

On the Way to Hilary Harnischfeger's Studio



above:
Hilary Harnischfeger's studio, 2013.

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Hilary Harnischfeger, **Pan**, 2009

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Hilary Harnischfeger, **Lucy**, 2009



I was on my way South to Newark, Ohio to visit Hilary Harnischfeger, who shares a studio with her husband in town. I had been looking forward to my drive down from Cleveland, as summer had arrived and I could have my car windows open as I made my way through the verdant fields and small towns that dot much of the bucolic landscape of central Ohio. After my visit with Hilary, I had planned to see the Newark Earthworks; the largest groupings of Native American burial mounds in North America. A Chipotle sits just across the street and a golf course lays, like a blanket, over some of the earthen forms. As I drove into town, many of the streets were cordoned off. I could see a Ferris wheel spinning in the distance and white tents lining the streets. Later, I discovered it was the annual strawberry festival. I felt happy to be a little lost as I circled the town's one way streets, slowly making my way closer to its center.

The day before, I had made another trip: to Kent State University to see the site of Robert Smithson's **Partially Buried Woodshed** (1970). Though I had been several times, there are no signs, and the site seemed different. Much has changed since Smithson and a handful of Kent students piled loads of dirt on top of the woodshed until its center beam cracked under the weight—setting the work into a state where it could begin to accumulate associations, actions, and attitudes as it decomposed. I had set Google Maps to locate Kent's Liquid Crystal Institute, which sits just to the northwest of the overgrown clod of conifers and vines that currently shrouds the site from surrounding parking lots and buildings that make up the sprawl of new construction on campus. When Smithson's piece was made, the woodshed was a forgotten relic, part of an old farm the University had purchased far from main campus. Just months later, four students were killed and nine others wounded by Ohio National Guardsmen during a student protest of events in Cambodia. Sometime over that summer, someone painted in bold white letters on the woodshed "May 4 Kent 70," in memory of the tragedy that took place on campus.

As plans began to develop to expand Kent's campus, the University tried to find ways to make the decomposing structure go away, and decided to encircle the site with fast growing conifers. In 1975, arsonists set the woodshed ablaze, destroying much of the structure. The University's grounds crew became increasingly worried about the safety of the site until, one day, without notice, the remnants of the wooden structure were removed. The foundation, however, and the growth of trees that encircled it from clear view, endure—like some sort of a shrine. Within the trees, there are crumbling chunks of the woodshed's foundation and odd shaped amalgamations of rounded stones suspended in concrete with rusted steel mesh and rebar poking out. There are patterned impressions in the concrete, left from the form boards used to cast the runny substance into place. Textures and cavities are now home to lichen and mosses, grasses, and spiders weaving webs. Driving the next day to visit with Harnischfeger, I thought about the way these materials lay strewn about the site, half buried but still overcome with vitality.

When I finally found my way to Harnischfeger's studio, I was pleased when she offered to walk me around town. Our first stop was Cornell Clothing, just next door to her studio. Half the store was a timeworn bar, the town's old hitching post. Now, where pub tables would have been, racks of clothing line the room. Memorabilia is displayed above the wooden bar and inside the cozy wood-paneled booths. Harnischfeger directed me toward the back of the store to the massive display of Boy Scout gear. I felt like I was looking at the paraphernalia of a secret society. The building had been in the family for three generations and so had some of these old uniforms, badg-

es, and handbooks. The owner also had toured with a few Midwest rock bands in the 60s. One large wall was given over to old concert t-shirts, tie-dye, and leather tassels.

We walked around the corner from Cornell's to see the Louis Sullivan-designed Home Building Association Bank. It was built during an economic boom in Newark when the railroad arrived and the population of the sleepy farming town swelled to 20,000. The bank was one of three Midwest banks designed by Sullivan in 1914. In addition to a bank, over the years, a butcher, a jewelry store, and an ice cream parlor had occupied the building. Now vacant, I heard local rumors of it becoming a not-for-profit art center, or maybe a Starbucks.

It was a beautiful day and I could no longer resist the Strawberry Festival. I was hoping for strawberries, but none were to be found. It turns out that many of the strawberry farms in the area have shut down due to global competition. The farms that remain now harvest their strawberries at a different time of the year. Everyone looked happy despite this curious reality. Teenagers were smoking by an old tree. A few kids on skateboards popped ollies on the sidewalk. There were tents filled with farm animals, custom crafters, cell phone service providers, tattoo artists, sarsaparilla booths, and corn dog vendors. A man yodeled and a banjo twanged in the bandshell. On our way out of the Festival, I bought a carved-on-the-spot keychain for a friend.

Harnischfeger's studio occupies an old attorney's office above a coffee shop. The space was dilapidated, but airy. The walls were well worn shades of green, darker in areas where the sun seldom hit. I could make out some lettering on one of the fitted glass doors piecing together "attorney." I imagined Humphrey Bogart chain smoking cigarettes behind a desk, his hat hanging in the corner. In one room, strewn atop one of the large tables lay a dusty hammer along with a range of ceramic fragments and pulverized bits in various stages of unbecoming. These partial forms become the foundation to which she compounds into new conglomerates.

Harnischfeger's interest in clay began when she moved to the area. Once an ancient swamp, Ohio is a clay-rich region filled with earthy submicroscopic bits of feldspars, mica, and quartz. Smithson wrote of the "infinity of surfaces" he found in the abandoned quarries of New Jersey in his essay, "The Crystal Land." Known as the "Newark series," the sedimentary rock formations were named for the city of Newark, New Jersey. Smithson cites the variety of minerals found in these quarries:

Paterson, Great Notch and Upper Montclair are the mineral-rich quarries of the First Watchung Mountain. Brian H. Mason, in his fascinating booklet, **Trap Rock Minerals of New Jersey**, speaks of the "Triassic sedimentary rocks of the Newark series," which are related to those of the Palisades. In these rocks one might find: "actinolite, albite, allanite, analcime, apatite, anhydrite, apophyllite, aurichalcite, axinite, azurite, babingtonite, bornite, barite, calcite, chabazite, -chalocite, -chalcopyrite, -chlorite, -chrysocola, -copper, covellite, cuprite, datolite, dolomite, epidote, galena, glauberite, goethite, gmelinite, -greenockite, -gypsum, -hematite, -heulandite, hornblende, laumontite, malachite, mesolite, natrolite, opal, orpiment, orthoclase, pectolite, prehnite, pumpellyite, pyrite, pyrolusite, quartz, scolecite, siderite, silver, sphalerite, sphene, stevensite, stilbite, stilpnomelane, talc, thaumasite, thomsonite, tourmaline, ulexite." ¹

The same Ohio clays formed during the Pennsylvanian, Mississippian, Devonian, and Pleistocene eras were used by the Adena, Hopewell, and Fort Ancient cultures





to shape their effigies and ceremonial objects, are used today to make construction bricks and stoneware.

In another studio room, a selection of Harnischfeger's near-finished works lie grouped on a table—chunky, jagged, igneous amalgamations of tinted clay, plaster, paper, and crystals. Broken as Harnischfeger's forms seem, their magic is in how things manage to come together. Surface, support, material, and media are frustrated here. Tracing the outlines of irregular cavities and negative spaces, like a scavenged patchwork of bones, reveals the tectonics of the structures. Fragments and shards of glazed motifs collapse into misshapen entryways, which Harnischfeger leaves vacant or packs tightly with tinted plaster embedded with minerals or stacks of hand-dyed paper. The plaster, like sediments settling into cavities, appears to collect crushed debris and bear impressions like fossils or forgotten actions—sites where distinct temporalities may coexist—as well as their meanings. They feel isolated and removed, yet acted upon.

Appearances, too, are compressed. In moments, they looked like rock formations pulled from an old cartoon, or primitive architecture, or ritual masks from a far off continent. Materials and associations shift readily from one context to another. Working one's way around and through these conglomerates is part of the archeology viewers must ply through. Their strata, patterns, folds, and spirals are trapped within bare substance; they appear fixed in place, though with neither a center nor a hierarchy. These are mined and we are mining (like the rocks Smithson collected from geological sites and placed within shaped containers for his **Non-sites**, shown inside the gallery alongside maps or photographs, performing like scale-models). Harnischfeger, however, provides no map or compass. Labor, time, and trust unify what was once broken apart into isolated topographies—now formed, together, well off the grid.

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Text excerpted from
Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, 2nd Edition, edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), 7. Originally published in **The Writings of Robert Smithson**, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979).