. I've visited Disneyland twice in the past two years. It's an amazing place. It's a parallel world that rejects the rules of the real world. It's totally camp, really.

**LEE** An idealized space.

**ROBICHAUX** Yes, a compartmentalized, artificial, idealized space.

**LEE** So that's why I was interested in the plastic flowers and stuff that you use, because that's not about your experience of nature, is it? I'm always interested in that, the idea of a fake flower, because I totally never related to camp. I found camp sort of uncomfortable. I had to learn to appreciate camp, actually. Now I do, and I understand it as a visibility thing, but I was a bit embarrassed by it. Not sure where I'm going with this exactly, but basically I just wanted to move past camp.

I was wondering how you felt about using artificial flowers. To me, the idea of artificial nature is tied to camp in some way. Camp is, ironically, about hiding something, isn't it? There is an artificiality to it, and I know that you and I feel that your work is mostly about intimacy, or rather it alludes to it. There is an intimacy in poking through and trying to get past something. And I wonder if somehow the artificial, the fake flowers, are a step before the silk or something. Silk is this natural thing that goes on the body, but the fake flowers are also part of the screen, which you are trying to take apart or want to get out of the way.

Because it's all about poking through and trying to get to the body or to the physicality, and your relationship to the organic. So when I see these fake flowers, it made me wonder how you felt about them.

**ROBICHAUX** That's an interesting point. I bought those flowers at a party store, and they were strung together on a string. I understand the point that you're making about artificiality and camp, the flowers in contrast to a direct experience of nature or pure abstraction. The plastic flowers are part of the screen of representation and artificiality, one that you're interested in moving beyond.

I'm not sure that I'm trying to get past the screen as much as I'm interested in the screen, how it works, and how it reminds me that I'm seeing and experiencing the world through a system of conventions: language, representations, etc . . . I'm searching for the pleasure, humor, and freedom of experience within the constraints of the screen. I'm as interested in the screen as I am in what's behind it and what's in front of it.

**LEE** The perforated paper is made for kids, right? It's like you're looking into, or through, a sort of innocence of the past.

**ROBICHAUX** The perforated paper that I use is called Stickkarton. It's an educational material that kids use to learn basic hand-eye-mind coordination by making patterns, sequences, or images with the guidance of a grid of holes.

**LEE** You have spoken about play before.

**ROBICHAUX** Children have amazing freedom in the early stages of their development. The subjective self develops

through play—touching, exploring, sorting, grouping, destroying, creating. It's a place of freedom that I'm trying to access, but it's certainly not about trying to return to a naïve state or anything like that.

**LEE** You can't. Right?

**ROBICHAUX** No, I don't think so. I'm interested in the possibility of accessing this freedom through play from the other side. The freedom that comes so naturally to us is constrained by the social values that we're exposed to. That's when we start hiding things. Hiding things behind the screen. We start building walls and cutting things off. This is when the separation between the body and mind begins.

**LEE** Right.

**ROBICHAUX** This idea of play reminds me of my experience at your exhibition at Maccarone. I enjoyed the repetition of your chosen materials throughout the show, such as the towels, and the repetition in colors, forms, and textures. I experienced it as an insistence and circling back. There

was a sense of potential and freedom in the different ways the recurring materials were used in the sculptures, paintings, and video. It felt open and free. In a similar way, when I visited your studio I was struck by the way you worked. Your materials and fragments were scattered and strewn all over the floor and walls. It doesn't look like that in my studio today because I just moved in, but I work in a similar fashion. The studio is a landscape of specific materials, fragments, and debris that I insert myself into. When I get to the studio, there's a question of how I'm going to interact with and engage these things. How will I relate to the materials, and how will I experience myself through them? This connects to what we were discussing earlier, that ideas are generated by activity. Everything starts with an action, with play.

**LEE** Well, I guess because what you do—when you talk about reusing parts of older works, for example—and with the kind of chaos in your studio, you're leaving yourself open to chance and accident. And chance and accident are types of organic happenings, so it's like you're existing within the work.

