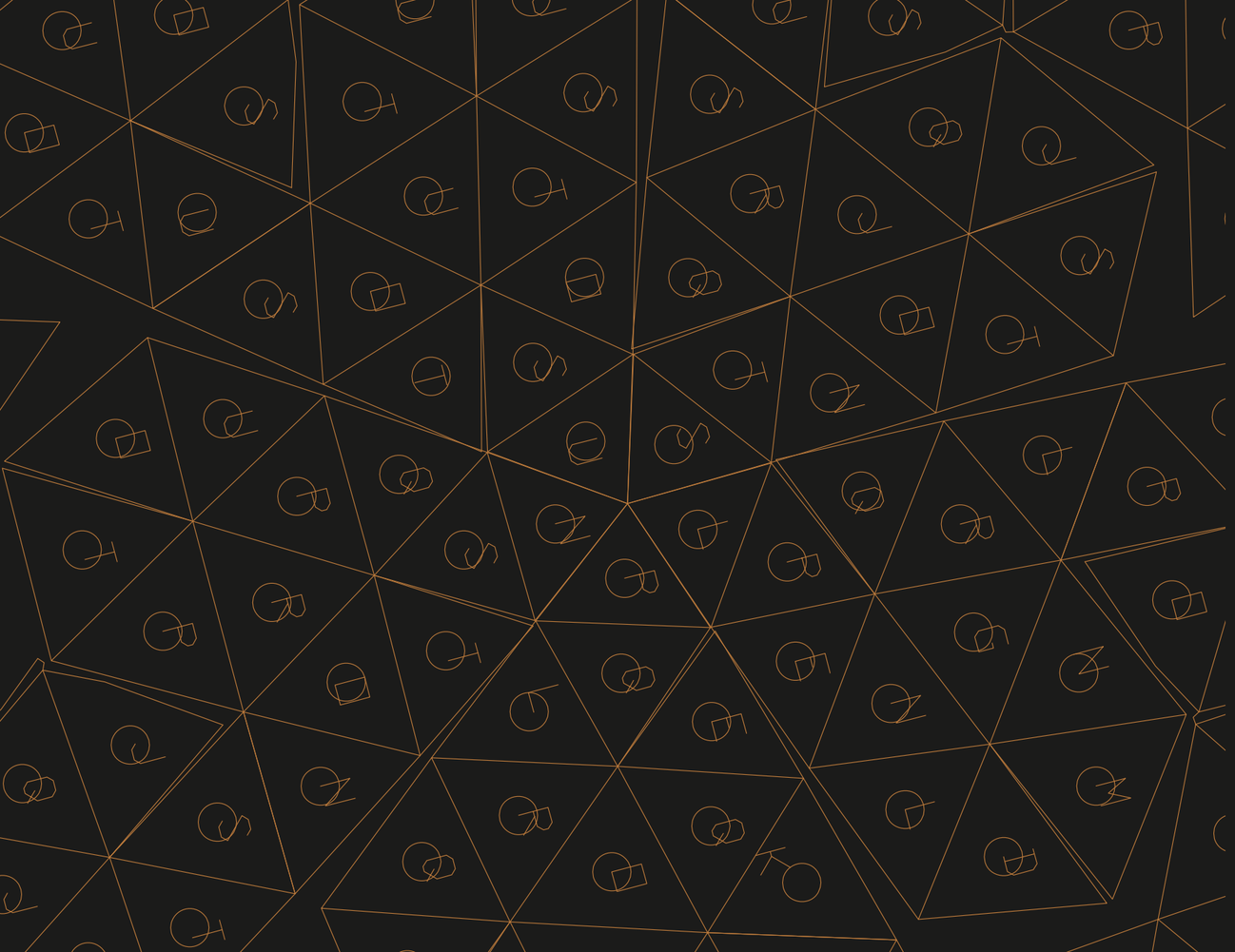
Falling Short of Knowing



RAN ORTNER

NORMAN MOONEY

New York

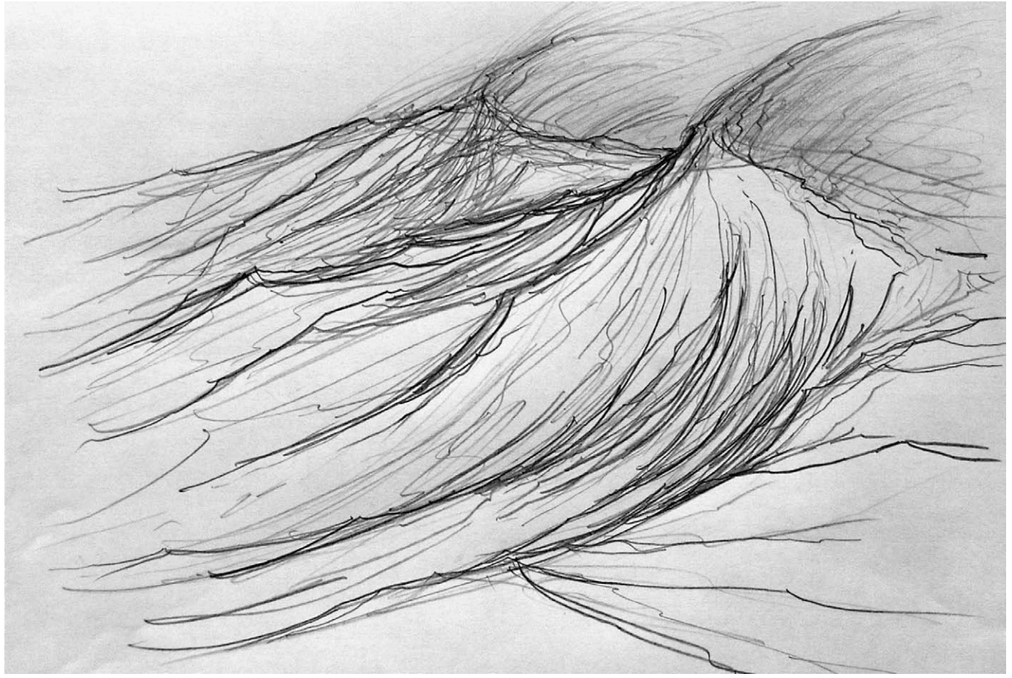
Milk Gallery
September 13-24

Moscow

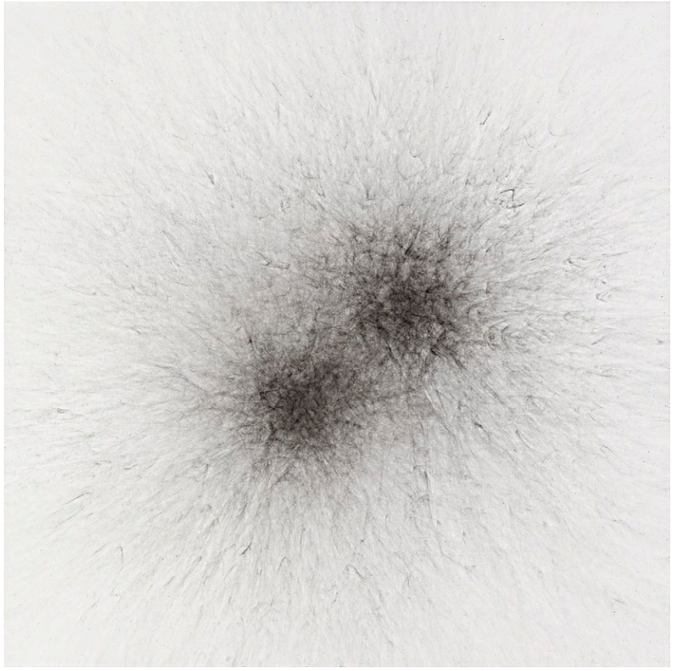
Red October Chocolate Factory
December 15-31

Singapore

Collectors Contemporary
February 12-March 26



Ran Ortner, Graphite on Paper, 2008



Norman Mooney, Series 1, 2006

JUDY KIM, BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART CURATOR

Norman Mooney and Ran Ortner produce works that are vastly different both in subject matter and in appearance. Norman's work appears ethereal and minimal. His two-dimensional works are planes of slick aluminum covered with gray to black wisps of color made from smoke. Ortner's works are perfectly realistic depictions of waves painted in oil on canvas. So, what brings these two together? What do they have in common? What brings them together in one exhibition?

Upon closer inspection and with time spent in front of the work of these two artists, the answers to above questions begin to reveal themselves in the responses they provoke in the viewer. But, first, there are differences in the ways these two artists make their work. The medium for Mooney's two-dimensional work is smoke on aluminum sheets that are prepared with a primer. Once the surface of an aluminum sheet is prepared, it is hung from the ceiling, and Mooney "draws" on it with bellowing smoke from a lit welding torch. Each application of smoke is performed very quickly, but each layer also demands a long waiting period before the next layer of smoke could be drawn. After each layer of smoke, a clear fixative is applied, dried, and sanded. Then the process is repeated numerous times until the desired density and depth of an image is attained. The marks made by the smoke are simple in form—dots, lines, or rectangular forms. The final surface is left either highly glossy or sanded to a matted finish. On the other hand, Ortner is a traditional painter in his use of medium—oil on canvas. He, too, prepares the surface of his painting, and layers of paint are applied on the canvas. However, whereas Mooney's process involves treating the entire surface in layers, Ortner is constantly moving, treating small areas of the canvas at a time. And, if Mooney's mark making is akin to a burst of activity followed by longer waiting periods, Ortner's painting is the result of a sustained and continuous process. He moves quickly, but each painting takes a long time to complete. The process is arduous and physically exhausting, climbing up and down ladders, moving in and out from the canvas.

Despite differences in appearance, both bodies of work have a startlingly similar effect on the viewer. They are sublime. Stand in front of Mooney's painting. Look into it for a few moments, and you start to feel disoriented—the image pulsates in front of your eyes. Then a thumping of the surface and the vibrating form hypnotize you into an unsettling state of displacement. It seems to push—or pull—you into a brink of another realm, and makes you painfully aware of your physical limitations. Mooney's most recent work is an overpowering presence in the gallery. The sheer scale of the work—9' x 8' x 28'—is domineering. This huge untitled sculpture with jutting blades seems to be a physical manifestation of the effects that his two-dimensional works have. The pulsating beats have broken through the surface of the flat aluminum support and become projectiles. It affects the viewer in fundamentally the same ways that his two-dimensional works do except now it is inescapable.

With Ortner's paintings, you have a similar experience, but the effect is much more corporal. The image pulls in your whole body. The sensation of displacement is here, too, but it is a much more physical phenomenon. It starts, perhaps, from your gut rather than your eyes. Because these realistic images of waves are just that with no reference points—no swimmers, no boats or ships, no lighthouses or shores—you feel lost in the painting. And, perhaps because we all have subconscious memories of being in the water, the body recalls the sensations and remembers the rhythm of the water, the pull of the tide. Similar to Mooney's work, you do not know where to go once you are immersed in the painting. The painting pulls you in but you are not sure where it will lead you. Rather than a serene or relaxing image one may expect from a painting of oceans or, more specifically, waves, Ortner's paintings literally knock your breath away—as if you may be drowning. The waves are about to crash, and you are standing in the middle of it, wholly unprepared. It forces you to relax and accept the ride-or not, and panic. In his newest work, a quadripartite painting measuring 8' x 32', the power and the primal force of the water is undeniable. Fear—and exhilaration—comes at you like a crashing wave. It's the perfect storm.
Although the formal qualities and methods of production are vastly different in Mooney and Ortner's work, they inspire awe. These works, which depict unique, fleeting moments in nature, capture and suspend us in a place in a universal continuum, and arouse tension between fear and attraction. In front of these images, we are engulfed in a state that is at once the present, the past, and the future. If a part of what art is supposed to do is emote, takes us on a journey, or pose questions that may not have easy or singular answers, then Mooney and Ortner are succeeding. Let their work overcome you.

RAN ORTNER

In my art, I contemplate the collision of opposites at life's center, from the most tender brutalities to the most devastating sensitivities. These paradoxes register within me and I see myself within them. I am continually surprised by the reflection between me, as an individual, and the environment within which I exist. 'The blood within and the brine without'. The pulsing surge of my blood...the pulsing surge of ocean waves.

I often think about Rollo May's idea that "sustained intensity equals ecstasy." Every day I enter my studio, prepare my materials and, as Joyce said, "go for the millionth time to encounter the reality of experience." In fact, I find that sustaining the encounter with life's biting reality is not "miserablism", but rather communion. It's not dire this marriage of life and death. It is majestic. It's the union of the holy and the profane. In the crest of each wave I see the rising of life, in the trough of each wave... death. In a tempest, these distinctions blur registering in me as the rhythm of life's dance. Life's beauty is magnificent as it hangs at the edge of death, insisting upon its relevance and screaming with immediacy. It is this immediacy I reach for in the sea."

Drift, 2000

Open Water, No. 4, 2007

Swell, No. 1, 2005

Swell, No. 7, 2006

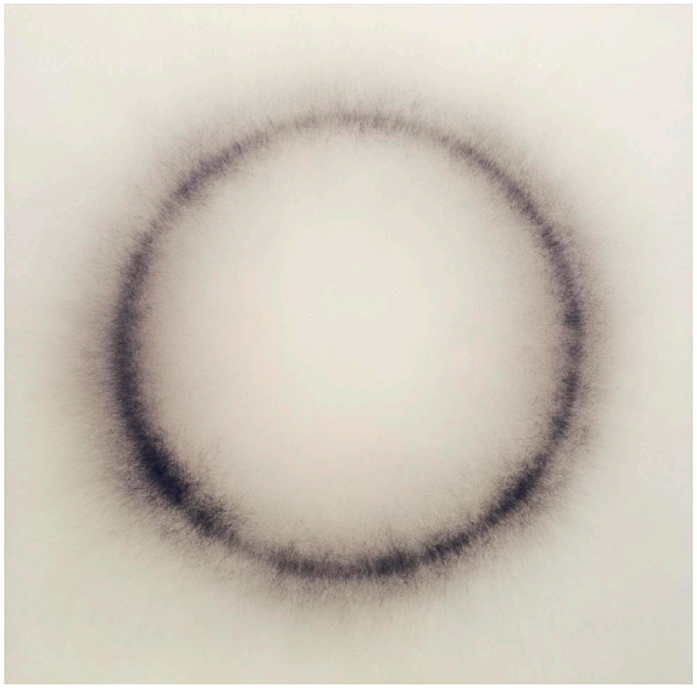
NORMAN MOONEY

This current body of work is the personal exploration of inner form and how this relates to the outer world. This is communicated through a very direct and immediate process of mark making. The direct engagement in this process enables the fundamental nature of the form to be realized. The marks created are primary, difficult to define; boundaries and definition are blurred between the positive and negative, inner and outer, the intimate and the universal. The formal physicality of the work deals directly with the primordial nature of human scale, engaging the viewer in a larger intuited reality.

Carbon on Paper, No. 1, 2005

Carbon on Panel, No. 22, 2006

Carbon on Panel, No. 35, 2007



Carbon on Panel, No. 31, 2007

LET THE WATER BURN AND THE FIRE FLOW *On the origins of the (new) sublime*
Lieven De Cauter

INTROITUS

What is the sublime? Our collective definition, as presented by Wikipedia, is as follows: “In aesthetics, the sublime is the quality of transcendent greatness, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical or artistic. The term especially refers to a greatness with which nothing else can be compared and which is beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or imitation. This greatness is often used when referring to nature and its vastness.” Accordingly, one could easily deduce that the most basic building blocks of our planet, the elements, are sublime, and that the sublime is most often elemental. The elements are cosmic, awesome, beautiful and overwhelming.

Fire, water, air and earth. Empedocles, the inventor of the concept of the four elements, besides being a philosopher and a poet, believed that these four elements were the basic building stones of the entire universe. In this way, the theory of the four elements is one of the first versions of the quest for a unifying ‘theory of everything.’ A quest that remains unfulfilled so long as there is no synthesis between quantum physics, particle theory and the theory of relativity. At their core, the four elements are sublime both in terns of their very nature as well as their role in unifying the universe as the arch-theory of everything. While the addition of the elements to our definition may make our understanding appear comprehensive, there is another aspect of the sublime that is even more core to its essence.

TERROR AND DELIGHT

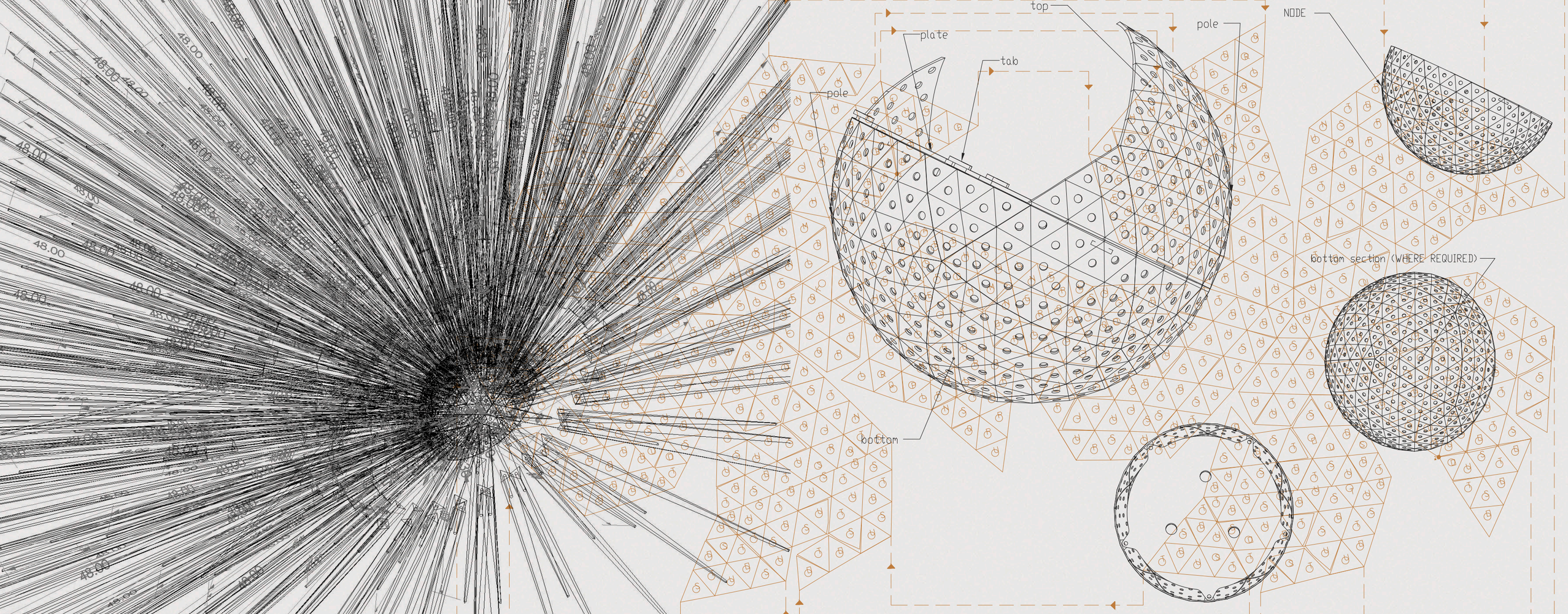
Edmund Burke infused the sublime with its modern, romantic meaning of beauty infused with terror. Burke stated, “Indeed terror is in all case, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime. The passions which belong to self preservation, turn on pain and danger, they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime.” As such, Burke’s examples rest on the idea of the elements at tremendous unrest or in overwhelming size. He invokes images of terrible storms, the sea in uproar, towering mountains and the bottomless abysses. Everything that is unfathomable in its ferocity and power while being rooted in the core building blocks of life.

Wikipedia’s definition is absent Burke’s terror, but it is most certainly the real, dark core of the sublime. When your experience is as willing participant, the sublime is a cause of delight, precisely because it evokes the passion of life by dancing with the fear of annihilation. Instead of the experience being described as horror, we find ourselves in awe.

Immanual Kant digested this and gave it a rational, enlightened twist: the sublime is for him what surpasses the imagination (Einbildungskraft) and the power of inner representation. Essentially, the sublime is an invitation to feel what you cannot imagine. It acts to inform our imagination in its attempt to provide guidance to the rational mind at times when the mind is presented with a series of stimuli that are, in fact, incomprehensible.

The sublime can act as a beacon to help guide the power of imagination in the face of conflict between our gut feeling and our intellectual understanding. This is often the case when we experience coincidentia oppositorum, the coincidence of opposites similar to angelic eros, platonic love, the unity of yin and yang. In art, the images that best evoke a sense of the sublime share the trait of being both admired by the mind and feared by the body. As such, the sublime is often best depicted by the sheer impact of large abstract paintings.

Though not all of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich are grand in size, they are consistently grand in subject. Friedrich, one of the early painters of the sublime in the nineteenth century, began to allow the viewer to access the stimuli of the sublime without being there in actuality. He began to create an atmosphere that awakens a visceral response that, when embraced, can only be described as sublime. While the mountains, the sunset, the sea, are beyond the image, our ability to be coaxed back to the feeling that these places educe is the capacity that a great artist depends upon for success in providing a path to the sublime through imagery. At its most poignant, we surrender to the water burning and the fire flowing.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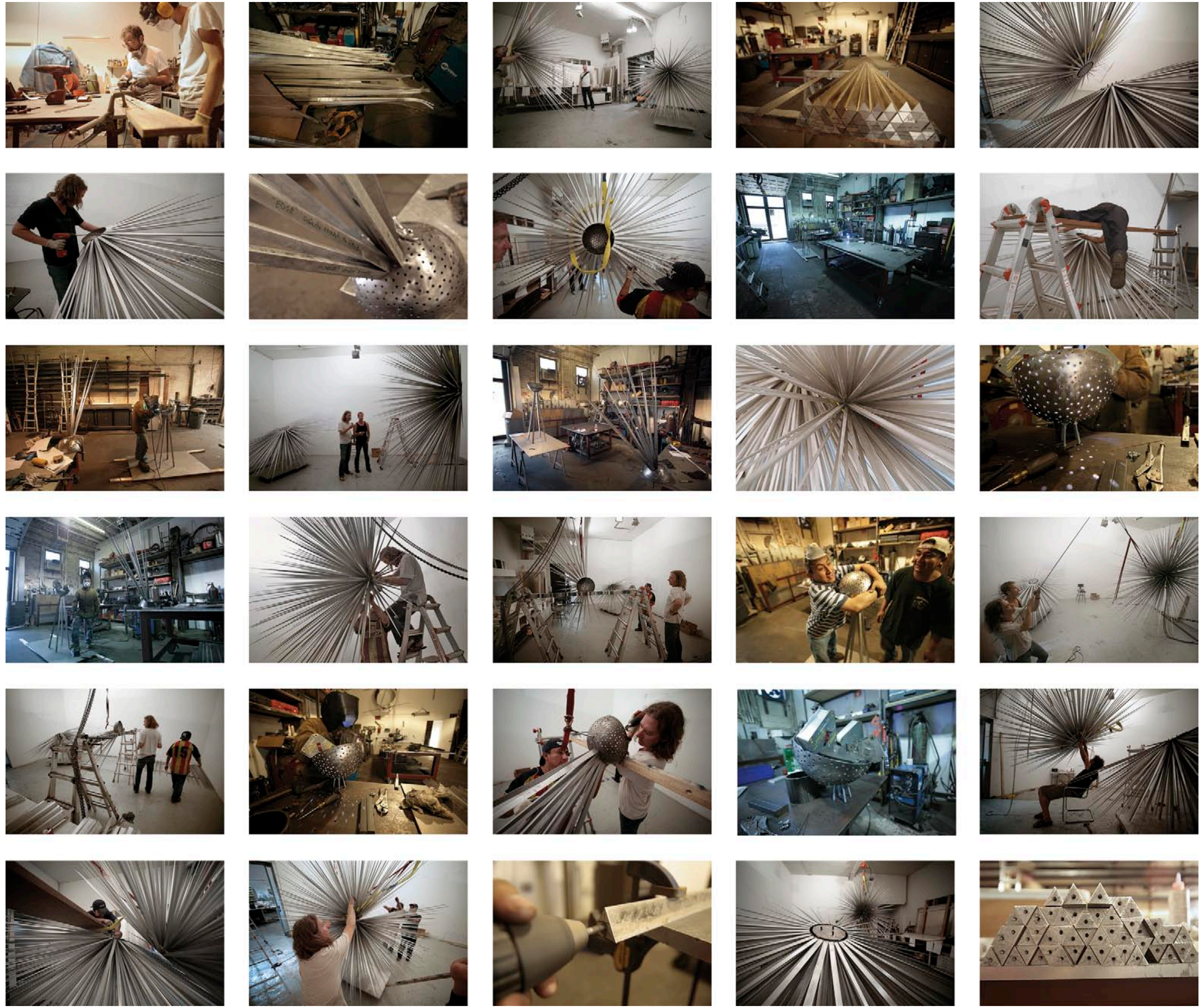
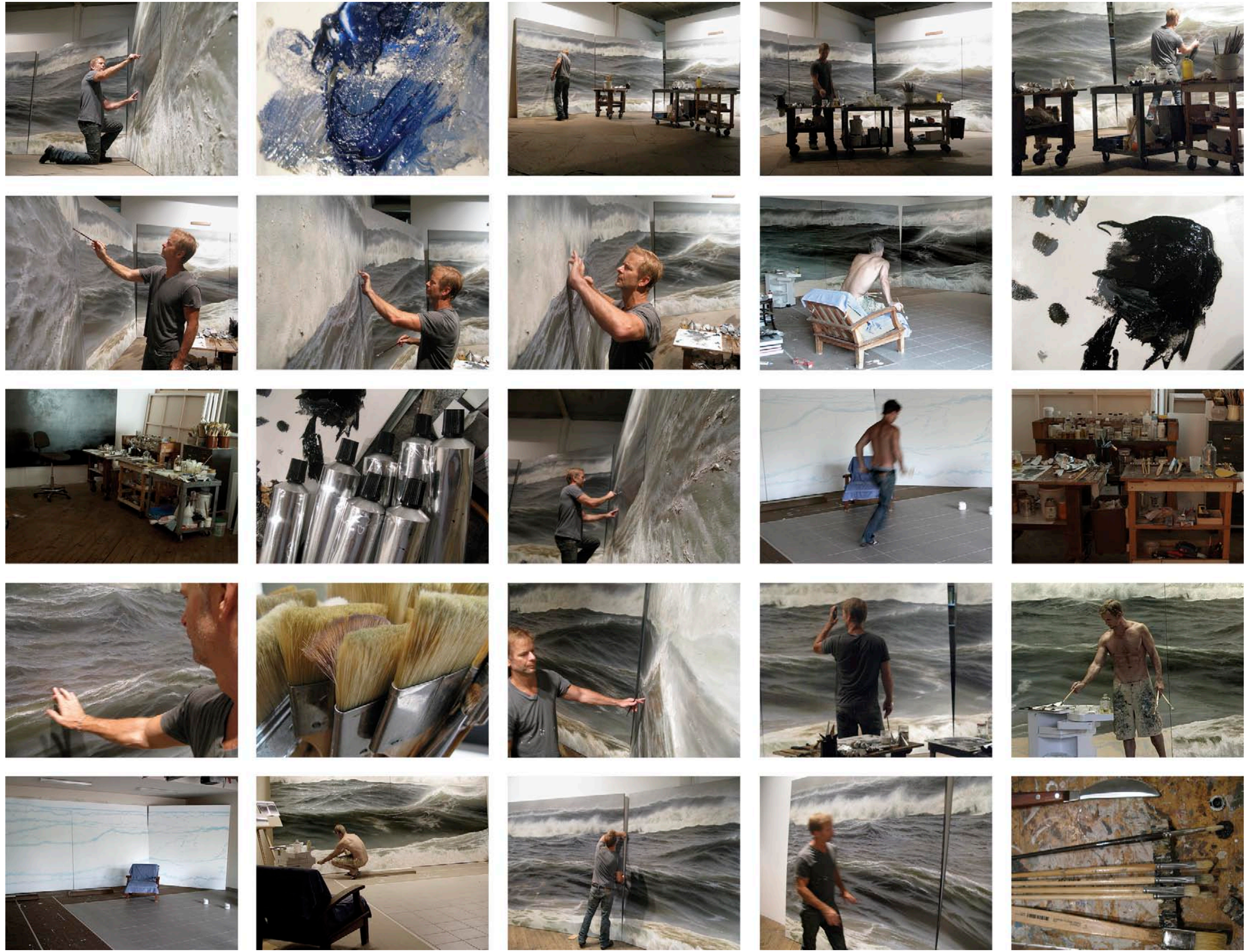




Brett Littman for PS1 Radio

On November 30th, 2007 I sat down with Norman Mooney and Ran Ortner in New York to discuss their upcoming New York, Wiesbaden, and Moscow exhibitions. I was intrigued about the genesis of this show because the artists are close friends and do regular studio visits with each other. Both artists also share an almost primordial undercurrent of energy and immediacy in their work. However, in the end it is apparent when you see the work side by side their individual pieces stand in stark contrast to each other in terms of content and their visual impact. In this interview I wanted to parse out the similarities and dissimilarities between these two artists in terms of their personal backgrounds and their artistic practices to better understand the choices that they make and ultimately what makes their work unique.

LITTMAN: Norman, can you talk about how you got involved in art-making.

MOONEY: I graduated from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin in 1990 with a focus in sculpture. I have continued to make sculptures but recently I have been working two-dimensionally.

LITTMAN: Scale has always been quite important in your work. Early on when I met you in 1993, you were working very large scale.

MOONEY: Scale has been important and the work has always been very physical. A sense of the relationship between yourself and the object is really a central issue in my work.

LITTMAN: When you were in art school, were you exploring different media, or were you working mostly in metal?

MOONEY: Initially I worked mostly in metal and stone. Later I worked with glass.

LITTMAN: Ran, can you talk a little bit about how you began making art.

ORTNER: My original background, my real drive as a boy was a bicycle, then as a teenager it was motorcycles. In my late teens I became a professional motorcycle racer. I loved the physicality and energy of racing and how the thrill of this flight totally engaged my body and mind. So in some ways I feel that my interest in art came out of motorcycle racing which can be viewed as a kind of performance or dance.

At 21 a knee injurey ended my racing. So I moved on to surfing and painting. My mother painted. Mom and her friends would read art instruction booklets and then they would come and paint at our cabin. I saw a kind of freedom in painting, and thought it would be very nice to have something that had this kind of portability, that could be done anywhere. It's something that didn't require the same kind of vigorous physical power that athletics did. When I started painting I had very naive ideas about what good art should look like. I thought the more luminous and the more detailed something was, the more I felt one could enter into it, then the better it was.

LITTMAN: The relationship between physical activity and art, and I think in your case specifically sports, is a pretty important aspect of your own life. In terms of your current work can you talk about relationship of your body to the paintings? There is a perceptible sense of energy that's placed right into the image.

ORTNER: Absolutely. I am also working with large scale. The reference point for my work is my body. The arc of movement, the range of movement, up and off the ladder, back, that moving in and out while I am painting feels like dance. It is a different kind of intimacy than I have, say with a book, or something that is scaled to be held. With something small you can get a quality of tenderness, but with something large you are forced to deal with the immediate visceral aspects of it. I think that quality can be particularly enlivening because you're both exhausted and you're touched by the magnitude of the process.

MOONEY: I think that's where Ran and I really connect in our work. Even though our processes are so different it is that intimacy when you physically engage in what you're doing. That relationship expands your experience and new ideas come out of that.

LITTMAN: Norman you've gone through quite a few progressions in terms of your own working method. You've been making drawings now with a blowtorch and using smoke and carbon as the medium. How did you start working with this process?

MOONEY: I had been focusing on form and density for a long time in my sculptural work. Using the blowtorch and carbon as my base materials allowed me to deal with a more subliminal idea of form. The drawings started with the smoke being this ethereal medium that produced density. I think for me I

needed to find a new material process with a sense of solidity and form without using metal and stone. The drawings also happen very fast. I set everything up and the setup is a big deal and we get all the big panels hung in the air and then when I'm actually doing the work it literally is over in about five minutes.

ORTNER: Which is fascinating. That is a dramatic difference in our approach because I spend very long days as a painter. My head is always well ahead of my body. I'm always trying to get myself to catch up so I'm moving as fast as I can, but I put in very long days.

MOONEY: Ran is always pissed off when he comes over to my studio and I am finished with about 10 pieces and he is still working on one painting.

ORTNER: It really is disgusting!

LITTMAN: That is a huge difference between your working methods because Norman you're one shot. It works or it does not work.

MOONEY: It is true that I have to throw away many pieces because they just are not quite there.

ORTNER: I find that I am chastened by the process, the physical exhaustion by painting long hard days. I am on and off the ladder and up and down all the time. I work with large portions of the painting and I am moving as fast as I can. I see so much possibility and I become enamored with this possibility and then I become careful and the piece starts to fail. At that point I need to be irreverent and come at the work again from another vantage point. Through this back and forth I feel my surface gains experience. I find that art can be amazing in that it is like a battery that holds this energy, and I feel that the more I put into the surface the more I get back this amazing devotional quality of pathos that becomes married to the surface.

LITTMAN: Ran or Norman, do you think the places you grew up and their distinct landscapes play conscious or unconscious roles in your work.

MOONEY: I grew up in Dublin, Ireland but also spent a lot of time outside of Cork which is on the south coast of the country. The connection to and the feelings that I have about art are very much influenced by those surroundings. The sense of awe when you're standing on the edge of a cliff by the Irish sea and feel a sort of continuum with the landscape and power of the ocean is what I am always trying to achieve in my work.

ORTNER: I had a fairly unusual upbringing. My father was a missionary and a bush pilot. From age five to eighteen we lived in Alaska and spent time in South America. One constant in my childhood was the magnificence of the landscape. The power of these landscapes gathered in me over the years as we spent so much of our time flying our small plane around Alaska and South America.

LITTMAN: Ran, in terms of the subject matter of your current paintings you mentioned surfing and your relationship to the ocean. I imagine this is a pretty important reference for you. Maybe you can expand on this a bit?

ORTNER: As a surfer I have very specific relationship to the ocean. I see it as a kind of intimacy that marine painters of the past may not have had. Even great sailors and people who have really known the ocean do not really know waves, how they break, how they form, where they're feathering and crumbling or holding up and hesitating, exactly how they move.

Since surfing is a relatively recent activity I think it is a new point from which to understanding the ocean. On my board I feel this energy that comes, these series, the pulse of waves that is very much like music. It is this non-material energy moving through the water that is so powerful.

Again this may be another reason that I like Norman's work. In my mind his work is not really about carbon or about smoke but about energy and movement.

LITTMAN: You also both tend to work with a pretty monochromatic palette. Norman in terms of your own process you're working with whites, grays, and the thousand shades of black. Ran, your paintings don't really have any color either.

ORTNER: I work with tri-tones, really a complexity that registers as muted grays and ivories, silvery blacks.

LITTMAN: Do you think that there is a kind of strategy behind that or is it simply that it gives you the ability to rework that surface and get that depth and that feeling of movement.

ORTNER: No I think it very much is a strategy. Obviously as artists you're looking at things all the time, you're looking for a balance between what you are seeing/felling and what the best way to engage it. This is a conversation Norman and I have a lot – we talk about restraint, how holding something back can allow mystery and enigma to come leaking out around the edges. This can be much more profound than rainbow colors in a painting.

MOONEY: I just don't see color in my work. It is as simple as that. For me there are tonal shifts, which bring out the ideas and emotions that I want in the drawings. Color would just diffuse the experience for me. The tones and shades of the carbon should just be enough to hold the point of contact between myself, the viewer and the form.

LITTMAN: One observation that I had about a major difference in your approaches is that Norman is likes to center his image and Ran you like to move the eye around your painting.

Norman's image is right in front of you and that sort of forces you to go into the work. Ran, in your paintings I feel like you are always painting right up to the edge. It's almost a full bleed and you don't ever find the center in your work because your eye is always moving to take in the totality of the image and follow the pulse of the energy of the wave forms.

This leads me to ask why you are interested in showing together. What is interesting to you both as artists about placing your work side by side or in the same context?

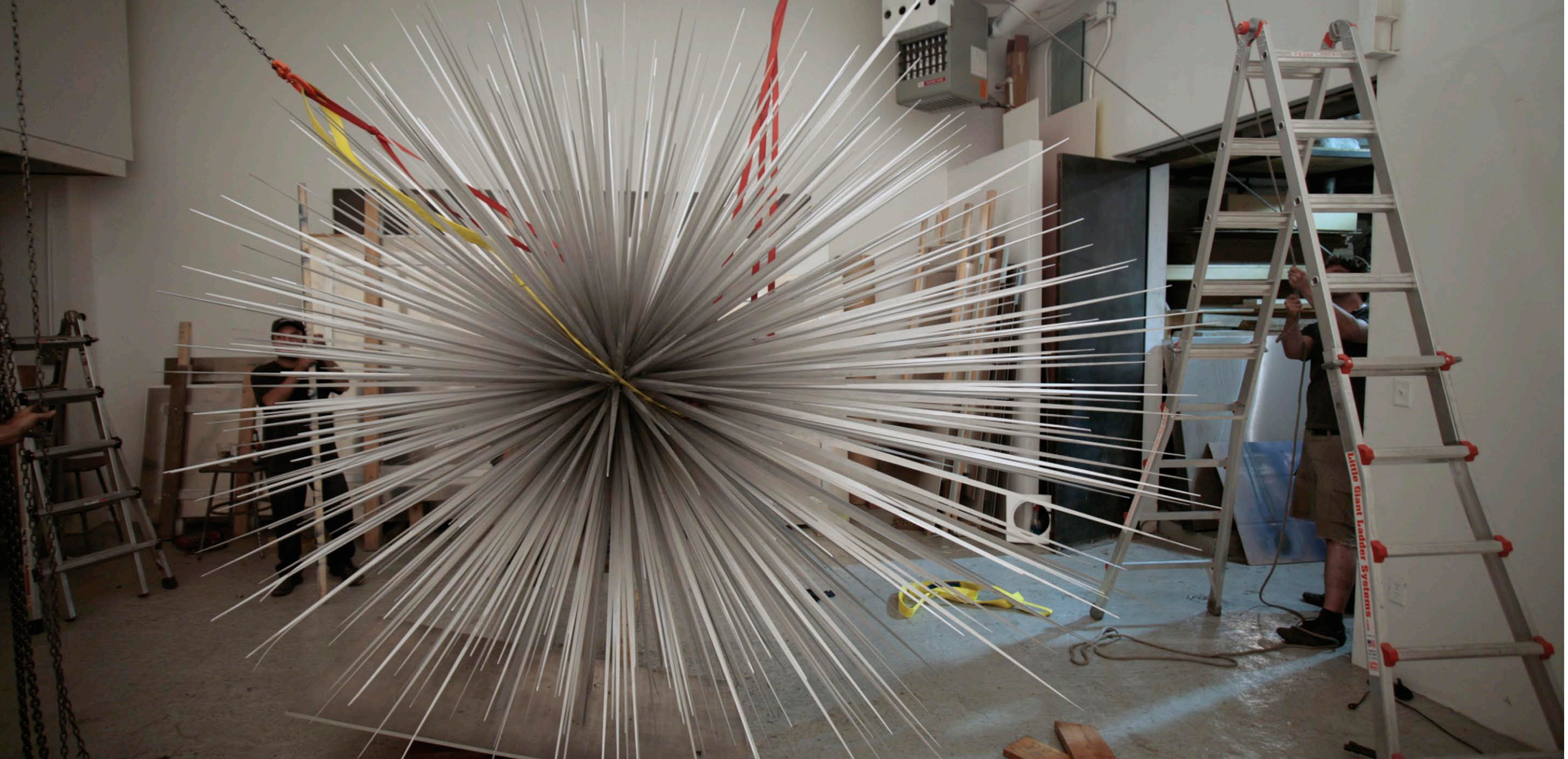
MOONEY: We didn't really conceive of putting our work together. Curators, collectors and critics who have done studio visits seem to feel that there is some elemental connection between us.

ORTNER: It has really come about because we have always supported each other as friends and artists. This whole thing has come about from people that have come to see the work and then identify this very deep thread that Norman and I both share about art making and our practice.

BRETT LITTMAN is the Executive Director of The Drawing Center

This interview was conducted for wps1.org on November 30th, 2007. The full audio of this interview can be found at www.wps1.org in the archive section under Material Culture.

Storm No. 1 in progress, 2008
8 x 32 feet
oil on canvas



Star Sculpture No. 1 in progress, 2008
9 x 8 x 28 feet
cast aluminum

Falling Short of Knowing
September 13-26, 2008

Produced by Ch'i Contemporary Fine Art
in association with Milk Gallery

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Drift, 2000, sand, canvas bag and fan, installation
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Swell, No. 7, 2006, oil on canvas, 84 x 132 inches
Swell, No. 1, 2005, oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches

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Norman Mooney

Carbon on Paper, No. 1, 2005, 22 x 30 inches
Carbon on Panel, No. 22, 2006, 65 x 65 inches
Carbon on Panel, No. 35, 2007, 72 x 72 inches
Carbon on Panel, No. 31, 2007, 72 x 72 inches