

## Rusty Scruby's Haptic Dance



*Rusty Scruby, Dock (detail), 2006, mixed media construction, 36 x 96 inches*

Looking at Rusty Scruby's work requires a certain performance on the part of the viewer. It is never enough to look in the ways we might be used to looking. A strange kind of dance takes place in a gallery featuring Rusty's photo-sculptures. We are called by his work to move back and forth, to contemplate the action of vision as such.

Art historian Alois Riegl conceived of the terms “haptic” and “optic” to explain the relationship between artworks and the world around them. Theorist Laura U. Marks describes Riegl’s Haptic visuality as “a kind of seeing that uses the eye like an organ of touch,” while optic visuality is about “seeing things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms.”<sup>1</sup> The optic indicates a certain separation of viewer and artwork, while haptic is a way of looking “that ‘grabs’ the thing it looks at.” Rusty’s work initiates a haptic dance, a physical visuality that allows for a unique relationship between viewer and artwork. It also allows for a unique relationship between *viewers* as the movements of one viewer to and away from an artwork seem choreographed to weave through the movements of another viewer. Looking at Rusty’s work is like becoming part of an intricate harmony.

The musical qualities begin at the surface of Rusty’s work, where image and texture, like competing orchestral instruments, maintain a tension that results in an almost pixilated visual effect. The images never try to be straightforward; they always ask us questions about how we look, why we look, and how looking becomes pleasurable. There is never one perfect distance from which to examine Rusty’s work because it seems the parts of each work are always at play. The sides and the front of each artwork (and even the back, if you are fortunate enough to catch a glimpse) elicit wonder and fascination whether you stand close enough to see each piece in the puzzle or far enough away to get the full effect of the composition.

Rhythms, from *adagio* to *allegro*, waft across the surface of the work, where seemingly simple palm trees emerge from a calming tropical scene into bold peaks seeking to escape the picture plane. Complex visual and physical layers, what Rusty calls “frequencies” create a transition from blurred image to crisp reproduction and vice versa. These frequencies cause a common desert plant or seascape to fragment into parts that compete for your attention, like a foot-stomping performance of dueling banjos. Rusty’s repertoire is vast and varied; even the facets of his all-white structures invite the kind of experience produced by his photo pieces. One’s eyes slip and slide across curves and into crevices, examining the association of light and shadow, object and subject, surface and space, artwork and viewer. Whether or not an image is scattered across one of Rusty’s pieces, what emerges is a relationship between artwork and viewer that is as much physical and analytical as it is optical. Rusty has been described as an artist, and that is certainly true, but interacting with his work makes clear that he is also the conductor of a modern orchestra, a magician of physics, the leader of a haptic dance.

— Heather Murray