

findings

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Snag Conference Christoph Zellweger - 'Point Of No Return Iris Bodemer - 'Entities
And Entropy Iris Eichenberg - 'Objects: Relations And Hierarchies' Happy 80th Birthday,
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Happy 80th Birthday, Bob!

A personal homage to Robert Ebendorf

Lieta Marziali

During one of our last gargantuan breakfasts together at West Dean College, Bob grills me about how, in all my projected idealism, I am going to survive and make a living in the world of jewellery. I revert to schoolgirl and try at once to ask myself whether in fact my thoughts make sense or whether the possibilities are just all in my head. At the end of the same breakfast, Bob gets up and clears plates instead of waiting for the attentive staff to come and get them. In fact, he would clear plates for the whole table, given the chance. Because that's what Bob does. When a young girl comes to finish clearing up, his intense eye-to-eye professorial questioning is interrupted and his avuncular attention devoted to finding out whether she had in fact managed to finish early enough the day before to enjoy her evening. These might appear, perhaps at first, to be two sharp extremes. They, in fact, are nothing but Bob doing what he does best: being there for you. For you middle-aged maker navigating the meanders of a career as an artist, and for you teenage member of the kitchen staff navigating the meanders of a long double shift.

We were so lucky that Bob came back to West Dean this year. The fact that the class was full is a testament to how many people's practices he has impacted during his visits. For me personally, he was the one to validate my path as a jewellery artist. I first met Bob in the summer of 2012, still only at the dawn of my jewellery journey. I remember stumbling upon his work a few months before that while exploring patterns of salvage and reclamation, of rebirth and second chances I had spotted in my work: really, a manifestation of the great changes that were going on in my life.

Enter Bob. The Prince of Second-Chances. The King of Salvage.

Little did I know that Bob was going to be so important not only in teaching me about how to be kind to materials rejected as trash or discarded as natural debris, but also to myself and what I was becoming. The story of Bob's training and career, his amazing success as a goldsmith, and his stellar rise as one of the most revered art academics in our field is there for all to read on the internet as well as the many books that make reference to his work. But it is the personal stories of his tough negotiations with his severe dyslexia, of the discovery of beauty in that can he had been observing being trashed by a car on his way to work every morning, and of exchanging a correspondence of collage postcards with the child of a friend, that make Bob not only the maker of amazing jewels but an amazing maker of people.

That first time working with Bob, learning about rivets, tabs and wire croquet wickets, I also learnt that imagination was the limit, and that I could push myself further than I had ever dreamt. And although unaware at the time that pedagogic theory was going to be an underlying foundation of my future research, I learnt about good teaching practice as the practice of being a good human being. And so I watched Bob, with the physical and mental energy of an ox, gliding gently through the classroom making sure everyone got an equal amount of attention; personally carrying out piercing work for the one elderly participant who



Brooches by Robert Ebendorf.
Photos: Lieta Marziali



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did not have the physical strength to do it herself in order to enable her otherwise overwhelming creativity; and accommodating as many requests as the curiosity of his students would demand during the long studio days. And long they always are, albeit punctuated with breaks to raid the tin for his beloved English biscuits to dunk in hot chocolate, with Bob always staying until the security guard jingles his enormous bunch of keys at 10 pm ... the sign for us to put down tools and head to the bar for a night cap.

But that year I also quickly learnt from him what was to be one of the biggest mantras in my personal and work life: 'Stay on the boat'. Find your strengths. Understand yourself and your work. Don't beat yourself up if it doesn't fit in any category but the ones you created for it. And then stick with it. Defend it and make it the best you can.

Over the past six years I have been fortunate enough to work with Bob four times, on each of his visits to West Dean. And I distinctly remember never asking myself, as my work became more refined and found its own ground, what else I could learn from him. Learning with Bob cannot be reduced simply to increasing one's cold-connections repertoire: it is about what American educational philosopher John Dewey referred to as the 'experiential continuum' or 'the ability of experience to promote and live in further experience(s).'¹

On a practical level, it is about constantly re-evaluating our position to materials and processes: in our case, confronting each single humble found and collected object for the emotional and narrative, but also for the material and visual power that it holds; and also confronting our capacity of intervention in each object. For me in particular, it is also about a personal and constant questioning and re-evaluation of the breadth of the meaning of the word 'found', and pushing myself technically to challenge jewellery's consumption of



Group discussion at West Dean. Photo: Lieta Marziali

tools and to further my own dialogue with both my hands and materials through how low-tech I can go with my work.

Continuing to watch Bob make is to live the experience of his patience and devotion towards his materials and simple tools. Continuing to watch him teach is to live the experience of a master who is able to completely refract the ray of his strong guidance through the lens of the curiosity and drive of his students. And most of all, being with Bob is to learn his respect for his trade and for anyone, at any level, who wants to embrace it.

The words *magic* and *mastery* share in their etymology ideas of both ability and greatness, and Bob has worked his own magic and mastery deeply into innumerable objects and people. And I cannot be but privileged and proud to be able to call him my friend.

¹ Dewey, J. (1997) *Experience and Education*, New York: Simon & Schuster (A Touchstone Book), p.33

For anybody interested in knowing more about Robert Ebendorf, C. Gore, L. Vigna and B. Pepich's book 'Robert W. Ebendorf: The Work In Depth', published by the Racine Art Museum in 2014 is a wonderful start.



Goodbye Selfie!
Photo: Lieta Marziali