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Old Belts and Fishing Tackle Transformed

A Review of ‘Alan Shields: In Motion’ and ‘Steven and William Ladd: Mary Queen of the Universe’ at the Parrish Art Museum

By Joyce Beckenstein



“Ajax” (1972-73) and “J & K” (1975) by Alan Shields. Photo: Gary Mamay

Sometimes wildly different exhibitions connect through kindred approaches to the artistic process. That synergy has “Alan Shields: In Motion” conversing with “Steven and William Ladd: Mary Queen of the Universe” at the Parrish Art Museum. Visit, and you will see two generations of artists born in the Midwest who have transformed ordinary stuff — from fishing tackle to Miss Piggy sheets — into high art. A meandering line through Kansas, Missouri and New York reveals a moral compass pointing to a shared American heartland ethic: Waste not. Improvise. Do what you love.

“Alan Shields was a force; he didn’t follow trends,” the show’s curator, Jill Brienza, said of the artist, who died in 2005. She attributed his spirited independence to his great-grandparents, homesteaders who migrated to Kansas from Pennsylvania. Farm life taught Mr. Shields to observe and love nature. His mother taught him to sew. At Kansas State University, he studied



Top: "Maze" (1981-82) by Mr. Shields. Bottom: Dancers at the "Maze" installation. Photos, Top: Gary Mamay; Bottom: Daniel Gonzales

engineering, took studio art classes and tried set design, but soon itched for a new Wild West — back east, in Greenwich Village.

It was 1968. By night he worked at Max's Kansas City, where the anxieties of war, civil rights and feminism spilled into brawls over what was and wasn't art. By day he searched Canal Street for cheap, unorthodox art materials. All of which coalesced in "Maze" (1981-82), a jungle gym-like labyrinth cobbled from aluminum poles sheathed in acrylic-colored cotton belting. Several canvas paintings serve as detachable walls. Alternately dripped, stained, dyed, smudged and stitched by sewing machine, they echo Abstract Expressionism through the movements of the 1970s. But "Maze" is no mere playground romp through contemporary art styles. Conjuring mythic labyrinths, cave murals, and ancient frescoes, it sounds a cry for refuge and private space.

Mr. Shields aimed to reinvent painting and free it from the nail on the wall. His interactive

"Maze" functions as a stage set: a streaming video documents a dance performance choreographed by Stephen Petronio created for the installation. The grid's open spaces also afford partial glimpses of surrounding works, encouraging viewers to look at art from myriad angles of sight and insight.

"Ajax" (1972-73), painted canvas strips suspended from fishing wire, presents painting-as-sculpture. "J & K" (1975) establishes humorous conundrums by relegating to painting the role of a frame, its strips of colored canvas serving as armature for a cat's cradle of intersecting beaded fishing line and tackle. The push and pull of these dimensional lines recall waves heaving at sea, or a tangle of fishing nets and ropes.

Mr. Shields bought a home on Shelter Island in 1971, where he raised his family. In the late 1990s, as art tastes ran fickle and sales fizzled, he supplemented his income working as a Shelter Island ferryman. A number of his handmade paper works and extraordinary prints dating from 1969 to 1983 round out the show.

Steven and William Ladd were born in Missouri in the late 1970s, about the time Mr. Shields permanently settled on the East End. Like Mr. Shields, they learned sewing from their mother. They also recycled materials, investing them with personal meaning. But where Mr. Shields emerged from the art historical revolutions of his era, the Ladd brothers learned about art by the doing of it, and were influenced by fashion and design. They began their careers making jewelry and couture fashion handbags packaged in beautifully lined boxes. The boxes are now filled with mini-landscapes, thanks in part to a windfall donation of 10,000 old belts and other materials from the defunct Brooklyn-based Invisible Dog Belt and Buckle factory. The coiled belts are used as a base layer for the interior of the boxes. "Faith" (2014), the centerpiece of the Ladd



Top: a detail from "Faith" (2014), by Steven and William Ladd. Bottom: patrons examining a part of "Faith," with the Ladds' "Ant Epidemic 1, 2, 4-23" (2011) in the background. Photos, Top: Steven and William Ladd; Bottom: Daniel Gonzales

brothers' exhibition, like "Maze," performs many functions at once, combining fine art craft with sculpture, installation, performance and, through extensive work with children, audience participation. "Faith" was unveiled during an opening performance in which the brothers dismantled a 36-box white tower. One by one, each box was opened and its contents displayed in an enormous grid. Like a time-lapse movie, the performance unfurled a geographical and psychic landscape of Mary Queen of the Universe, the Catholic elementary school they attended that inspired the title of their show.

A dark green scroll "forest," dense with intricately beaded trees and infested with crawling goldtone wire ants, dominates one side of the work. It represents a creek where children were forbidden to play but did so anyway. A nubby expanse of black beads represents an asphalt school playground, the "safe" side of their young world. Bright orange and red flames of blown glass coursing through it symbolize the Holy Spirit and the spiritual life guiding the Ladds' upbringing. Print images of 150,000 ants cover surrounding gallery walls. "One day, as kids, we opened a box of Legos and thousands of ants came crawling out," William Ladd said.

Other related exhibition pieces consist of smaller, wall-hung scrolls and beaded works in a variety of colors, each hue symbolizing some event meaningful to the Ladds, as explained in the exhibition catalog. There are also artists' books, designed as school albums, with fabric swatches stitched into their pages, including pants fabric from Steven Ladd's sewing days and cloth remnants belonging to the deceased mother of a dear friend.

Believing that art transcends personal passion and is key to human development and connection, the Ladd brothers work with underserved groups, including Rikers Island prisoners. They are also conducting a Scrollathon, a museum school program serving 1,000 children. Terrie Sultan, executive director of the Parrish, emphasized that this sort of work has lasting effects. "The Ladds will have touched the lives of 1,000 families," Ms. Sultan said, "making them a de facto part of our community."