

ONE THING, THEN ANOTHER, AND:

AN INTERVIEW WITH JERRY BIRCHFIELD

ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Jerry Birchfield creates complex images of simple materials using a variety of approaches and techniques, including sculpture, film photography, and digital manipulation. Birchfield's works bring these mediums together in equilibrium and overlap. I sat down with Birchfield on June 10, 2013 to discuss the underlying concerns of his image-making process.

Rose Bouthillier: *I'm curious if you can describe how an image begins for you. Is it something that's envisioned in your mind? Or, is it sparked by an object? Or, does it only begin to take shape in the frame?*

Jerry Birchfield: I'd say the latter. I've been thinking of photographs as being built, and not necessarily taken. So, a lot of the recent photographs have been constructed in front of the lens, like a sculpture or a collage built-up on the surface of the negative.

RB: *What led you to produce images this way?*

JB: In my undergraduate studies at the Cleveland Institute of Art, I was in the photo department. But I always had one foot in photography and one outside. For some reason, it felt right to be working from a photographic point outwards. As I was making sculptures and drawings, I was thinking of them as being part of some sort of photographic practice. I'm still making sculptures, still making drawings, and marks on paper, but the final work is a photograph.

RB: *In terms of the sculptural aspect of your work, can you talk a bit about your installation strategies? For instance, your photographs for Realization is Better than Anticipation are arranged at various heights, some stacked, and with different distances in-between. This seems sculptural, and structural, even though the pieces are arranged on the wall, something that is habitually read as a flat 2D surface.*

JB: I'm interested in all the elements of a photograph being at an equivalent level. The pictorial, the material, the perceptual, and the durational, all occupying the same space. The installation becomes part of that. Simple gestures, like varying the viewing height, or acknowledging a standardized viewing height, give the impression that the photograph is an object that's capable of moving in space, and, even more so, that there are conventions for how this object is moved through space.

The installations always begin with a consideration of contingent elements. For MOCA Cleveland, we [the artist and the curators] decided which images we were going to work with, and in which space. Within that, I wanted the images to develop relationships with one another, and to the wall that they were on. It is sort of arbitrary, in the way that the first becomes related to the second, and the second to the third, but then the fourth is related to the tenth, and the eighth is related to the second. So, all of the photographs together are dependent on each other as a whole.

I'm also interested in the viewer's navigation of the work, particularly with images hung together. From one image to the next, there is an entrance and exit to each work, into and out of pictorial space, through the material conditions of the space in-between. The viewer's eye and body activate those pathways.

RB: *How do you choose the objects in your photographs?*

JB: I'm interested in how the objects build the photograph, not in a representation of the object itself, per se. The objects are chosen based on how they can appear within a photograph. Sometimes they are really ephemeral, built in the studio, and sometimes they are part of my daily life, find a way into the photograph, and then go back to their daily use. The choice of whether the object is included or not can be made only after the photograph exists, and either works or doesn't. I'm really interested in how the traditions and genres of photographic practice, such as documentary, theatrical, or commercial, influence the work. Choices like lighting refer to those things—they become as much of a referent as the object being photographed.

RB: *Some of the objects you use appear in multiple images, or as you say, come from your daily life. Do you find that you develop some sort of pictorial attachment to them, something like an affection that develops through making the image?*

JB: I do have a special place in my studio for the things that are made to be photographed. And some stuff I just can't throw away, because it exists in a photograph and it seems so important. But, the object can't do the same thing in real life as it does in the photograph. So, it's really just for me, it's not for showing. The objects that are part of daily life just go back. One of our rugs was recently part of a photograph. I'm interested in how things like that, that I use daily, can come together with those I produce in the studio, in a way that has an equalizing effect.

RB: *In addition to pictorial and sculptural concerns, a decidedly photographic concern pervades much of your work: original and copy, indexical or virtual. How do those distinctions shape your images?*

JB: I feel like I've had these rules in place for a while that I'm now shedding. Shooting film, or digital, or 4x5, or medium format, printing on certain paper, no digital manipulation, or, if something needs to be fixed, then I can digitally manipulate it, but nothing more. But those rules and choices are starting to feel arbitrary; I can construct an entire image in the camera, or I can do it entirely digitally. Lately I've been experimenting more with multiple images in the frame, images stuck onto other images, so the photographs, materially, are becoming very related to collage. It's all part of a pretty fluid process. Because I'm making inkjet prints that are generated by a computer, they have a very material form. Then they're in the studio and become part of a new photograph, which goes through the whole process again.

RB: *Your works are editioned, and exist as individual prints, yet in the installations you place them in particular relationships to one another, through arrangement. I'm curious as to how you navigate them as singular entities with what seem to be multiple identities.*

JB: I'm interested in things being very clear, physically, about what they are. Although there is abstraction and un-identifiability in the images, I am interested in the medium acknowledging itself to the viewer. Inkjet prints are inkjet prints, and the reality of them is that you can print many very easily. As installations on a wall, they become objects that are affected by the space they are in, and by the viewer navigating that space. So, regardless of their ability to be printed, theoretically endlessly, they become a unique experience within the framework of the installation.

RB: *One thing that we've discussed before is the way an object can oscillate between appearing very simple, or "dumb," and very complex. And it seems to me that potential, that flip, is really tied to indexicality in photography. It's dependent on some kernel of the "real" being transferred/transformed in the image. Based on your growing ambivalence towards the film/digital divide, and manipulation, I'm curious as to how you approach that spark of the index in your work. Is it something that is consciously preserved, or yet another convention to be mimicked and shadowed?*

JB: I'm more concerned with the condition of the photograph at the end. There are varying degrees of abstraction and representation within singular works. Certain areas flatten out, become completely graphic, and present in that way, and then all of a sudden there's a very photographic or depictive moment with light and shadow. I'm interested in the play between those things, and one basically emphasizing the other. So there's a continual shift between entering the pictorial, or even identifying the referent, and then the next thing that your eyes move past pushes you back to the surface of the print, and back into the space that you are standing in. There's a constant oscillation, and that's the goal with most of my work, to find the spaces in-between, like awkward moments, awkward compositions, even awkward tonal ranges. In traditional photography, you want your maximum black with detail, and your maximum white with detail, you follow the Zone System, so that black, white, and nine shades of gray in between are perfectly depicted. I'm interested in what happens when those things are slightly off.

RB: *I've been thinking about your work in terms of Venn diagrams, as if there are circles or zones of qualities or concerns, Abstract/Representational/Material. Within each image there are areas where two, or all three, of those zones overlap. The distribution of information among the zones make for interesting tensions.*

JB: Those areas of overlap are what make the works humorous, or tricky, or self-referential. If it's too depictive, or too abstract, the image just becomes really poetic in a way that I don't like. I'm interested in the thing that stops viewers, the thing that falls, that forces vision to fall back into the present space. Certain decisions, like the matte paper, varying scales, are all part of that.

RB: *This idea of visual navigation reminds me of the work you recently showed in New York, Back and Fill (2013); the title is a sailing term for a series of small maneuvers. It seemed to fit very eloquently with your work as a whole.*

JB: When I came across that term, I knew it was just perfect. I had a lot of trouble making that work. I kept making minute shifts. Looking at it, going home, looking at it again, and then changing everything, but just by a few degrees. And in the end, those are really the simplest works I've made, visually. Plain grey prints in plain white frames. But the decision making process was always shifting. So *Back and Fill* seemed like a totally appropriate title for that work. And it seems to be the way that a lot of things are going in my studio. Some things happen very easily, but most things are continually changing, that's just the way my process is. I also like the other meaning of the word: "back and fill" can mean taking back, or renegeing, on a previous statement or promise. I like the idea of the work proposing something, and then immediately changing its proposal to be something else, so that it's continually oscillating back and forth. Or, telling you the exact opposite of what you thought it just said.

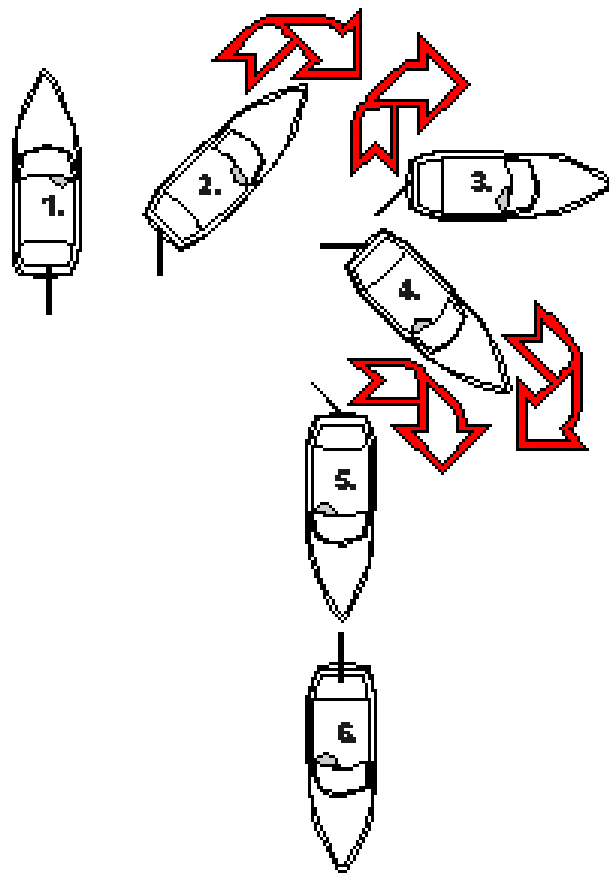
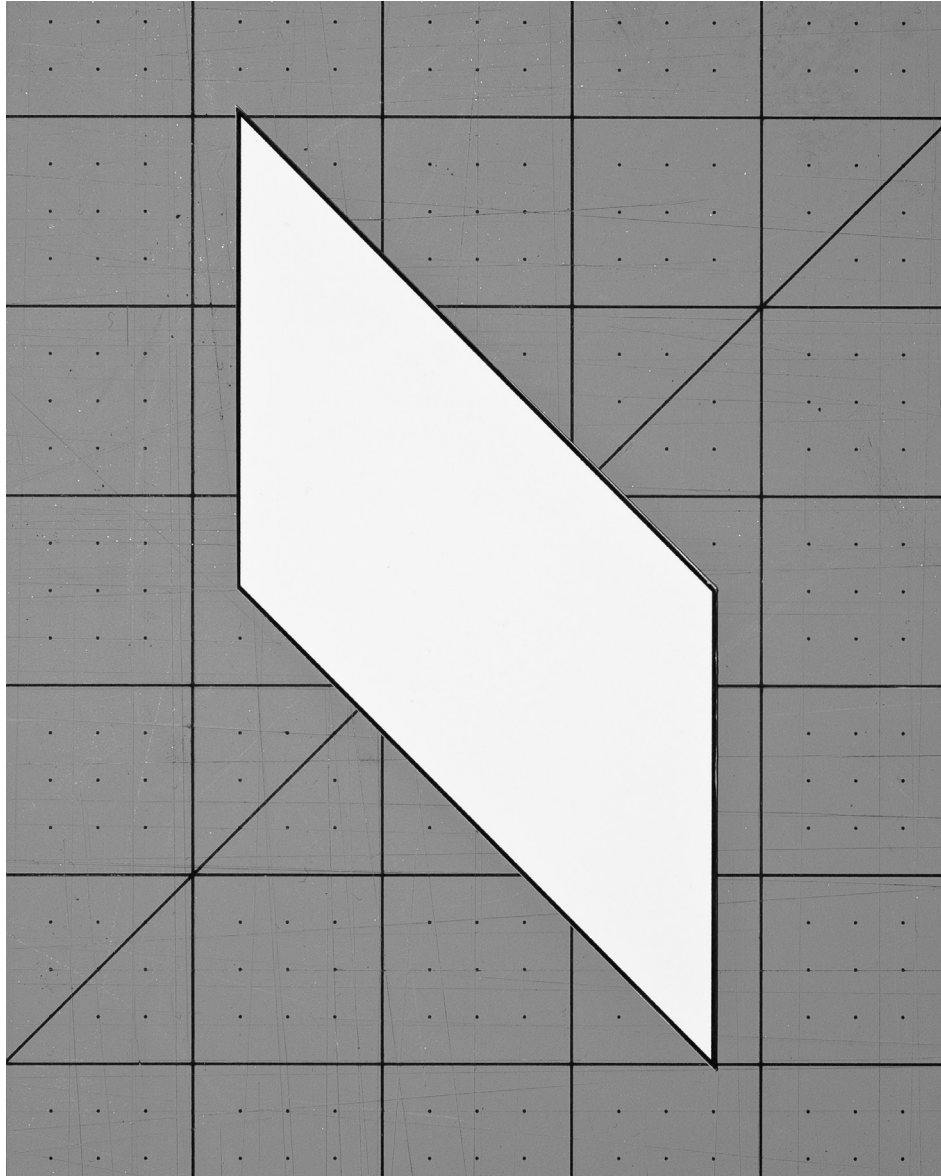


Diagram of the nautical "back and fill" maneuver. Taken from boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/backfill.htm.

JERRY BIRCHFIELD
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ABOVE: Jerry Birchfield, *Untitled*, inkjet print, 2013, 15 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

RIGHT: Jerry Birchfield, *Untitled*, inkjet print, 2013, 25 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

