

Off the wall

New exhibit uses Mexican hammocks to explore multiple themes

BY ARNOLD WENGROW

a.wengrow@yahoo.com

Artist **Randy Shull** calls his current exhibition at Tracey Morgan Gallery *Black & White*, but the show is far from monochromatic.

Inspired by the culture of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Shull deconstructed hammocks handmade in that region, shaped them, draped them and encrusted them with paint, turning them into large-scale pieces that riff on themes ranging from butterflies to hinges to gravity.

Along with their Asheville residence, Shull and his partner, **Hedy Fischer**, have owned a home in Yucatan's capital city, Mérida, for 20 years. "You ask yourself, as an artist, how can I connect with this culture?" he says. "It took a while to figure out what the foundation of the culture was."

Hammocks are a cultural cornerstone in that area of Mexico, he discovered. "It's the bed in the Yucatan," Shull says. "It is how people sleep in the Yucatan. It is how people take a siesta. And it is the biggest influence on architecture in the Yucatan Peninsula."

Shull trained in furniture design at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and has some architectural knowledge from his work as a painter. "For five years I've walked off the space in so many homes [in the Yucatan], and it's always 13 feet," he says. "That happens to be the span that a hammock covers when it goes from hook to hook. The hammock is the defining mechanism for how big a house is."

The string used to create Mexican hammocks is manufactured exclusively by one company in the Yucatan, Shull says. And all the hammocks made in the area are handwoven, he adds, noting that many families in small villages weave them on a stand-up loom. "It's amazing because it can happen for 45 minutes [with one person], and then you can set the shuttle down, and somebody else can pick it up 10 minutes later. They're kind of cooperative efforts."

'MANY LEGS'

Shull says his artistic exploration of hammocks and their meanings is something he'll pursue for the rest of his life. "It has so many legs," he says.

One of those legs is gravity. "I think the feeling of being in a hammock is this feeling of being weightless," he says. "It takes all the weight off your body. So it's kind of antigravitational. So how do you transmit that feeling into a painting?"

The artist's answer is to make his works in large scale. He likes to reference the size of the human body, so they're often 6 feet in height. One particularly large painting measures 7 1/2 by 16 feet. "When paintings are big, they become experiential," he says. "They don't become objects, they become about how it makes you feel. And I love that."

To create these big pieces, Shull lays out hammock fabric in shapes on the floor to apply his layers of paint. "I do a lot of pouring," he says. "I don't call it painting, I call it pouring."

On the wall, the finished pieces appear to hang loosely, adding to their antigravitational feel. They are reminiscent of the works of **Sam Gilliam**, the innovative artist who suspended swathes of painted canvas from the walls and ceilings of exhibition spaces in the mid-1960s.

"I didn't think of Sam Gilliam until I realized what I'd done," he says. "To free the canvas from the stretcher, that's huge."

He realized he was referencing other artists as well. "I think about **Jasper Johns** and the catenary pieces," he says, referring to Johns' practice of attaching string to his canvases at various points to form a hanging arc.

He also mentions the Spanish Catalan architect **Antoni Gaudi**, who designed his famous unfinished basilica of the Sagrada Família in Barcelona by turning scale models made of chains upside down to calculate optimal arches. "He figured out the catenary," Shull says. "And the catenary arch became so important to him."



POURING IT ON: Artist Randy Shull is pictured adding paint to hammock fabric on the roof of his studio in Mexico. The local artist divides his time between Yucatan and Asheville. Photo by Hedy Fischer

BUTTERFLIES AND HINGES

In addition to other artists, Shull was also inspired by creatures in nature that seem weightless, such as butterflies. The notion of monarch butterflies migrating from Mexico to the U.S. and then, several generations later, returning, he says, “is very much like my own migration from the U.S. to Mexico and back to the U.S.”

One piece suggestive of a butterfly is a three-panel blue-and-white work called “Blue Bisagra.” Bisagra is Spanish for “hinge” — the but-

terfly’s midsection becomes a hinge between two wings.

“The hinge is this thing that allows the door to pivot, to take you from one arena to the next,” Shull says. As with migrating monarch butterflies, Shull says, “The bisagra is like the flight that I take to Mexico. It is the hinge between Asheville and Mexico.”

Besides art hanging on walls, the exhibition will feature a piece of hammock performance art on video. Shull hung hammocks from a 5-ton chain hoist and lifted heavy objects in them. “We live in the mountains

of Western North Carolina, so I thought, ‘Let’s see what the capacity of a hammock is.’ So I suspended a 1,200-pound boulder,” he explains.

Shull didn’t stop there, also lifting a bed, a tractor tire and a sofa. When he saw the sofa go up, he was inspired — his assistants lifted the sofa again with the artist on it. “I rode the sofa,” he says. “It made me think about all kinds of cliché things like couch surfing. It was the best 20 minutes of my day possible.”

For Shull, hoisting objects — and himself — in a hammock looped back to his thoughts about gravity.

Being involved in architecture, he says, “is to some degree about defying gravity. Why can’t art be about finding ways to defy gravity? And so I messed around with gravity for two hours, and we took video images and documented it all.”

‘NEW DYNAMIC’

Jennifer Sudul Edwards, the chief curator and curator of contemporary art, at The Mint Museum in Charlotte, first saw Shull’s hammock pieces when he posted work in progress on his Instagram page. She was intrigued enough to drive to his Asheville studio to see them.

“When I first saw the work in person, I immediately started having these hyperattuned, critical thoughts,” she says. “But I also totally relaxed into the color and the mesmerizing loops and cradles of the hammocks.”

Edwards had previously known Shull as a master woodworker who manipulated his medium into elegant pieces that often had a humorous or sardonic edge. While those works were mainly highlighting the solidity of the wood, Edwards points out, the hammock paintings are quite different. “He’s relating to a completely new material and to space in a new way.”

Edwards feels the hammock pieces still contain some elements of Shull’s previous work, such as dynamic colors and respect for natural objects. “[But now] he allows volume and movement to develop from the weave and twists of the hammocks,” she says. “He allows color to push and pull the empty and filled spaces of the material.”

Shull’s hammock pieces, Edwards adds, are a totally new dynamic for him as an artist. “And it’s a new dynamic for how we can think about a painting, its relationship to the wall and its relationship to us.” X

WHAT

Randy Shull: Black & White, an exhibition of paintings made with hammocks

WHERE

Tracey Morgan Gallery, 22 London Road, Asheville

WHEN

The exhibit runs through Sept. 21. Gallery hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday

INFORMATION

Visit avl.mx/e2f or call 828-505-7667