



# Modest Proposals: Paul Donald's Subversion of the Grand Gesture

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A house of cards pits dexterity against chance, betting that precise, carefully controlled gestures will defeat gravity's ceaseless attempt to reassert its domain. A metaphor for instability, a "house of cards" stands or falls on the masterful touch alone. The hand's ability to hold chaos at bay, to anticipate and defeat the forces of disorder, to hold the whole world at hand, in hand—that is what mastery entails. Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, art lauded that masterful gesture, even when, as in Expressionism, it courts the appearance of wild abandon. (Expressionism, after all, works precisely to the degree that it is balanced on the knife-edge between control and chaos, wildness and its banishment; it is thus a particularly battle-tested form of mastery.) Moreover, the visual's elevation of mastery as its defining trope inflects our understanding of artists in general. We not only call them masters, and that which they produce masterpieces, but the masterful control they emanate tends to migrate from the hand to the mind. After seeing Leonardo da Vinci's "Deluge" drawings in Windsor Castle in 1964, even the hard headed anti-romantic Jasper Johns said he admired them "because here was a man depicting the end of the world and his hands were not trembling."

So when I call Paul Donald's most recent sculpture a house of cards, it is towards highlighting its refusal of mastery, for the work is likewise slowly built-up, one careful gesture after another, a deliberate, humble accumulation of painting, cutting, and folding paper with a patience that is as anti-heroic, as forthright about limitation, as a Kafka short story. Unassuming, even self-effacing in scale, it offers no tonic of conquest, no heroic gesture, no grappling with the infinite. Instead, mingling craftiness with craft, Donald has built up out of mere cut and folded paper a paean to delimitation. This is precisely not anti-art, for art's variously embodied antitheses share with their target a hubristic claim to totalization that nothing in Donald's work even vaguely suggests. Instead, these small works, blooming in the narrow fissure between the meticulous and the elusive, are a slow accumulation of little gestures, a negotiation with, and not a triumph over, constraint.

That is not to say they aren't skillful, and it's their skillfulness that first strikes a viewer. But to

master a skill isn't the same as mastery *tout court*, and what's most appealing about these little works, all of which can fit into the palm of a hand, is their play with slippage. Some are even collectively entitled *Drift* and drift they do, between maquette and sculpture, furniture and cartoon, Rococo and Modernism, the planar and the volumetric, the fluid and the solid. Indeed, like much of Donald's work, they seem caught in a moment of unfixity and transition—a herd of hybrids—in the process of metamorphoses. But this is no transition from one state to another, but the permanently stateless existence of the truly estranged. Born of an unlikely marriage of furniture and cartoons, they attempt a cognitive leap beyond the materiality of furniture towards the flowing biomorphic fluidity of the cartoon; but unlike cartoons, they are volumetric and stable, real things, not two-dimensional abstractions. As such they are funny-serious collisions of things meant to be mutually exclusive. But, and this is key, not in any huge, transcendent world-making way, but as a little gesture, a demonstration of possibility, towards the achievement of that particular liberty born of constant change.

Donald's work came to mind as emblematic of a new tendency I've been noticing of late. Towards attempting yet another end run around the hypocrisy of the art market's hunger for an anti- or uncommodifiable art, some mid-career artists like Donald are exploring that polar obverse of the '80s art market—modesty—and they are doing so in terms of scale, medium, ambition, even in the scope of the work's referentiality. As Jeff Koons and Richard Prince scale ever higher auction-room heights, the art world's self-serving identification with the trappings of a materialist critique has never cost more, hence never been so hypocritical. Once the Damien Hirst/Charles Saatchi nexus made the grand gesture (albeit in scale more often than conception) the yardstick by which ambitious new work was to be judged, artists like Donald began to mine the marginal as a dissident act. But unlike Modernism's many previous appropriations from its margins—ranging from Duchamp's embrace of non-art to Picasso's reanimation of the non-Western or Warhol's cheerful surrender to Pop culture, this new form of marginality itself equivocates. It's not invested in mining the

margins to find yet another masterful trope with which to lead from the sidelines, as Julian Schnabel did with his black velvet paintings in the '80s or Hirst's taxidermy in the '90s. No, the new margin is invested in its marginality as, precisely, marginality, as a refusal of the recent hedge fund acquisition of what is, ostensibly, a critique of the very market forces that generated record profits and auction records.

In no small measure through Warhol's ministrations, by the late sixties the turnaround time for co-opting an art that refused to be easily bought and sold was shortened considerably and art's outliers from conceptual to Fluxus were rather quickly domesticated on the auction house floor. But for the most part, this form of buying-in was imposed over the work. There was generally nothing in the work save its conceptual richness that invited its conversion into commodity signature, and much by design—in its materials, subject matter, scale and concept—that sought to mitigate that prospect. But beginning with Warhol, and intensifying in recent decades, the ostensibly market-resistant art work increasingly sports the look and feel of high art—in its choice of materials, scale, density of conception, exquisite execution, rarity, and now, of course, price. Towards its eventual commodity status, it may say no, but it clearly means yes.

But Donald's meticulous paper sculptures, like much new work, defies this model through a tendency towards both modesty and material flux. Until recently, the art of material transposition relied on the big makeover, defamiliarizing the known through recasting it, in some cases literally, in another (generally more "arty") material. Think of Charles Ray's Buick cast in plaster or Damien Hirst's egregious skull done jeweler-like in diamonds and platinum. But artists like Donald take a humble material and create of it an equally humble work of art. While he may tease out of it its transformative potential, he doesn't actually fundamentally transform it. Unlike the big gestures of his fellow artists invested in metamorphosis, this new courting of the literally transformed is precisely *not* about the stealthy deployment of high art's materials and old school masteries, as familiar today as it was in Renaissance patronage contracts that specified the expanse of lapis lazuli and gold in an altar piece, that reassuring whiff of the market even when it seems most strenuously denied. After all, the pleasures of Ray's or Hirst's work are haunted by a hidden and rather distasteful moral, celebrating the artist's triumph over materials, in an almost 19<sup>th</sup> century salute to the controlling intelligence's ability to shape and manipulate brute matter in line with market imperatives. For all of their celebrated play

between material states, the fact is that artist's like Ray or Hirst never question the simple notion that a thing is either one thing or another, in one state or another. They may labor hugely to carry a thing from one material immanence to another, but once secured in its new form, that thing restabilizes and comes to rest—a shark in a tank is now a sculpture, and what made it a sculpture was, in the full and very traditional sense of the term, the sculptor's "art." It has the heft, the spectacle, the specialized labor, even the finish that "sculpture" requires.

But practitioners of a more modest mode of art-making resist this hypocritical refusal of the transcendental muses while still living in Art's house, on Art's generous budget. Their new *arte povera* is, however, distinct from the old in not requiring the services of children, the mentally ill or any of art's other beatified pariahs to work its claim. What's changed is that artists like Donald are no longer trying to mingle and mate with the excluded margins to strengthen art's genetic make-up. Rather, they understand art's historical territory as a prison, and they look to escape. Of the categoricals, they are at best indifferent, with a tendency to drift.

Donald's work has broadly embroidered upon similar themes for years. He has shown lovely large drawings in which wet color on a wet ground bleeds into the paper beyond the rigidly geometric armatures he's drawn to "contain" them. He's built wooden sculptures that drift into animation, seeming to skittle across the floor. And he's constructed beautiful cartoony reliefs with bug eyes that the observer can spin on the wall like a roulette wheel. In each of these works, animation describes not just the look but the feel, imbuing the inanimate with a seeming exuberance that is but a projection of delight in the movement between states, in the freedom from the categorical and its insistent demands. Like good animated films, these works cross and recross the boundaries between serious and silly, art and entertainment, the rarified and the popular.

But Donald's work isn't striving to cross these boundaries, for that would reify a conceptual schema toward which he is at best indifferent. As with many practitioners of a modest mode of art, his work acknowledges no polarity between a thing and its status as art. Nothing is really transformed in his work, for transformation is an act of accomplishment, a clean movement between states. Donald's art consistently denies that ontological leap; his sculptures refuse to be other than what they are—insistently hand-worked paper. As totems of an in-between state, indecidedly drifting between assorted, seemingly opposed



PAUL DONALD, *Companion*, 2007. INSTALLATION VIEW, JAMES DORAHY PROJECT SPACE, SYDNEY. DIMENSIONS VARIABLE; WOOD AND VARNISH, ACRYLIC INK ON PAPER. PHOTO: JENNI CARTER.

identities and ontologies (paper/sculpture, surface/mass, design/art, cheap/valuable, temporary/permanent, and stasis/transformation are but a few) they suddenly assume the weight of metaphor: these little sculptures are queer. Not queer in the ordinary language sense of homosexual, for that is, like Hirst's shark, merely another form of being. No, they're queer in that they act as solvent to a culture of polarity, to those binarisms premised on inclusion or exclusion to larger categories of being. Donald's *Drift* instead drifts between states like some ideal polymorphous perversion, neither one thing nor another, putting pressure on the very naturalization of the categorical itself. Yet even that formulation seems too insistent, too coherent. Donald might lavish his fragile, small-scale paper works with the care and attention generally accorded big statements, but the results seem to slip off his efforts with a shrug. They drift, unmoored.



PAUL DONALD, *twinchaisetendrils (smalllyellow)*, 2008. ACRYLIC INK, PAPER; 11 X 5 X 9 CENTIMETERS EACH (APPROX).

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