

introduction

by charlie levine

I am fortunate to have been, either in person or digitally, a visitor to John Ros' differing studio spaces since I first met them in their East London iteration in 2015. From there John has been in studios in New York, Virginia, Mumbai (while on a fellowship), Brooklyn and now in Long Island City. I have seen, first hand, their creative studio practice, and it is a wonder to see and talk through.

The studio, for John Ros, is a hybrid space that is constantly functioning in many ways — much like the artist themselves. It is at once a space to delicately hold and keep an archive of past works, offer textures and light to inspire, as well as provide a door to close for focus and deliberation. As John works in a site responsive way, or more in terms of an artist who responds to their surroundings — physically and politically — the studio becomes the forefront 'canvas' for the work to begin upon and of. The works being created help develop a method or set of rules to work within, to test ideas out and to limit work within the constructs of the space itself.

Techniques are honed, concepts played with, the studio is where ideas may birth, but they do not grow into themselves fully until John is in

the gallery/exhibition space. This is where the studio practice expands and breathes, where those moments of play, practice, admin and conversation become planted and the seeds grown — where the site responsive interventions are created on site with found materials.

This transference of energy and newly found materiality to work with allows John to take that learning from their studio and look afresh at a space, its light, the silent opportunities and the moments of noise. The importance of using found materials and finding new ways of looking at them is not only a creative response but also an advocacy one. John is fuelled by a deep resistance to capitalist consumption and the pressure it puts on society (economically) and the world (ecologically). John's impulse to be driven by more than art for art's sake is key to their ambitions as an artist.

“my durational, site-responsive interventions involve a process of taking up residence within a place to fully engage with the location, its surroundings and every element within it. my exploration begins without parameters, allowing

for the possible and impossible. while delving into the idiosyncratic elements of each space — assembling and disassembling, shifting, accumulating and rearranging material — subtle dynamics and possibilities are emphasized. to reinforce these tensions, all components are sourced on site and often activate unseen or forgotten elements.”

It was at Sluice art fair in London, 2015, and then again in New York in 2018 with long-time collaborator Tash Kahn, and in Mumbai in 2019 that I saw, firsthand, this way of working. I am reminded every time that John creates or showcases their practice that the experience isn't about the object or print work itself. But rather the gesture of making — both active and inactive. They prioritize how we look — both artist and audience — at the work, space, surrounding streets, headlines of the day, and we are asked to reflect and come back again and again to an idea that we discover only via the prompts they present to us.

You think you have an idea, especially as a curator commissioning them, what you think John will produce on site, how they might

react to the boundaries or rules that a space provides based on the work they've been doing in their studio at that time. However, this is not the case. John has an ability to see beyond the gallery, while always never losing focus upon it. They take stories from the site, the neighborhood it sits within and beyond, and creates focal points for audiences to grasp onto. They create protagonists out of found objects within a venue, and they can produce white noise by showing everything and nothing. There is always a sense of humor found with their work, audiences are invited to smile along with the artist and find joy in the detail. There are smart moments and pauses where we can get excited by noticing a small nuanced intervention that others may have not necessarily caught. This makes each audience member feel special and truly connected to the exhibitions, an ownership of discovery. This is a genuinely unique part of John's practice, and one that is not immediate, rather — like much of their research — is about re-visiting, and taking a second look.

“my work involves getting to know the spaces i occupy, understanding the impact of my movements on the

environment and on others, past, present and future. in some ways my practice has become a collaboration with many — known and unknown — as we encounter each other and build experiences together — figuratively and literally.”

Alongside this John is also coming from a very strong political stance. Though the works might not be instantly interpretable toward a specific social commentary, trust me, it is there. As it runs through John's veins, and then out through their work. John is a Latinx, queer, non-binary, artist, curator and lecturer. They are thoughtful, plugged into their personal communities' stories, struggles and hope and embeds that within their practice and approach. Nothing is done accidentally, everything you see, read and experience is intentional. It encourages you to look at the world, society and stories slightly differently through the lens of an artist who has felt different, who has felt invisible, and who is now finding their voice as the world becomes more open to conversations around heritage, questioning of gender norms and how the creative process can amplify, positively, these conversations.

Specifically, as John puts it, their work is “a critique of colonialism, capitalism and systemic violence” with their exhibition making promoting the development of anti-racist spaces focused on social justice and equity. This links back to their focus on climate change issues, specifically the line between waste and consumption, through the re-purposing of found objects. The importance of bringing the disregarded, forgotten or ignored back, through the artist's personal creative rituals, and back into view and with a new power, purposefully challenges more traditional hierarchical hegemonies and asks us to re-think society from a newly created neutral stance.