

MAAKE MAGAZINE

Tim Roda

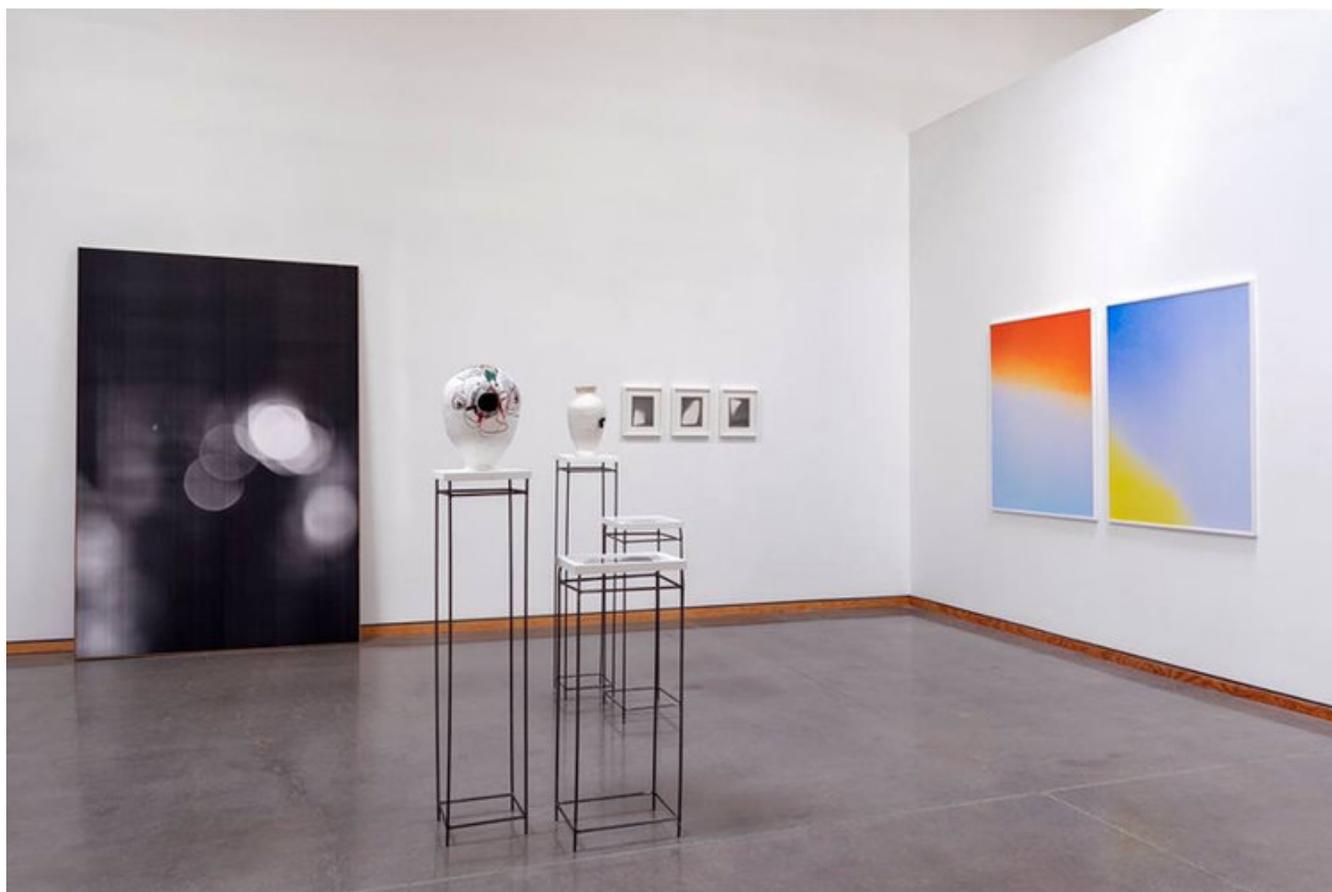
Tim Roda is a New York- based artist and art instructor at Molloy College who has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. He is known for his black and white photographs that document the family. Roda holds a MFA from the University of Washington, Seattle. He has received several awards, most notably a Fulbright Award to Italy. Roda is the 2012 recipient of the Kennedy Family Fellowship at the University of South Florida, Tampa. He completed residencies at the Archie Bray Foundation, Marie Walsh Sharpe, and the Centro Cultural Andratx. His work is included in the following collections: Bard College Museum, Hessel Foundation; The Rose Museum, Brandeis University; Seattle Art Museum and the Henry Art Museum; Museum of Fine Arts; Portland Art Museum; Elton John Collection; Museum of Contemporary Photography; Essl Museum; Gaia Collection; and the Centro Cultural Andratx. Reviews of Roda's work have been included in the *New Yorker Magazine*, *ARTFORUM*, *Modern Painters Magazine*, *Beautiful/Decay*, *Art in America*, and *Slate*.

Statement

My work casually travels within arenas of installation, sculpture, performance and photography. A ceramic pinhole camera is used to capture a single image on paper or film. The final product is both the silver gelatin photograph documenting one moment in time as well as the device, which recorded that image.

My subject matter draws from my Italian-American heritage. It is typically about the family and, most specifically, the relationships among grandfather, father and son. The specific moments in time that I create, strive to produce art that triggers emotions and childhood memories for the individual viewer.

Technically, I could shoot and print a clean picture, make a fine pot or well-designed sculpture, but that would be unrepresentative of my need to explore new territory. Working in the studio allows me to work through many questions that I have always had. But, as in any field of learning, my research results in more questions that need to be answered.



Installation Shot from *LET THERE BE LIGHT*, ANGELL GALLERY, Toronto, 2018

Group Exhibition: Isabel M. Martinez, Liz Nielsen, Katarina Riopel, Tim Roda, Alison Rossiter, Sarah Sands Phillips, Jim Verburg

Photo courtesy of Angell Gallery. Photograph by Alex Fischer.



Interview with Tim Roda

Questions by Beatrice Helman

Hi Tim! Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. Where did you grow up and how does that show up in your work?

I grew up in the 1980s in a place called Lancaster, Pennsylvania. My parents bought a one-acre piece of land surrounded by cornfields. My dad and grandfather built our house from an A-frame house kit. Growing up, my family of six was self-sufficient. We had fruit trees, a huge vegetable garden, livestock and solar panels. We would often cook soup on our wood-burning stove. This way of growing up translates into my work through a sense of being self-sufficient. It's old-school. I don't need the latest gadget or material to make my work. I look around at what's available and how it might make sense. My ideas are an intuitive dance between making and seeing, thinking and reacting.

Can you remember a first experience with ceramics or in the broader sense, creating? How have you seen that relationship evolve over time?

One of my earliest memories of making was building forts from the firewood piles that were stacked in our yard. My dad would make me an arsenal of weapons to help protect my fort. I would find images or create drawings of pitchforks, swords, and catapults that my father would help me make out of wood. I also remember making a homemade Halloween costume of a chicken. I used real chicken feathers from one of the chickens that we butchered for dinner that I glued onto a paper bag. In high school, clay became my medium of choice. My ceramics teacher taught me about the additive and subtractive qualities of the material. I loved how I could make a camel or a chicken out of clay, fire it and glaze it. If it didn't work out, I would wedge it back up to create the next sculptural object. In college, I brought the two experiences of building scenes and making clay objects together when I took my first photograph. The photo was of my oldest son Ethan dressed up in a Wolverine costume sitting next to a ceramic figure. This photo got me into graduate school.

What are some of your resources and things that you've taken inspiration from over the years, and particularly with this series of photos?

The inspiration for my work starts with real-life events from childhood, borrowed memories, or current times that I sensationalize into constructed scenes. For example, the ceramic figure sitting next to Ethan was my rendition of his preschool teacher at the time. Ms. Judy wasn't our favorite teacher, and that comes across in how grotesque she looks. In my older work, I've recreated scenes from my childhood with Chicken Sunday, Birthday Celebrations, Religious Study, or Family Life—often blending those memories with current stories and events. In my current work, a series of events challenged my approach. My camera broke and I did not have a separate studio space for making installations or developing my photos. I did, however, have clay and access to kilns. This is when I came up with the idea to make ceramic pinhole cameras. My ceramic sculptures were never functional before. I liked the idea of creating functional ceramics so I could keep making photos.

Have you ever felt consumed by one thing that then spurred work that explored your relationship to a particular movie, book, image, found object? If you're using other images where are you finding them?

I live a nomadic experience. Since the age of 21, I have lived in four different states, as well as traveled for long periods of time to do artist residencies and exhibitions in Florida, Upstate NY, Spain, Poland, Germany and Italy. In this way, the things in my immediate environment inspire me. My site-specific work takes on different meanings based on where my studio is located, what materials are available, and what found objects are there. Often my ideas come from a reaction to something that happens in my daily life, in the news, or in the art world—more than a movie, book or image. I see some moment of hypocrisy, or extreme tackiness and respond through art making. The worst thing someone can say to me is, "you can't do that!" My innate reaction is always, "watch me." Making art is a way for me to release frustration, respond to questions and work through an idea to make a statement.

How do you begin a piece, and do you plan the structure ahead of time, or let it unfold as it goes? How do you build a piece, is it from something tiny or from the larger idea and then down to the specifics?

In my ceramic work or large-scale silver gelatin photographs, there is no plan outside of a basic concept or form. Sometimes it starts with a found object or reacting to a relationship within in a current moment. Most of the time I just push materials around until I see a starting point. It's personal, yet I've learned how

to conceptualize objects and straddle the line of not giving away too much information through using universal symbols. In other words, I try to keep a foot on both sides of the line. As I transform my idea into form, it evolves into deeper and more meaningful concepts through details and further understanding. My goal is for my work to confront the viewer and for them to deal with the conclusion.

You mentioned that your work “casually travels within arenas of installation, sculpture, performance and photography.” Can you talk a little bit more about that?

My work involves installation because of the constructed scenes that I create with found objects that sometimes include clay or ceramic sculptures. The performance typically involves my children coming into the scene and we document that moment with a photograph.

What is the process in building your pin-hole cameras, and what function does it serve in your work?

It has taken a lot of trial and error to make the pinhole camera's function. I'd prefer not to give away my specific process and techniques. The function is basically the same as when I get my iPhone out. I see something and press the button. The difference is that the camera is made of clay, black electrical tape is used as a shutter, it can only take one picture at a time and has no memory card.

You also mentioned that you could print a clean photograph or well designed sculpture, but choose not to. Could you expand on that?

Every artist has a set of rules that they follow in their work. I have decided that it is more important for me to be myself and approach techniques and materials the way I do rather than jeopardize the integrity of my art by conforming to existing standards. I was always told that my work was clumsy. Over time I realized that it's important to have a different approach than others. My approach stems from my upbringing. It's my thumbprint that makes my work unique.

I found that your piece *Subtle Beast 3* to be remarkable. I was hoping that you could talk about the story behind it, how it came to be, the relationship between the different mediums used to create it?

This work came from a culmination of things. I recently read that someone of my age is called a “Xennial”. It's the generation that bridges the divide between analog childhood and digital adulthood. We have one foot in Generation X and one in Generation Y. Although I am aware of digital processes, my interest usually leans towards low-tech approaches. I have a Canon 7D and an Epson 9900 large format printer which are both amusing to play with and important to understand. For a more in-depth response to your question, you should read David Hunt's latest essay, *Tim Roda: The Father's Folly Garden* when he questions what a hole can be.

Do you have a theme or preferred subject matter you return to often?

I always return to the relationship between father and son. I also like to play around with patriarchy in American society and my cultural heritage. With the pinhole cameras, using the figure in an image doesn't always have to be a staple. I feel as though a prop like a brush or just an interior can also start to allude to the same concept, just in a more abstract sense.

Do you work to answer questions, and if so, what are a few? It does seem impossible to completely answer a question without creating another...

I consider art to be a science, and in that way artists answer visual questions through their work. My questions stem from childhood memories growing up in a family that was different than other families. We traveled the world, went to Broadway performances, and then the next day we had Chicken Sunday where we plucked the feathers from chicken carcasses. My job was to count the heads. Instead of going to church, my dad taught us Bible stories on our living room couch. So, my questions are about father-son relationships, religion, immigration, cultural identity, and why we ate the animals that we named.

Does your work have any relationship to humor?

I do think it has some darker undertones that are humorous or absurd. I would say it's satirical humor

What's your process in terms of deciding whether something is finished, or at least ready to be seen by others?

I like to work in different modes of art making. I build objects, then I create installations for the objects, and then I take several photographs of the scene. After each installation is photographed, I let my kids dismantle it and start the next one. Once the roll of film is complete, I review the negatives and choose one photograph of each narrative. I start editing when I feel I have a solid body of work. I might fill in the gaps with new installations if needed.

Can you talk about your use of color or lack of, and I am here actually thinking about black and white photography and the purpose behind that?

Color has always been difficult for me. I am better at thinking about pattern, texture, contrast, noise, tension, and claustrophobia.

Sculpture is such a physical motion and something that takes time, in a world where we're so used to tapping on screens and immediacy. Do you think about the role and presence of physical creation in this age of iPhones and software that allows people to draw on screens, etc. Both are relevant. It's speaking two different languages. Really, it's not only about touch, but allowing your brain to understand space.

What is your relationship to social media? Do you see it as harmful, helpful, a work tool, a distraction?

Social media is a tool. For me, it's been a great way to stay in contact with people from all over the world. With that said, I did just write someone a hand written letter with a pencil to add a personal touch. They didn't respond.

Are there are any favorite accounts you follow?

Brooklyn Clay Center, Thisiscolossal.com, and Season.cz

What are you reading, eating, watching, or listening to right now?

I'm listening to my son read *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog*. I'm eating granola, watching *The Sopranos*, and listening to Lester Flatt.

What do you do when you need a break and have to let off steam?

I go to the beach.

Is there anything that really sets the mood in your studio? Do you listen to music or podcasts while you work?

My studio is a living circus. As the ring leader and person who breaths fire from Jamaican rum, the elephants have to dodge two of my sons using the trapeze while the third tries to shoot them down with flaming arrows. In the meantime, my oldest son who is soon to be 21 and who has been my longest accomplice comes up with ideas that I think are crazy. If an interlude of music isn't playing in the background, we have a full out jazz-fusion breakdown as my kids play the violin, flute, guitar and drums. The worst is when they all decide to pull out their recorders. It always translates into angry art making.

What are some of your other great loves outside of art?

I love cooking, playing chess, coaching soccer, and spending time with my family and friends.

Who are some other artists who you look to and admire at the moment?

Historically, Grunewald is my favorite artist. I like Francis Bacon, Norman Rockwell and George Ohr. The contemporary artists that have inspired me through the years are Daisy Youngblood, Rebecca Horn, Sam Taylor Wood, Akio Takimori, Charles Simonds, Arthur Gonzalez, Wolfgang Ganter, Kristen Morgin, and Helen O'Leary.

Do you have any projects, shows, or residencies coming up?

I am currently working on two projects. The first is a site-specific project at the Belfry—an artist residency program in Upstate New York. The Belfry is an old Methodist Church that was renovated into a live-work studio and gallery space. My family and I created and documented site-specific narratives in the various rooms of the church. I am in the process of developing the large scale silver gelatins.

My second project is called: *Wild Clay. The Nature of Clay: How an Artist and Scientist Investigate the Functions and Properties of this Wild Material*. This collaborative project is with Scientist, John LaCava, to conduct biological studies of the mysterious clay-like, circular composites washing up on the beaches of Long Island, NY. I've been using this material to build pin-hole cameras. LaCava is interested in exploring the DNA and microorganisms that may be present in the materials, for example through metagenomic sequencing combined with light or electron microscopy.

Thank you so much for talking with us!

To find out more about Tim and his work, check out his website.

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