



Alongside, The Outside of the Left Side of the Inside: An Interview with James Woodfill

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I recently had the opportunity to chat with James Woodfill via email about his latest exhibition at City Ice Arts, **The Outside of the Left Side of the Inside**. Woodfill is an established visual artist based in Kansas City, Missouri who works in a wide variety of mediums ranging from functional objects and installations to public art projects, drawings, and photographs. He has collaborated with the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, el dorado architects, and KEM Studio to name just a few. Woodfill is also an assistant professor at the Kansas City Art Institute. After viewing the work at City Ice Arts last month, I wanted to find out more about his most recent installation.



Melaney Mitchell: *The title of the show itself, **The Outside of the Left Side of the Inside**, seems to invoke a playfulness. Do you feel like the wording reflects how the viewer would ultimately participate with the works? Viewing them as an outsider from the installation, and then from within?*

James Woodfill: First, let's acknowledge the process of this interview. You have asked a series of questions of me, and now I am responding to them, all of this via email. It is a useful process in some ways, and problematic in others. I am able to carefully write responses to the questions and the potential for off the cuff remarks that are inaccurate or un-thoughtful is limited. I also am able to get a general sense of what you experienced as a viewer by piecing together the diverse list of questions. And I am able to get a sense of the frames of reference that you might be using as a lens for this discussion.

However, this process makes it difficult for me to build consistent trains of thought between one answer and the next as the questions were posed – so if you don't mind, I am going to re-organize the questions a bit. I want to use my responses to the rest of the questions to help answer the first. Or maybe, the answer to the first question here will help answer the others. Either way. And I will double them up as I answer them.

This matter of process is important, as it mirrors the way that I think about the work. I am consistently interested in the re-ordering of events and materials. I am interested in the shuffling of chronology and the disruption of static points of view. And I am interested in self-reference and a direct acknowledgment of the operations that I am involved with. I will try to explain this a bit more as I go through the questions, and hopefully clarify the title of the exhibition a bit more.

I want to emphasize that I see this interview as an integral part of the process of **The Outside of the Left Side of the Inside**. The installation has caused it to happen. The writing that has taken place, the conversations that I have had, and the ideas that they have provoked surrounding this exhibition are all part of the context that is being built.



MM: Do you feel as though you created a game-like environment for the viewer by controlling the pathway of the gallery space?

What was it like working in this space and how do you feel it shaped the end result?

JW: I haven't thought of it as a game-like environment in the way that I suppose you mean it, but this frame is useful. The choreography of the space is fairly pragmatic for me. It is a compositional device that helps amplify the condition of time in the space. Garry Noland and Tanya Hartman both, in writing about the installation, saw this as a condition of uncertainty. I see it as a condition of disorientation or dis-association.

My intent has been to establish a situation where you walk into the room and are immediately trying to assess where you are "supposed" to be. You are trying to find the floor space in front of "the painting" to stand and act as viewer. But the location of that view is shifting. And your movement in the attempt to find it becomes part of the composition of the choreography. You are inside the room, and thus inside the frame.

I think I understand clearly how you can associate this with the idea of a "game-like" environment, and it helps place the experience in a quasi-virtual state. We are moving outside of the norm and into another set of conditions. But it is not fantasy. We can recognize everything and nothing is concealed.

I also wanted to construct a situation that brought the physical nature of the gallery space into the compositional structure. I love the space – the ceiling contains a drawing of the history of its use, and I tried to construct with objects and strategies that had resonance with it. The shape of the room is peculiar, and I worked to find agreement with this as well. The installation is completely a result of my tools and strategies as they came into contact with City Ice Arts, and my hope was for a unified sense of place



MM: *There seems to also be a sense of humor in the work mixed with serious painting wizardry, is this what you hoped would come through?*

(Specifically related to this, I remember being baffled by the lowest table's color in the center installation stack, trying to decipher if it was painted, or if that color originated that way! Yet, I wonder if I was supposed to analyze that...)

Did the color choice for these works happen to reflect the name of the location of where the work was installed (City Ice Arts) or was there other reasoning behind that?

JW: The sense of humor is tricky for me, and I am uneasy with the term “wizardry.” The painted panels have a pace to them – they were created slowly over time, and they unveil themselves slowly over time. There is nothing mystical about the materiality of them. They act compositionally both in space and time, in a similar way that the choreography acts compositionally – as a pragmatic formal element. It is the emergent relationship between these sorts of tools in the space that might give us a sense of the uncanny. Perhaps that is where the sense of humor that you see comes from – the particular pace of slightly unexpected things.

A certain sense of humor might also be a result of our inability to firmly place things in chronological order. Yes, the color palette has a strong relationship to the fact that the installation is housed in a room that was originally a giant cooler for ice storage. And I know that as the preparation for the installation progressed I pushed the color further into that relationship. But I cannot say that City Ice Arts caused that palette. It was as much a result of the navigation between painting the panels and using folding tables, with their own set of particular colored surfaces.

The sound operates the same way – the final composition of the sound was a result of the way it operated in the space, including the fact that the white noise that I included sounded very much like a loud air conditioner. This relationship was amplified by both the color and temperature in the space. It was also amplified by the history of the space and the name of the gallery.

These issues come together in a dis-jointed way in the space, to the extent that I don't think the viewer can quite locate the cause and effect relationships in any sequential way – they are all lateralized. Your comment that you wondered if you were supposed to analyze the color of the table is an indication to me of a certain disorientation that comes from fuzzy boundaries. We become hyper aware of detail and we build connections on the fly.

Jonah Criswell sent me a link the other day to a video lecture by Jan Verwoert talking about the concept of adjacency. This immediately became a clear lens for me to see what I have been attempting from a slightly different angle. Jonah sent this to me as a response to a conversation that we had in the gallery space about the shifting boundaries of composition and this lateralization. This idea of adjacency became a map of sorts for me. Matt Wycoff and I produced a book project this summer, ADJACENT to this exhibition. I place a link to the lecture about adjacency in a blog that Matt and I started as an ADJACENT structure to the book project. This conversation is now a further articulation of this idea, and so forth. Where something starts and where it ends is always in flux, and the shiftiness of this is disconcerting.

From one point of view, all of these things are other than the installation (outside). From another point of view they are all part of the composition (inside). From yet another, these issues are simply adjacent to the work, and we are left to build relationships with them or not. I do not feel compelled to try to control the drift, just to continually try to apprehend and clarify it.

Getting back to the title, I wanted to indicate not just a shift in orientation, but a shift in the kind of orientation.



***MM:** Do you feel like this work is best viewed in an installation photograph- which tend to feel like carefully arranged painting moments- or as a fully interactive installation – where the viewer has the freedom to see writing on certain panels or look under/above/around the works?*

How do you feel the photographs relate to the installation overall?

JW: I'm both surprised and intrigued by the first of these two questions. And I assume that it might have been provoked by the second. It seems funny to assume that I might not say that, of course the fully interactive installation is primary. The installation photograph has traditionally been at best a secondary representation of the real thing. But I am interested in how image, especially digital image can surpass the represented in primacy.

If we are sitting in front of a computer the installation photographs are all we have. More importantly though, as the documentation acts as adjacent information to the initial installation, from the point of view of the virtual experience online or even in print, the installation can be seen as adjacent to the images. Both trajectories work.

With that said, I do believe that the installation in space and time is a much more layered experience if both options are in front of you. The photographs, as well as the paintings in the entry to the gallery space help to build a context of adjacency. They offer another way to see the forms of construction and composition that I am interested in. And the photographs allow a different vernacular into the tool kit used to build the sense of place that I am after. That shift in vernacular is equivalent to the idea of a shift in the KIND of orientation I spoke of earlier.

I hope that these answers start to give a picture of what I'm thinking about.



*If you want to experience **The Outside of the Left Side of the Inside** for yourself, the First Friday reception is this Friday, September 5th from 6-9 pm at City Ice Arts. Following on Saturday, September 6th at 1pm, Woodfill will also be giving a gallery talk about the exhibition that runs through September 13th 2014. These are the final events at the City Ice Arts Building so don't miss them! For more information on James Woodfill please visit his website and blog. To contact City Ice Arts, they are located at 2015 Campbell St. Kansas City, MO 64108 and you can visit them online [here](#).*

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