



Alex Fialho interviews Jarrod Beck on the occasion of the opening of *Temple*

AF: This wasn't what I expected!

JB: The idea to use textiles was born from a desire to make drawings very large, to make things transportable, something particularly relevant in this phase of my life. Textiles are something that we as humans can relate to; we know what they feel like against our skin, under our feet. They become an intimate material, right away.

I traveled to India in December of 2017—packing light, I included a sketchbook in which I had been working on a series of 11 technical drawings that together become instructions for the assembly of a temple. I had been invited to stay at the Retreat, a residency administered by the Sarabhai Foundation. When I arrived in Ahmedabad I asked Suhrid Sarabhai if he knew a tailor who I could work with to transfer my graphite-on-paper drawings to machine-stitched lines on fabric. He packed me into a car and we drove to Mansun Farm, a small factory that his family runs in Kotarpur, on the edge of Ahmedabad where two dozen or so artisans block-print, dye, and machine- and hand-stitch garments in small quantities.

We quickly moved into production of my drawings, which grew to 30 pieces, 15 of which are shown at Kentler. We began each day by discussing a drawing and brainstorming how to achieve each piece at full scale. I chose to mostly use superfine *khadi*, a handwoven cotton that is unique to the region, and worked with a vocabulary of construction techniques to push the idea of lines on the page being extruded into a third dimension, into space.

AF: How do you reconcile the loose quality of these textiles, as they hang and even waft in the space, with the precision of your architectural sketches and the nature of architecture itself?

JB: These works represent a step from a drawing scaled to fit one's hand, an instruction to be passed from one soul to another, and the space, or the movement through the space, that the small drawing is instructing. We are going from 8 inches to 80 feet, and with some of the works, 80 hours or 80,000 miles three times, with at least one of the works in the show.

I chose to show the works in a way that honored the chronology of this exhibition, as we are just one month from the moment these pieces were created, wet with dye, hanging from a clothesline for 5 days after each printing, slowly expanding from their bound state during the dyeing process. I made decisions based on some of the spatial features of Kentler and through the lens of one of the inspirations for my foray into textiles, the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad.

AF: Can you tell me more about your experience at the Calico Museum of Textiles?

JB: I first traveled to India two years ago and was based in Ahmedabad at CEPT University and the Kanoria Art Center. A visit to the Calico Museum was a pivotal moment in my practice. To visit the museum, one needs to sign up for a tour, which lasts exactly 90 minutes. Every moment is choreographed, and it takes some getting used to: after a few minutes you realize that there is no way to dwell on a piece, you have to keep walking and keep

looking, gathering everything you can with only your eyes, pen, and paper. One person collected all of the works in the museum, textiles from all over India, but focused on Gujarat and Rajasthan: garments, temple hangings, and tents made by the Mughals to create proper receiving areas for a mobile kingdom. I had an epiphany looking at a 27-foot-long scroll that was used by a traveling storyteller to guide his story as he walked from city to city to entertain and earn a few coins. The materiality, color, and technique of these works, as well as the history of their use, was so much more interesting than the relationship of a gallery visitor staring at a painting in a sterile setting.

AF: I'm interested in following the line between your recent shows. The medium—paper pulp—of your exhibition *The Moon* at Smack Mellon in 2017 feels quite different from the textiles here. Can you talk about the projects in relationship to each other?

JB: *The Moon* was three drawings, steel rebar hooks hanging vertically, and “moonpeels” of paper pulp, with the performances as the thing that moved between. A warp, woof, and shuttle. I learn about and use the material that is right for the idea I am putting out into the world. This show is all textile, but it's a development of my paper pulp works from the last few years as well as the performative element that has been increasingly a part of my installations.

AF: The scroll you mentioned makes me think of the work *Letter (Lost brother)*, which I was immediately drawn to upon entering the space, with its voluminous drape into the center of the gallery.

JB: When I arrived at Mansun Farm, the first workshop we stepped into was the block-printer's studio. It's a low-ceilinged space, with room to walk around 4 sari-length



(6-meter-long) tables. At the far end of the room is a smaller room, I called it the library, full of hundreds of hand-carved wooden blocks. When the Farm goes looking for handwoven textiles around India they often travel through villages dedicated to block-carving. Printing with these carved blocks is a process that has been largely supplanted by screen printing and now digital printing. So many of these carved blocks have been lost, used as kindling, because they aren't necessary anymore. So the Farm has worked to gather what they can. All the blocks are cataloged but the room is disorganized, or rather reorganized daily by the printers and the designers who work together to make textiles for the Farm. It allows for a sense of discovery. *Letter (Lost brother)* is a response to these blocks as a resource, their history as storytelling devices, and the stories that I was told by the people I met on this trip. It's a letter to a brother I haven't met; it's a letter to the viewer and simultaneously a way of memorial making. The work uses blocks pictographically and spatially. I want you to spend time with it in the way that makes sense for your way of thinking. Maybe you try to decode it, maybe you see it as a printmaker and can hear my hands hitting each block several times to release the ink onto the fabric, perhaps you see it as a plan of a lost city. Ruins, riddles; read it.

AF: The last time I came to your studio in Red Hook it was on the occasion of a super moon, and you were very adamant that I look up and find it later that night. The moon seems to be on your mind. Why and how does that connection enter this exhibition?

JB: We stand on this planet and watch this other body orbit us, we watch it turn red or cross over the sun and shift our world into a color and temperature we rarely experience. Can you imagine what our ancestors experienced during



an eclipse? Before we could explain it? I want to focus on the wonder and fear of that experience because I'm scared that we are sabotaging ourselves, as a nation and as a species, out of existence. The moon is something we can all agree on, no matter what border you tie around yourself or which story you believe, so I'm using it as the center of my work. I wrote a text called *The Moon* in 2015 that kicked off the work I've created since. In one of the scenes in this epic poem the moon is showing off, proud that it has our attention. Proving that it has gathered the light of the sun for so long that it glows on its own. It explains the phases it shows by demonstrating its cape, which it calls a fur-shoulder. I've tried to make one before, but it made sense when I had the textiles and know-how of the Farm. *Furshoulder* was also inspired by a piece in Robert Wilson's collection at the Watermill Center where I'll be an artist-in-residence later this spring. It's a shaman's cloak, made with hundreds of black raven feathers. It exudes power, and I can't escape its charms when I visit it.

AF: Erotics feel subtly implied in a lot of your work. Your titling is often suggestive, and I'm thinking of your take-away poster for the FALLS show in Provincetown that features a hooded presence and a hand connected by saliva. It's often not that explicit, as in this show, but I'm interested to hear more from you about how you think about eroticism, latent or otherwise, as it figures in your practice.

JB: I'm interested in the electricity between bodies, two humans, many humans, dancing for one another. And humans and celestial bodies. Erotics is the play of desires,

it's a show, it can be public or private acts excerpted and placed in the public eye. Its intensely intimate, a physical act that transcends parts and objects and individuals and can approach meditation. I understand it as a trance state akin to the creative act: I use text and image to disarm the viewer, to wear them out, overload them with sensation, maybe turn a few away but with the hope that they'll glance over their shoulder as they go. This show comes out of that frisson, a tension between a figure and a landscape, a tension that is erotic and can also be called architecture. I used the idea of a temple as the organizing principle for the show to give the viewer something to come back to as they approach each piece and as they approach the entire exhibition. There are works on the floor, some overhead that you can duck under. I want you to move your body and to find one or two and surrender to it. Surrender in the sense of staying vulnerable enough for a moment to receive what it offers and to hear your own response to what this drawing inspires in your mind.

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