The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present Humble Vessel, *a solo exhibition by artist Karl Schwiesow at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from June 10 – September 11, 2014. In conjunction with the exhibition, CCAI commissioned artist and writer Chris Lanier to write the following essay. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to Karl, Chris, the Carson City Courthouse, and all those involved in the exhibition.*

AN ORGANIZED SHIPWRECK
by Chris Lanier

Why a boat?

A sensible first question would be: why a boat? Why, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery, does it appear that some sort of peculiar shipwreck has taken place? Part of the answer comes from the artist's past: Karl Schwiesow's father, Doug, was a boat-builder. Originally a steelworker and ironworker in Nebraska, Doug moved to Alaska to work on the oil pipeline, and ended up getting into commercial fishing in Homer, where Karl grew up.

Doug didn't know how to work wood, so he used his steel-working skills to make fishing boats out of aluminum. "He taught me to draft hulls," Karl remembered, "so I'd build small models out of paper, while I was out on the fishing boat. And I'd put tape all over them so they'd float. It was always really exciting when they'd float."

1979 MacGregor Sailboat 22'(long) x 8'(wide) x 5'(high)

For Doug, the boats he built for himself were in a constant state of revision. "He fished on the boats he built – and he would design specific elements into them." In the fishing season, he might find a structural awkwardness in the boat, or an element he wished he had to hand. "During the winter he would take the boat into his shop and change something – cut this out, weld this in. Create a more efficient design."

Here, Karl has made some very dramatic revisions to a boat, but not to make it more efficient – rather, to make it useless. "It's kind of an antithesis to what my dad was doing, I suppose. Not that I'm mad at him or anything – 'You're always building awesome stuff, well I'm going to deconstruct awesome stuff!'" He laughed. "I'm always interested in dysfunctional things. Non-functional. Things that are supposed to be useful but aren't."

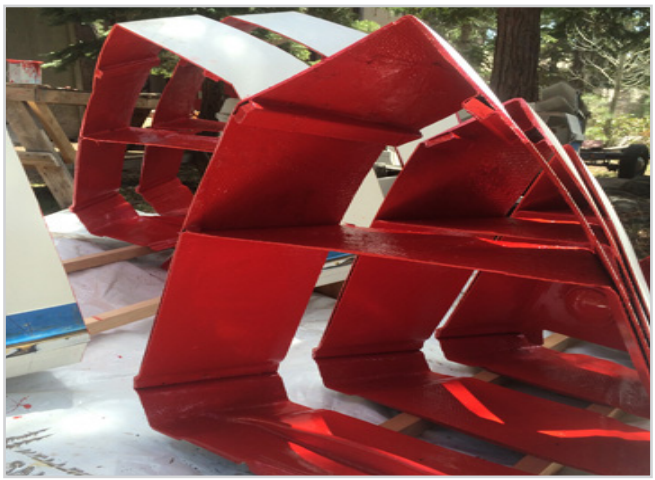
The interest in boats is not purely autobiographical – he's also drawn to the boat as a potent form, one full of aesthetics, associations, and very concrete potential. "You can get on a boat, and get to places that you can't get anywhere else, on foot – and you can get there without any source of power, really." He mentioned Thor Heyerdahl's raft, the Kon-Tiki, which Heyerdahl piloted with a small crew, traveling from Peru to the Polynesian Islands in 1947. Heyerdahl, an anthropologist, wanted to demonstrate the plausibility of his theory that the statues on Easter Island were constructed by migrants from Peru. "They drifted the entire way. That's insane to think about." The modesty of the craft – it was constructed mostly from balsa logs, lashed together with hemp rope – coupled with the distance it traveled, captured Karl's imagination. "You can build one. If you want, and you have the motivation, you can float whatever – and call it a boat."

Conversely, you can un-build a boat – and call it art.

There it goes!

This is what Karl did to the boat: he set it up on a trailer, put on a tyvek suit and gloves and goggles and a respirator – and started to cut it off the trailer. He started with a Sawzall, and after burning through a few blades, switched to a Skilsaw. After cutting the stern off, he measured in one-foot increments, sometimes adjusting the length if there was a structural feature that seemed like it was going to interfere with the cut. "It was pretty awkward. I had to get inside it." After cutting off about half the boat, he rolled it off the trailer, made a cradle for it, and cut the rest apart on the ground.

Once it had been cut into sections, he painted the interior with a red paint made for painting metal, like fire hydrants. "I had to buy the paint in Nevada," he laughed. "They don't sell it in California. Or, they sell it in pints – to get a gallon, you have to get it in Nevada." For Karl, the use of red was partly practical – "It needed that type of contrast to separate interior and exterior space" – with both the interior and exterior of the boat being white, the distinction wasn't visually clear. The red is also partly metaphorical. "It starts to reference a body, or a vessel. You make the interior red - we're red on the inside." And finally, there's a tweak at the expense of public art. "I'm kind of inspired by the folks who build big sculptures and paint them red all the time. You see them in sculpture gardens. I think it's funny that people do that. And then I



started doing it and I was like" – here he stroked his chin theatrically – "yeah, it does look better red."

That appears to make sense, up to a point, though it leaves the fundamental question: why on earth would someone want to do all that to a boat? As I interviewed Karl, he posed the question to himself: "Why would anyone want to do that? I don't know why anyone would want to do that." When I pointed out that he in fact had done it, so that he should be in a position to know, he replied: "Yeah, and it felt great! I'm destroying this thing! It's like cutting down a tree in the forest. There it goes!"

Karl stated, with the air of setting down a statement of principle: "I like to wreck stuff. To use things up." But there's a system to what he does that distinguishes it from mere vandalism: "I wanted to show there was some sort of skill in taking it apart, and some sort of method. How much chaos do I let get in there? How much control? Where's that balance? I really want people to recognize it as a boat."

He found the boat on Craigslist – as he put it, "Where you find everything." He went on: "I called the guy - he didn't want very much for it. Like $500. I asked him if he'd trade a bike frame for it. And he said yes." The man was moving, and had another, bigger boat that he was taking with him. Karl drove over – "'Here's the frame, can I have your boat?' He was like, 'Yeah yeah, here's the title, here's the trailer, here's the registration - let's go sailing some time. Call me when you get it together. I'd love to go out and race it!'"

"And I was like - 'Sure.'"

"He had put a lot of work into it. He was really into it." And Karl thought to himself: "I'm really into it too - but not the same way you are!" He summed up: "He just kept putting words in my mouth and I was like, 'All right. I'll take it.' No remorse. If he knew what I was going to do with it… he probably would not have given it to me."

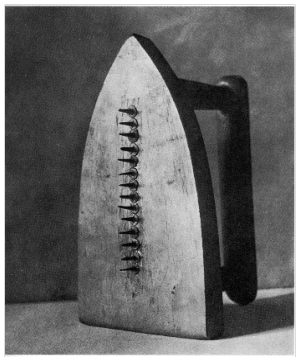
Implanted in this anecdote is the fact that Karl isn't just making art – he's making an affront. The affront of uselessness.

What it was.

When talking about his work, Karl kept returning to the idea of uselessness. It's an idea that has a distinguished pedigree in the arts. For some, the uselessness of an art-object-the fact that something can have value that stands outside the imperatives

of food, shelter and reproduction – is precisely what elevates it. The line between aesthetic value and utility value is never as simple as that – if a painting or sculpture gives the spectator an idea, if it communicates a thought, or if it creates an emotion or mood, does it truly stand outside the commerce of utility? Value always rises above questions of raw materials.

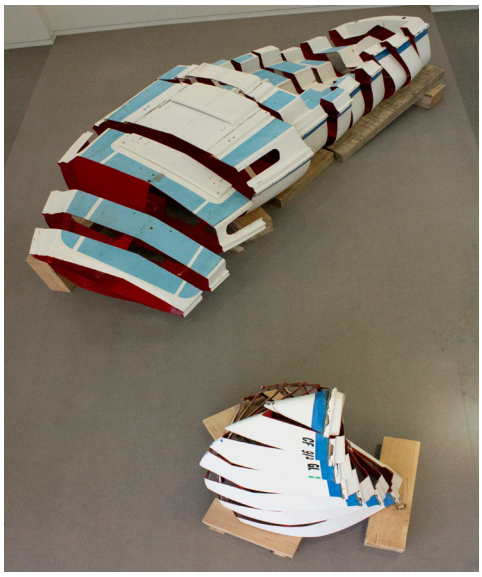
Beyond this, there is a distinction to be made between creating something, like a painting or sculpture, that is "useless" at its inception – and taking something that has a very obvious function, and then rendering it useless. Perhaps the perfect emblem of this is Man Ray's The Gift (1921), where Man Ray took a flatiron and affixed a line of tacks down the middle the ironing surface. Ray not only negated the functional object's use, he did violence to it. The flatiron was a tool that was destroyed – and that could keep on destroying. If used in its traditional manner, it would leave a lifetime of torn clothing in its wake. For Karl as well, his artistic process has an element of rebellion embedded in it. "I make functional things a lot as a living. I fix bikes as a living. I build furniture, install countertops. Everybody is always constructing things around us all the time. Building, building, building. It's so in human nature to grow and to build. I think it's interesting when things decompose."



He continued, "Not enough people take time to appreciate things when they come apart. People are always challenged when the thing is coming apart. They're challenged when it's coming together too, but people have a different attitude about it. There's a dark side when people see something unravel. Well, why? It's still this beautiful object. And it's still worth something – because it makes you feel that way, it challenges you in that way."

I mentioned Zhuangzi, the Daoist philosopher, and his story of the "useless tree." In the story, he encounters someone who complains of the uselessness of a big tree on his property - so old and gnarled, no carpenter could ever cut it down and make it into lumber. Zhuangzi counters that the tree's uselessness is, in fact, its power – he suggests relaxing and sleeping under its shade, and in a translation by Burton Watson, concludes: "Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?"

Karl seemed to respond to that framing of "uselessness." "I don't want to destroy something. I need to come up with a better term than that. Rebuild through deconstruction? Whatever you want to call it… It really gets to people." A shipwreck is one thing – an event that has drama and pathos built into it. The shipwreck that Karl has devised – one that is organized, systematic, deliberate – is something else again. What happens when an object is taken apart in this way? Karl's answer: "You start to pay more attention to what it was."



Hull Section: 21'x 8'x 5' Bow Section: 6'x 5'x 8'

Chris Lanier
Reno, Nevada
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