

David Dixon interviewed in The Shack by artist Andrea Minicozzi,
Ithaca, New York, 2010

andrea: Well, you really wanted to talk about the house you're renovating.
So why did you want to talk about that?

david: Oh, because it's obviously not an art piece, but I thought talking about it could somehow make it one. There was a lot of thought and aesthetic effort put into its construction, and architects are allowed to claim their designs as being art, or at least as some sort of creative statement. So I do feel like the house has some sort of expressionist element in it.

a: So then why do you say that it's obviously not an art piece?

d: Yeah, I don't think it's obviously not an art piece, not if we're talking about it as if it were one.

a: But why do you think you immediately said the word "obviously?"

d: Because I renovated the house out of necessity for living, so it wasn't intended to be an art piece, which one makes, maybe, as a kind of exception to a life lived. You know, art's that other thing that one does in order to reflect on the life lived. Something that's outside of life and, therefore, can be critical of it or comment on it. Renovating the house was out of necessity because I needed a place to live, so it's hard to think of it as a reflection on, or comment about, life. But then as someone who makes movies that are sometimes autobiographical and documentary, it gets a little convoluted as to where the life and art boundaries are. You have to put a stop to it at some point, because you're living your life; your life isn't art.

a: I'm interested that you immediately said that it wasn't art but then said maybe it is.

d: I've spent a lot of my life making art and disregarding my life, so I'd live in horrible conditions, but as long as I was making the art, everything was fine. So I feel like a kind of junkie, where I could be in a completely hideous room that's disgusting and dirty in some old warehouse somewhere, cold, with snow inside (!) but as long as I have my books and I'm making art, everything is fine. It's okay because you're not really there, as an artist you live more in the past and future, I think, than the present. Or that's what makes the present bearable. I can remember a distinct moment, after many failures to get anyone involved in viewing the art I was producing, when I said, "fuck it," I'm going to invest some time into making a nice environment for myself. This wasn't when I built this place, but a loft space in the city. I wasn't thinking of it as art. In fact, it felt like something very different from art. It felt like I was doing something for myself, which is odd because people normally think of art as some sort of self-indulgent activity. But it's

the opposite. Where as everyone else seems to be with their families, in their homes, doing things to make their environment more comfortable. So I spent a few weeks just renovating and building and making my environment attractive and comfortable and aesthetic. You know, when you hang pictures around, and you make it flow a certain way, and it's for yourself. So maybe that's why the house isn't art, because I'm doing it for myself. But in the case of this space, I'm not doing it for myself, so maybe that's why it *is* art. I'm "rent-o-vating" this space. That's a term I invented, because I'm paying rent by renovating. Someone else is going to live here after me. I'm probably going to finish building right about when I have to leave. So I'm not doing it just for myself, I'm doing it for whomever comes to live here after me.

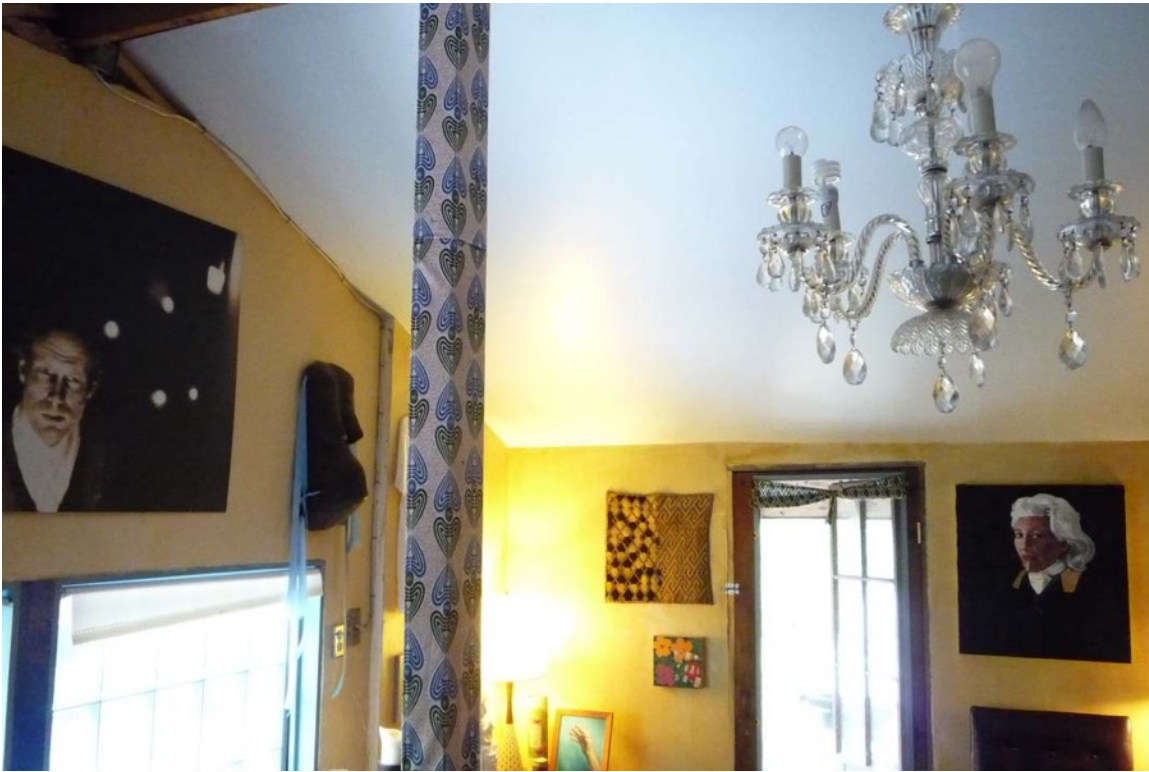
a: And in what way do you consider that other person when "rent-o-vating" this place?

d: I don't. I just think about what I want it to look like. But that's what an artist does when they're making work, but with an audience in mind. I imagine that's sort of how architects work, too. None of the pictures and paintings are going to be around when I leave. So it's going to be a lot different for the new person. Although, when doing the upstairs rent-o-vation, I liked it better without all the pictures hanging up. I was really thinking of Cy Twombly when I was plastering the walls. I was really working on compositions from one wall to the next. I was really thinking with all the power of my art education! I was applying it to the construction of the place, in the choices of material and color. And I would get upset when something wasn't working, and I would lie in bed and think about what I would do next in the same way I would when I'm working on art.

a: My mom would always call me artistic in a way that was embarrassing to me, to describe something like my choice to dye my hair a crazy color. I think she was using that word as a way to talk about the things I chose to surround myself with. How do you choose what you surround yourself with, and what do you owe that to?

d: I have my personal collection of stuff. I work within limited means. As an artist, you're in a position to produce culture, rather than just purchase and consume it. That's kind of a luxury. Being un-wealthy and unable to purchase culture, you can produce it. That's a benefit of being an artist. Even dead broke and in, ostensibly, the lowest class, I feel like I'm completely privileged. I live and think in artistic space and the artistic space is, as far as I'm concerned, the most privileged space and, perhaps not coincidentally, a space that wealthy people think they can purchase, so there's kind of a class victory there, possibly.

a: You put up images of your work in your space. Do you consider this image to be a piece itself? [Pointing to the photograph titled 't.o.m. Bemused' to the left in this photo documentation]



d: Yes it is a piece. That's from the old man performance. His name is t.o.m, which is an acronym for "the old man," which also happens to be my father's name. But I'm older than my father in that picture. I'm more like my grandfather's age, and I sort of look like my grandfather in it, so it's kind of multi-generational. But the piece is not about them. I don't think they're in it too much. My new movie is about "the Father," in a way, so my dad has become pretty comfortable with being used and critiqued. His name is in this piece and he accepts that, no problem. But it's not really him. The words the character speaks are not things he would say. Yet, they are an attempt to develop a structure of some kind that is, not contrary to, but distinct from, my inherited beliefs.

a: How so? What are some things that t.o.m. says that your father would not say?

d: t.o.m. says things... phrases I wrote when I was 24 or 25. So that scripted text—from basically sketchbooks—returned in a live performance as the old man. That photograph is not from the live performance. I shot it in a different location afterwards. I was going to do a different piece, it was going to be a video piece, and I had someone [Andrew Sutherland] there to take pictures. Nothing came out right except this photograph, so I kept the photograph. I like the photograph. It's called 't.o.m. Bemused.' I like to keep it in the house. It's a reminder. It's myself aged, so it's a constant reminder.

a: Is it yourself aged? Is that what you consider it?

d: No, I don't actually consider that character myself. I hope by the time I get to that age that I won't be as conflicted as that character.

a: So you were saying that this character is not related to your father or grandfather. What is the distinction between t.o.m. and these men exactly?

d: The language he uses is paradoxical, mystical language that neither of them would ever speak in. It's an imaginary me, at their age, as opposed to them. I wrote it as this prophet character, an aged Hermes, really, who had nothing to do with them. The "t.o.m." thing just worked out. It was like, oh my god, it's my dad's name! It was one of those things that just fit together really well. And my dad actually came up to see the performance, he's very supportive like that. He thoughtfully experienced the show and gave me written comments afterwards, which were insightful. There are a couple of different phrases from the text that repeat: "Fake flowers are forever" and "If you believe it until you die it was true," which was the title for my last exhibition. I think that script is something that I'll be able to dip into for the rest of my life. It's full of things that I wrote that I didn't really understand. They were just these phrases, and amazingly some have held up over the years. "If you believe it until you die it was true," I don't remember now what led me to this conclusion.

a: Does the meaning of that phrase change over time?

d: Yes, completely. It sounds kind of profound, and when I wrote it, it had a kind of pseudo-sounding profundity, and that's why I used it. But I never really stopped to explore in too much depth what that profundity was, it just sounded right for the performance. So, now, I'm exploring it a bit more.

a: Can you talk more about the meaning of the phrase?

d: It's a cool phrase. You don't have to necessarily adhere to an assumed or accepted truth, it could just be the underlying truth of whatever it is that you think you are, you don't have to necessarily maintain them yourself. It's just that, inevitably, they will be true to your experience if they are maintained until you die. It's the fiction that maintains your identity, basically. If that fiction is maintained until you die, it essentially becomes who you were. So it becomes true, but only after you die. It doesn't become true before, because at any moment before it could be undetermined, then the fiction would be revealed as such, before it has time to mature into the truth of who you were. So it's important for the fiction to be maintained until you die, and if so, it becomes true. But, of course, you're dead, so you never enter the truth of the experience, so you're always outside the truth of your own experience, and it's not clear if anything or anyone else experiences that truth either.

a: I'm incredibly fearful of all the photographs ever taken of me ending up pinned up at my funeral. Now that I'm alive, I can destroy the ones I don't want, I can have people take new ones of me, but the idea of those photos telling my story once I'm dead is unsettling to me.

d: I have two photos in particular of myself that I'd love to destroy. I keep thinking, why don't I tear them up? I never do, but will now that you mention it; next time I get my hands on them.

a: ...or they can end up next to you at your wake when you're dead. When you're alive these pictures carry a lot less weight, but when you die they are the things that people use to tell the fiction or to try to understand the fiction.

d: Yes, that fiction is definitely something that I'm concerned about. Not in controlling it, but in the way we become a fiction after we die. So you're a physical fact, I guess, when you're living, but then you become a fiction, pure spirit, when you're dead. Which sounds like it pretty much contradicts everything I was saying before, but there's something there about interiority and exteriority that's different. But, also, I think that there's something to consider in that postmortem fiction that we become that also infiltrates the us that is living. That fiction is an element that supports who we are as we are living. In other words, it's something that we're conscious of while we are living, our patrimony, if you will. One of the things that t.o.m. says in his performance is "find the old man within." There is this whole movement to return to your inner child, a kind of essentialism, but I like the idea of projecting yourself forward to when you're dead. This allows us to think of ourselves as a construct. That's when we're aware of the fiction. In that fiction we find our immortality, and that's where people like daVinci or Jesus come in; they are fictions that other people keep alive through re-imagining them or identifying empathetically with them and their production. I think that might be the only kind of immortality that one can aspire to, and that's the artistic urge, maybe. Certainly the creative one, genetics, child-bearing, that kind of thing...

a: So to talk about this space, your home, some more. If you died tomorrow, people would treat this space as if it were holy, or something. There's nothing more haunting than being in someone's space once they are gone.

d: Yeah, and how is that different than art making? I have to go pee and think about that.

[A couple minutes go by.]

d: I have these pictures of my mother's house before she died. She would make these still-lives all around the house in a suburban housewife kind of way. I always felt it was an art project of hers:



Elaine Dixon's "still-lives," 2001

Everyone is a frustrated artist, to a degree. This expression of my mother's was all done for us; it was all for the family. No one else really came over that much. So it was this really insular form of expression. Everything was decorated really precisely and carefully. There were these still-lives all over the house, on the coffee table, everything was set up. You weren't allowed to move them. There would be an open book placed on top of a stack of other old, aesthetically pleasing books, which nobody read. Then there would be like an old pair of spectacles on top of the open book, as if Benjamin Franklin had just gotten up from reading, or something. I loved that. These things were all over the house. She had home and garden magazines, like *Southern Living*, and she would look at them and think her house should look like the photos. The photos had these arrangements in them, set up by the photographer. Many were set up to look as if someone had just walked out of the picture frame, which she in turn reproduced in our house. An apple, perhaps, with a bite taken out of it—we had a wooden one of those. My mom was really good at this. I went to a friend's house, whose father made a lot of money, and it looked surprisingly like my mother's house with the still-lives, so it wasn't just my mother. And they had hired some really famous interior decorator to do the decorating. I couldn't believe it, because it was just like how my mother decorated, with the spectacles and everything. This interior decorator, which I'm sure was expensive because they actually mentioned his name—I mean he had a “name”—he was making the same decisions as my mother, also due, probably, to the same home decorating magazines. Decorating seems to have completed some full circle of representation, where the constructs of the photograph had infiltrated the real-life lived domestic space of our home, which may be why I wanted to show you my shack, or why I thought there might be art here, somewhere, in this effort.

a: One more question. What's your favorite thing in your space? I'm forcing you to name it.

d: Suzy (Spence)'s painting, or Leslie (Brack)'s, or Ralph (Lemon)'s, but I also have this article over there that's about a girl that was killed in my high school, which is really important, and Mike (Ashkin)'s piece, and (Brad) Benischek's posters, and the chandelier, and my jade congs. Oh, and there's the picture of my mother, and the one of my granddad. Those are important. And some books, many books, but they're never really *in* a space, they're everywhere. Unless you really love that particular, physical book, which happens.