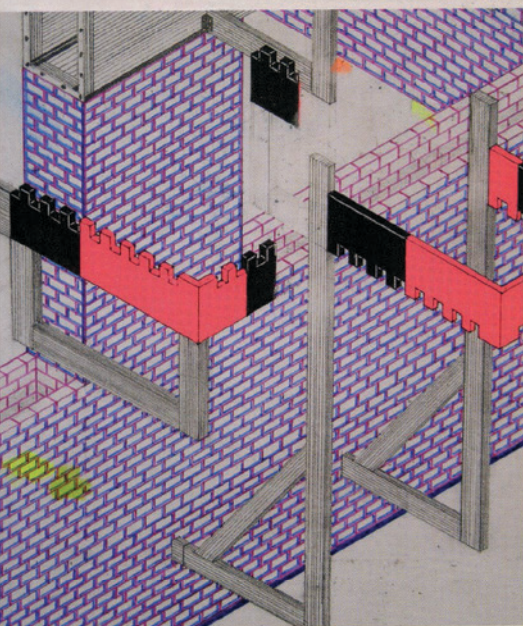
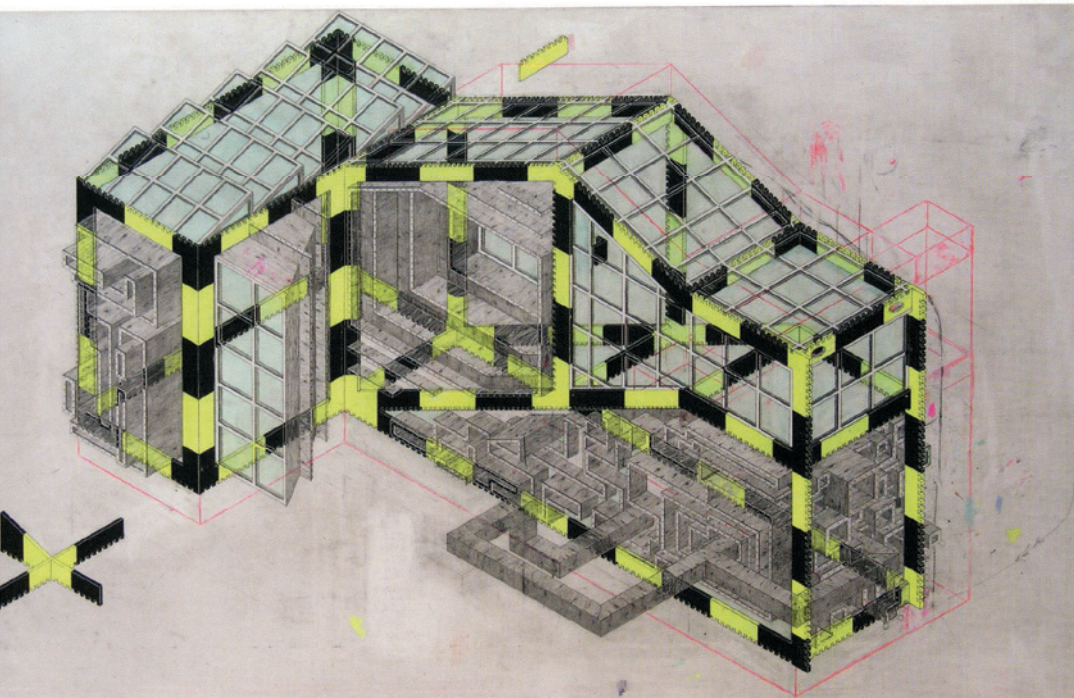


# JOSEPH BURWELL

*SCHOOL OF THE VIKING SPANIARD REVISITED*



AUGUST 23 - OCTOBER 5, 2013

The stereotypical image of the artist's studio as a paint-splattered, sparsely furnished garret where the lone artist toils away producing their brilliant works is in much need of re-examination. Many artists' studios are a far cry from this description, and serve very different functions for their inhabitants. This exhibition examines the relationship between the studio and the work produced within it by two contemporary artists who have recreated their studio spaces within the Halsey Institute's galleries.







Born in Iceland in 1970 and raised in southwestern Virginia, Joseph Burwell began to study architecture at Savannah College of Art and Design, but changed his major to studio art and received his bachelor's degree at the College of Charleston in 1993. He received his MFA in sculpture from Tulane University in 1999 and moved to New York in 2000. Since then, Burwell has exhibited in New York, Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Ireland, Egypt, Canada, South Korea, and many venues across the U.S. He is a 2011 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow (Printmaking/Drawing /Artists Books).

## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST: UNDER CONSTRUCTION

### BY ERIN BROWN

As an archeologist digs his way through an excavation, every new layer becomes a complicating revelation: each brush stroke exposes another strata of information that may confirm or confuse our understanding. Yet, often as the artifacts of the past are examined, juxtaposed, and interpreted, an uneven narrative emerges—a *mélange* of data and speculation collides with a drive to create a meaningful story of our collective past—leaving us with fictions as foundations.

Joseph Burwell's work plays with the serendipity of misinterpreting histories. His meticulous drawings seamlessly integrate defining architectural features from across cultures, continents, and centuries to form baffling structures that are neither utopic nor dystopic, but bring a leveling hand to the hierarchies of the history we have been presented. Medieval brick crenellations meld with modernist glass panes, wood scaffolding frames, futuristic neon paneling, and steel pipes support parapets in a structure whose function is left to the imagination of the viewer. Though the structures are painstakingly rendered, a closer inspection of each drawing reveals sub-cutaneous strata of marks—a series of revisions, alternate configurations, and concealed truths (such as a sacrificial office plant in *The Center for Modern Disintegration*, 2013).

Burwell has taken on these notions of excavation, interpretation, and presentation in a series of installations of his own studio in various stages of reconstruction. The first, *School of the Viking Spaniard: Reconstruction of the Garage* (2010), transformed the Miyako Yoshinaga gallery into a seemingly true-to-life reconstruction of the garage Burwell used as his studio. A saw-horse drafting table with carefully laid out tools—a French curve, drafting triangle, pencils—stood in the midst of wall-to-wall shelves that sported scraps of inspiration—ancient maps, tchotchkes, photographs—along with examples of the artist's own drawings. As the viewer examined the installation, they tacitly formed their own narrative of the artist, his process, materials and methodologies.

Yet, true to form, Burwell readily admitted that this, too, was an invented history. "After nine years of periodically working on [my studio] when I found the time, energy, and money, it never became the efficient workplace that I dreamt of before I had to move out. So I am always remodeling and modifying it postmortem," he explained. The revelation that such a plausible portrait of the artist's studio is, in fact, a romanticized version of the truth may belie a more subtle connection with the past than any of the artifacts on display.

From earliest history, man has been making self-portraits as a way of ensuring his own immortality on his own terms. At once didactic and self-conscious, these self-styled images—from primitive hand paintings to candelabra-coiffed Goya to Warhol in his "fright wig"—provide the viewer not only a point of genesis for a body of work, but a look into the psyche of the individual who created it. Among the most revealing self-portraits are artist's depictions of their workspaces: a studio portrait allowed the artist to make his process, materials, and tools muses unto themselves; and, as with any muse, there are endlessly flexible shades of truth, anxiety, and artistry in any depiction thereof.

Vermeer painted himself in a lavishly appointed studio; Rembrandt rendered himself in a dark, austere chamber. Gustave Courbet's 1855 painting, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*, poises the artist in his studio as the crux of society, undeterred from his painting as a nude model hovers behind him, Baudelaire fusses with a book a few feet away, and creatures from all walks of life and times in history mill about in his capacious hall. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the creative process turned towards abstraction and became a practice about itself, artists removed themselves from studio portraits entirely, with only their tools left behind to tell the story: a box of pencils and a wine glass on the table of Matisse's *Red Studio* become as much of a revelation about the artist as the rakish angle at which Vermeer painted his own cap.



Just as the modernist image of the studio void of the artist asks the viewer to draw conclusions about the artist through the artifacts he has left behind, Burwell's installations inject the viewer into a studio portrait to inspect, infer, and create a narrative from objects as incongruous as the elements of his drawings. As we examine the range of artifacts he has chosen to present, we see that this portrait is not merely an *in situ* rendering, but, rather, mirrors Courbet's allegorical portrait: by its mere creation, the installation superficially inserts the artist, his work and methodology, into art history.

The second iteration of Burwell's installation, *Reconstruction of the Garage: The Dormant Stage* (2013), revealed another layer of the archeology of Burwell's studio portrait and place in archeological and art history. A carefully crafted "period room," the installation reconstructed the museum storage facilities that housed the fictitious archeological exhibit of Burwell's studio seen in *School of the Viking Spaniard: Reconstruction of the Garage*. "Artifacts" from the original installation were placed on a series of foam-covered, museum storage-style shelves with numbered cataloging tags in an order that did not reflect any of the juxtapositions Burwell created in the initial iteration.

Removed from their context, each individual object was leveled to the same status as an artifact, allowing the viewer to be as fascinated by the protractor as he was with the drawing it was used to create. Blurring of the original hierarchies created by the artist fundamentally alters how the viewer understands him. The fossilized finality of the original installation is debunked, and an image of a mutable being in transition appears. The self portrait becomes more abstract, and a new layer of portraiture is revealed as the "museum" itself—with its tools and methodologies—becomes the object of study.

For the current exhibition, *School of the Viking Spaniard Revisited*, Burwell adds another layer of time and reconstruction to the piece. The studio is again on display, but not in a finished state: the gallery space appears to be in transition, with the installation and all its pieces pulled from the fictitious museum's storage and in the process of being re-constructed for another version of the history of Joseph Burwell's studio. We are left with a partially obscured portrait of both the artist and the museum, and the transition becomes the focus of our attention.

As we witness this dance between constructed realities and their de- and re-construction, through the lenses of archeology and self-portraiture, a vision of contemporary anxieties emerges. The modern person's obsession with their own immortality is expressed through the "artifacts" they create to be left behind. Layers of family albums, quippy blog posts, or artsy Instagram pictures carefully strung together create a sense of permanence and control—it's no wonder so many people today refer to themselves as "curators" of something or other. But, this is a false ballast for the reality that once we cease to exist, our history is out of our hands, and up for interpretation. Burwell himself admits that "Archeology is a morbid science, and in viewing myself through its lens, I feel like I'm planning and attending my own funeral."

Yet, his work confronts the fear of being misinterpreted. As we view the relationship between the creator of the object and its interpreter in his *School of the Viking Spaniard* series, the individual portraits of each—of the artist's studio, and the museum interpreting and displaying it—intermingle and fade into one another, producing striking, serendipitous hybrids that emerge from the confusion. Burwell's installations may not be true to life, but they are true to the invented history that created them.

*Erin Brown is a journalist, curator, and art critic. Recent exhibitions include Next In Line: Drawing in the 21st Century at Kunsthalle Galapagos, NYC, white-hot at Thatcher Projects, NYC, and an upcoming exhibition at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in September 2013. She works and lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her bicycle and an extensive library of too-heavy art books.*

## MEET THE ARTISTS

learn more about their creative processes!

### FRIDAY AUGUST 23, 5:30 – 6:30PM

Artist Lecture with Joseph Burwell  
Room 309, Simons Center for the Arts

### SATURDAY AUGUST 24, 2PM

Exhibition walk-through with Herb Parker,  
Joseph Burwell, and the exhibition's curator,  
Mark Sloan, Halsey Institute director.

### THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 26, 6PM

Artist Lecture with Herb Parker  
Room 309, Simons Center for the Arts

### THURSDAY OCTOBER 3, 6PM

Members-only tour of the exhibition,  
led by the exhibition's curator, Mark  
Sloan, Halsey Institute director.

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