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Rob Fischer is interested in the things people leave behind. Abandoned houses, furniture, books, wood flooring, and metal pipes are treasures to this artist, who transforms discarded materials into evocative, poignant works that reflect today's mobile society.

Fischer lives and works in Brooklyn, but his work is heavily influenced by the rural landscape of his native Minnesota. One of his earliest works, *Disappearing Boat*, 1998, is rooted in the covered fishing vessels unique to the south shore of Lake Superior and in the tiny cabins floating on the Mississippi River. Starting with the hull of a used boat, he built up a rectangular structure that looks much like a boxcar. The roof and siding, however, are made of panes of mirrors.

Traditionally, we climb into a boat. But Fischer's structure has no entrance, and we are forced to view the work from the exterior. This boat traded its functionality to become the shell of something past. The mirrored structure seems to hold memories, inaccessible and hidden. Those who try to enter or to see what lies within the walls are rebuked, finding only their reflection.

Fischer made another similar structure of metal, mirror, and glass. This one borrowed the familiar shape of an ice fishing cabin or a mobile home. Its first incarnation, *Mirrored House on Floats*, 1999, was created during a residency at Art In General in New York. The gallery was open while the work was under construction, and visitors could wander

inside the six-foot-long structure to view the interior. After the show, Fischer lengthened the house into the fourteen-foot piece, *Mirrored House*, 1999, which is a closed structure like *Mirrored Boat*.

Lying closer to the ground, *Mirrored House* does something optically quite different: it absorbs the environment around it. "Its physicality is still there," explains Fischer, "but visually it disappears." To exploit this amazing effect, he took the house to numerous locations in central Minnesota and photographed it.

Floated on a lake in a crisp winter landscape, the reflection of the house in the water and the water onto the sides of the house makes it appear as if the structure were

TEXT / REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

AMIDST THE RUBBLE: THE ART OF ROB FISCHER



FIGURE 1: Robert Fischer, *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 2005, wood, plaster, light, wiring, plumbing, flooring, scaffolding installation view; Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York | ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: one of two panels from *Mirrored House*, 1999-2004, c-print, diptych: 40 x 28 inches each; *Mirrored Boat (Disappearing Boat)*, 1998, mixed media, 5 x 3.5 x 16 feet (all images courtesy of the artist, Mary Goldman Gallery, Los Angeles and Cohan and Leslie, New York)

slowly, calmly sinking. Placed in a field of knee-high grass, the building looks as if it were partly wrapped in a blanket of vibrant yellow, and partly absorbed by the deep blue of the summer sky. In the woods, the naked trees seem to grow through the structure itself. Sitting amongst the fallen leaves, it seems about to sink back into the landscape as a log decomposes back into the forest floor.

The lifecycle of objects is a paramount notion in Fischer's work. The creation, use, and subsequent abandon of an object or structure to decay constitute his process. "There is sadness in the way things are destroyed by nature," he says. "But at the same time it is a transformative experience. [*Mirrored House*] is an expression of that. It doesn't take that long for nature to take it right back."

Fischer developed a way to save his personal refuse from this fate by building dumpsters and filling them with the remnants of past sculptures. A sort of purgatory for unwanted objects, a dumpster is usually a temporary receptacle for abandoned matter

on its way to the junkyard. Fischer's steel-framed dumpsters, however, preserve and somehow glorify his waste. Their glass-paneled sides ensure visitors are able to see the varied contents.

In his work for the 2004 Whitney Biennial, *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies)*, a dumpster holds books, chairs, floorboards, and a system of metal pipes, which run water continuously. It is as if the artist were acknowledging that life-blood still pumps through these objects. For *Ash Dumpster*, 2003-2004, Fischer burned damaged or unwanted objects from his studio. The charred remains give the work a coffin-like feeling.³

Given the contemporary penchant for voyeurism, it is quite captivating to visually sift through the contents of these dumpsters. The work is nonetheless also gut wrenchingly sad. Reflected in each dumpster are objects we might have seen in our relatives' homes, stuffed into an attic, basement or garage.

Concurrently with the mirrored and dumpster sculptures, Fischer began a series of

photo-hybrids made by painting acrylic on c-type prints. Often taken from a moving car, the random snapshots are of mobile homes, hunting shacks or trucks parked randomly on the side of the road, with no other visible vestige of civilization. Once printed, Fischer obscures the windows, admitting a "feeling of being able to protect a person or personality by painting the windows all white." With the individualism removed, the structures become obscure, lone outcroppings in the landscape. In some images, Fischer adds flames and billows of dark smoke, foreshadowing these structures' eventual disappearance, swallowed up into the landscape or burned to the ground.

Fischer seems to accept the impermanence of precious or beloved objects—a trait he extends to his own practice as he reconfigures once-loved sculptures. "If I have the piece around, I'm going to keep working on it," he acknowledges. *Mirrored House*, for example, was refitted and presented at Rockefeller Plaza in 2005 in a group show entitled *Art*



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *UFO (Green and White Tilted)*, 2004, acrylic on c-print, 20 x 30 inches; *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies)*, 2004, mixed media, 8 x 7 x 20 feet

Rock. In the same year, his solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria featured *Not Waving but Drowning*. This new work was in fact half of his earlier *Disappearing Boat*, which he had sliced in two. *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies Dissected)* was also on view, re-presenting the contents of the dumpster exhibited at the Whitney Biennial in an entirely new context.

Revealing the interior of the boat and taking objects out of the dumpster, these works represent a shift towards exposure of what is sometimes hidden from view. "More than looking at [a sculpture] as an expression," he explains, "now its *function* becomes the expression." Returning to the subject of the house, he explores its structure and internal cycles in a series of important works. *Hallway that Led to Nowhere* was a fictional space Fischer created at the Mary Goldman Gallery in Los Angeles in 2003. By recontextualizing the hallway, Fischer encouraged visitors to walk through and experience the physicality of a space normally taken for granted. *Stacks*

(*Closets and Hallways*), originally presented at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum before being reworked for the Altria show, carved up hallways and rooms, and stacked them one upon another. The deconstructed architecture suggests a reconsideration of various liminal spaces—spaces in-between that are as common as they are overlooked. Also in the Altria show was *Manifold (Minotaur)*, 2005, one of Fischer's most beautiful works to date. The elegantly simple work uses worn and discarded floorboards to trace the path in, across, up, over, down, and out of an interior architectural space.

Fischer's works reflect a collective look at impermanence and memory. No work signifies a particular story or communicates a personal history. No longer functional, his objects provide perspective. They remind us that, in our mobile society and in our quest for the shiny and new, we too often leave behind objects that were once integral to our lives, treasured and loved.

NOTES

1. See interview with the artist in *Rob Fischer: In Site*, Madison, WI: Madison Art Center, 2000.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the author's interview with the artist, June 11, 2006.
3. Robert Fischer, email to author, June 10, 2006.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a critic and curator based in Atlanta.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Manifold (Minotaur)*, 2005, wood, steel, 86 x 86 x 78 inches; *Hallway to Connect Two Perceived Rooms*, 2003, mixed media, 96 x 132 x 44 inches