



ALISON RUTTAN

Unmaking of Places and Histories

UNIVERSITY GALLERIES
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Alison Ruttan: Unmaking of Places and Histories is organized by University Galleries' Director and Chief Curator Kendra Paitz. The exhibition and programming are supported by a grant from the **Illinois Arts Council Agency**. All images courtesy of the artist.

UNMAKING OF PLACES AND HISTORIES:

Alison Ruttan and Kendra Paitz in Conversation

Kendra Paitz: We have chosen to focus on your new and recent architectural ceramic work for *Unmaking of Places and Histories* at University Galleries. Although you have been making this work for several years, it started as you finished a photographic project inspired by Jane Goodall's research. Could you talk about your *The Four-Year War at Gombe* (2009–2011) and how it led to these works?

Alison Ruttan: *The Four-Year War at Gombe* is an epic photographic series installed in chapter-like groupings. Based on Goodall's discovery that chimpanzees, like us, carry grudges, defend their territory, and wage war, the series follows her accounts of a troop that lived together peaceably for many years before splitting into two communities. Over a period of four years, half of the original group hunted down and killed all of the former members of their troop. It seems that, like us, the bloodiest feuds and civil wars are waged against those to whom we have the closest ties. Goodall wrote about chimpanzee violence and she saw us in them, both in our ability to cooperate and in having the same kind of strategic thinking that goes into planned warfare. I started the ceramic project *A Bad Idea Seems Good Again* (2010–ongoing) while I was in the middle of editing the Gombe project. The U.S. was in the middle of the war in Iraq. It seemed important to return to human affairs, to be in the present, and to look directly at the state of the world we live in. I see the two projects as linked, in that the Gombe story is like an "origin" story for our own history of violence.

KP: Each of your bodies of work involves long-term research, often, as you mentioned, involving human behavior. We'll get to your materials and processes in a few minutes, but could you discuss some of the reading, conversations, and travels that influenced your research for the ceramic works—content-wise, in terms of cultural, political, and architectural history? Was there one particular moment or story that compelled you to start down this path?

AR: The heart of these projects was a need to understand our own human relationship to violence. Much of my reading during that period followed the questions, "How much of our behavior is rooted in the core of our biological identity and how captive are we to these impulses?" I read books by primatologists Frans de Waal and Jane Goodall as well as Wrangham and Peterson's book, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*. I met with scientists working in evolutionary biology and had residencies at primate research stations. I also became curious about Teresa Brennan's work on affect. Some of her research looked at how the behavior of individuals in groups is influenced by the hidden effects of pheromones that can lead to both social cohesion and aggressive actions. I found connections in the war journalist Chris Hedges' *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* and in J. Glen Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. They both created deep questions for me; each wrote about the terrible seductive power that war holds over those caught in its annihilating embrace. It is hard not to wonder if we are forever destined for endless wars. The ceramic works have functioned as a form of witnessing from afar the conflicts that have now spread throughout the Middle East. While we in the U.S. have become consumed by our own internal politics, we should not forget that American politics have played a significant hand in these wars. On a more positive note, I recently read Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which statistically counters many of my fears with clear evidence of significant improvement in human behavior over the centuries. Nice to know.

My scale and material choices were inspired by funerary models from the Han Dynasty, several examples of which can be seen in the Art Institute of Chicago's permanent collection. I have passed by these sculptures regularly in my many years teaching at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago]. The models feel remarkably modern in that the buildings are very specific but simplified, not unlike the balanced proportions that we admire in early Renaissance paintings by artists like Piero della Francesca. I felt that my reconstructions of destroyed architecture in the Middle East should honor the specificity of the buildings they are sourced from, but also should not be weighed down with unnecessary attention to detail. It is a matter of where I want you to focus; the skill I apply should be enough to be believable but not so perfect that you become lost in the craft. In 2016, I went to China to see more of these sculptures. I was also able to see historical buildings still in use that had inherited many of these same qualities.

KP: You've also cited the influences of Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, among others, for their repetitions of geometric forms. And you've talked about the "failures of Modernism," particularly in relation to Modern architecture distributed throughout the world. Could you elaborate on this?

AR: Much of the architecture we see in today's cities is indebted to Modernism and that had roots in utopian ideals that emerged in the first half of the 20th-century. The buildings' forms followed their function, with many architects advocating standardization in architecture and creating mass construction of "rationally designed" apartment blocks for factory workers. This style of building quickly became a sign for modern living. Modernism eventually merged with what we now call International Style, which further streamlined the idea of functional buildings that were pure and free of decoration. Module and mass-produced apartments and homes changed the way cities and neighborhoods looked across the world. In reality this type of building quickly became synonymous with cheap construction. The communities that inhabited these suburban enclaves have suffered the largest casualties of these wars. Older buildings in the city centers have fared much better due to their sturdier construction. The dreams of a better, modern, and more egalitarian life have been left in rubble as a visible scar.

KP: The crumbled and shredded buildings in the source images on your studio walls really are shocking. On a slightly different note, I appreciate your dexterity among mediums. You were working in photography and thinking about making a film right before starting this project, but you've also made drawings, collages, videos, and installations. Once you decided that clay was the right way to convey your thoughts about this you started taking ceramics courses. You said that the clay breaks like concrete, so you could make convincing buildings and rubble.

AR: That material similarity of clay to cement was a big part of my choice to work in ceramics. I was also attracted to the use of slab construction. I am not an artist who works in a materially specific way, but I do value the aesthetic, cultural, and historical associations that come with each medium. I usually have a learning curve at the beginning of new projects, and the craft that develops always informs the possibilities and ideas I am exploring.

KP: Materials-testing and research are incredibly important to this body of work. One of our graduate students and a ceramics professor said they were "geeking out" over your glazes. You make tiny models of buildings to experiment with the variety of surfaces and colors you can achieve with the glazes. What does that process look like? And do you keep detailed notes about the outcomes?

AR: It takes so much time to build each one, so I am very careful with the glazing. I do extensive glaze-testing using tiles for color, surface, and glaze fit. From there I make quick ceramic studies that have a formal relationship to the finished work but feel far more like sketches. I often use multiple layered glazes and the studies allow me to test how the different glaze combinations will react. I try to label all the tests and keep notes on what I used and in what order on each final piece.

KP: You've also developed methods using cheesecloth, plastic tenting, and cycles of moistening and drying?

AR: Yes, I've become the expert at doing things the wrong way. If you're after something that is broken, you have a lot of leeway. At the same time, things that would be a disaster for another artist are often cultivated in my work. For *Line in the Sand* (2014–2015), I cast 650 vehicles from 15 different molds. I deliberately let some over-dry in their molds, causing tearing when removed, while others were removed too early, causing slumping and warping. I engineer the sliding pancaked rubble by sandwiching cheesecloth between two ceramic slabs and re-running through the slab roller. I allow the slab to dry and then break it. I then wrap it in wet towels to re-moisten, and then I can drape it over an architectural section that has damage. I keep the sculptures in a moist plastic-tented environment for about two weeks to help the debris bond to the clay it is resting on. The cheesecloth burns out in the first firing so getting the clay to re-bond is essential.

KP: There's a tendency for people to initially become enamored with your process. In addition to the engineering of these works, you also enact violence upon them with crowbars and BB guns. You can even see some of the remaining BB pellets or semi-melted ones within the compartments of some of the buildings.

AR: I am conscious that the amount of rubble must relate to the perceived amount missing from the building. That is why I make them as complete forms before wrecking them. I use a crowbar's bent end and a BB air gun, which has a fairly low impact that I can control. The BB gun allows me to rip through the walls.

KP: How did you decide to display the sculptures on tables like this? You talked about navigating city blocks.

AR: The tables were originally designed to represent the unevenly shaped blocks in Beirut. The wooden tabletops are covered in troweled clay to give them a matte surface that is dusty in appearance. I wanted to create different elevations, so some of the tabletops are higher and supported by loose bricks, wood, and plastic bags—materials commonly found in rubble. The rusted steel tables were designed as open grids that reference steel girders, windows, and doors. The buildings are sparsely set within the open expanses of the tabletops to suggest the loss of additional buildings that once inhabited the now forlorn landscape. The environment is meant to feel out of time, and one might wonder "At what point are we seeing this destruction?"

KP: Could you talk a bit about the visual research you've done for studying these sites? For example, *The Egg* is based on an actual building in Beirut that was supposed to be a movie theater.

AR: I have amassed a large collection of photographs gathered from web searches that document many of the war-torn regions of the Middle East. All of my work is made in reference to this material. Most of the ceramic buildings are specific, not conglomerations, but the building referred to as "The Egg" is the only significant work of architecture in this series. In 1965, it was designed by Joseph Philippe Karam to be part of the Beirut City Center, which would have included a shopping mall, this cinema, and residential buildings. In 1975, the civil war in Beirut left the buildings bullet-riddled and largely unfinished. Today, only the cinema and the underground parking exist. "The Egg" remains a monument of sorts and its future is still undefined. The building's unusual characteristics were what drew me to it: the challenge in making it, as well as its obvious reference to a failed utopian future. I think it stands today as a reminder of those hopes and not as a warning.

KP: The newest works in the exhibition include found furniture. The ceramic components project upward, collapse into, and spill over these objects that are rooted to our sense of a domestic environment. You're thinking of these works as more of a micro view, connecting the devastation to one's sense of home?

AR: Yes, the furniture is an experiment with creating an alternative pedestal to suggest a domestic life that might have been but has now vanished along with the residents who lived or worked in these buildings.

KP: And you ultimately decided on furniture styles after searching Airbnb sites in these countries?

AR: I researched what middle class homes would look like in cities like Homs and Aleppo. I looked online for magazines or merchandise websites but was not very successful in getting a sense of ordinary homes. I then began looking at Airbnb sites. I didn't find any in most of Syria, but I did locate a few in Damascus and Beirut. The interiors pictured looked very much like middle class homes anywhere in the world with a mix of heirlooms and standard modern furniture. I noticed a preference for darker woods, lighter marble, white, gold, and metal work, so I tried to stay close to that, picking up pieces from second-hand stores as well as buying a few new pieces. The furniture choices came first, and from there I would scour my large archive of images, looking for buildings that could be integrated into the furniture. Then I cut into most of the furniture pieces with an eye toward creating a relationship between the two forms.

KP: We titled the exhibition for a phrase that you used in our first studio visit. You were talking about the "undoing and unmaking of places and histories." The phrase is heavy and ominous; it conveys the calculated and deliberate destruction of sites and/or cultures. How did you come to this particular language?

AR: Many of the Middle East's Arab regions have been controlled by outsiders going back to the Ottoman Empire's rule (1517–1918). Following WWI, Britain and France secretly drew up a treaty (the Sykes–Picot Agreement) to partition much of the Ottoman Empire into British and French-controlled territories. The divisions that were made have never fit with the ethnic populations living there. It was essentially a land grab to gain access to the Mediterranean. The agreement negated the promise Britain had made to the Arabs to give support to the creation of a long-desired Arab homeland in greater Syria, in exchange for the Arabs' support against the Ottoman Empire. The legacy of this broken agreement has continued to create mistrust among Arabs that reaches into present-day conflicts in the region. The continued fighting over control of territories is a form of "unmaking" and has created a terribly unstable region and much suffering for its populations.

KP: It's complicated to address such horrific human experiences, particularly when one is not from that area. These works not only draw attention to the devastation of violence, but also to its aftermath. You've described these works as your way of "witnessing from here." They prompt a sense of empathy, in part, because of their intimate scale. It's also important to note that there are no figures, no people or traces of them, within the works.

AR: My understanding of what is, and has been, happening there is primarily from what I see on television or on my laptop. I am not a deep expert on the region, its politics, or its people, but on the other hand, it shouldn't take an expert to see that what is happening is deeply wrong. As an ordinary American citizen, living at great distance from the crisis, I have few options to effect change, but I can refuse to look away. I can refuse a narrowing of my viewpoint to only that of my own backyard. The lack of people noted in the work suggests a kind of disappearance, both literally and metaphorically.

KP: Also in our first studio visit, you described these works as "purposely intimate anti-war monuments." When you gave your lecture at University Galleries, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran came up to share his appreciation for your approach and message. Could you share some of the feedback you've received from people who have experienced the type of violence referenced in this work?

AR: I am pleased when I haven't offended anyone by my ignorance. I do not wish to speak as an authority or suggest personal knowledge, of which I have none. I usually just try to listen, as I am keenly aware that it is someone else's story. It has meant a lot to me to hear from students, immigrant families, and veterans that my making of this work has meaning for them.

