

# International Sculpture Center Blog

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## Duke Riley: In Duke's Studio at The Armory plus the (Un)fairs

April 24, 2013  
By intsculpturectr  
in In the Studio  
Tags: Jan Garden Castro, studio  
1 Comment



Odwalla Boat, Odwalla bottles, wood, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Magnan Metz Gallery

Since Duke Riley's studio this month (March as I write) is somewhere unknown, either an island near Key West, Florida or an obscure library on Staten Island; and since his original Greenpoint studio was transformed into Rotgut, an all-night speakeasy with cheap drinks and naked doings; and since this was shut down by the police last month, I decided to visit the studio Duke created as part of Curator Eric Shiner's Focus: USA Special Projects wing of The Armory.

Nothing screams "America" as boldly as Duke's combination of installation, arcane tales from the underbelly of American history, humor, invention, and lots of sex, drawing, and fabrication materials right out of Wild West tales, including wood, nails, cigarettes, and rope. His driftwood studio floor, gathered after he volunteered to help Superstorm Sandy victims in the Rockaways, was thick planks of aged, multihued wood plus a few colorfully-inscribed planks from the old Rotgut bar counter. Set into the center of this square floor was an incised granite stone commemorating the *Silk Stockinged Stowaway who landed on Pier 94 on November 30, 1934* – a tale tied to the pier housing the Armory show. A rectangular wooden crib recessed into the floor held 700 sheets of cobalt-blue, wax-coated rubbing paper. A monkey's fist knot – a thick ball of knotted rope – was tied to a metal cleat normally used to moor boats. By taping the paper against the granite stone and rubbing it with the knot, 700 people knelt down, rubbed the stone, and made their own prints. Duke numbered, signed, and gave away 700 real art works at the multi-billion dollar 5-day all-over-town art fair spending spree called The Armory. The free art was revolutionary!



Duke's Riley's Rubbing Studio at the 100th Armory Show, NYC, 2013. Photo Credit: Will Star

The studio walls were papered in seafoam green wallpaper containing endless drawings

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of rats and seals interwoven into curving nautical designs. As one viewer noted to friends, some seals, gay and straight, seemed to be doing '69 on the walls. On top of this, the 11 art works included one wall-sized 111 x 130 inch ink on canary paper "Give me Monarchy or Give Me Death," – an orgiastic, sprawling epic about the dream life of the dukes and dames and a set titled "Items Salvaged from Vessel: Whale's teeth believed to have been engraved by Gordon Davis while inside The Acorn vessel." This latter set of objects resembling scrimshaw on whale teeth was made of cast acrylic and tattoo ink. This tells the story of The Battle of Brooklyn. According to Duke, George Washington was caught behind enemy lines in Red Hook, a Brooklyn seaport, and was saved by the 21<sup>st</sup> Regiment from Marblehead MA, reportedly, the only racially-integrated unit during the Revolutionary War.



Scrimshaw Vitrine (detail). Carved cast acrylic whale teeth, tattoo ink, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Magnan Metz

Gallery



Lubberdise Lost. Cigarettes on wood panel. 72" x 48", 2010.

Photo Credit: Kitty Joe Sainte-Marie

Even though the Armory featured cigarette butt art by Damien Hirst and Al Hansen, Duke's cigarette tree, *Lubberdise Lost* (cigarettes on wood panel, 60 x 48") was constructed with a range of choice whole cigarettes, reportedly a fantasy of smokers and bums that in heaven, cigarettes are free and even grow on trees. An engraved plexiglass and tile mosaic, *Morituri Te Salutant* (a tribute about death in battle), shows soldiers from a Roman *Naumachia* intermixed with the metal Globe from Flushing Meadows World Fair of 1964. Rounding out Riley's studio was an old wooden secretary desk with a black and white TV playing film footage from Duke's live re-enactments, including the 2009 *Those About to Die Salute*

*You* in which fleets of homemade boats and toga-clad warriors from museums from all five boroughs duked it out, shooting fireworks and slinging microwaved tomatoes from boats in a flooded Flushing Meadows 1964 World's Fair fountain.



Those About to Die Salute You (Performance Detail: The Queens Museum of Art Vessel). Local invasive reeds, trash, materials salvaged from the former World's Fair Ice Skating Rink, participants, 2009. Photo Credit: Sam Horine

Duke Riley's arts intermix real histories and his own interventions. It is not Duke's obsessions with sex, salty dog tales, and the sea but his mastery of wit, drawing, hammering, and sculpting that make his installations eye-opening. This studio was cut stone amid the buzz and champagne bubbles of the Armory's annual Navy Pier cash cows.

The artist's website, [www.dukeriley.info/](http://www.dukeriley.info/), illustrates many art works and lists his solo exhibitions and some "battles" he has staged, including a reenactment of the Chinese

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Zodaic race in China. Riley's statement includes the following: "Our rights need to be constantly tested, refreshed and renewed. This testing is the messy process of a democracy and needs to be enacted by those who break the order of things through questioning and challenging the status quo. The boisterous sea of our liberty relies heavily upon these waves." So the message behind the humor and playfulness in Riley's art takes us to America's core values **and** to contemporary adjustments of those values – such as the elimination of racism, sexism and other cultural and social injustice.

Coincidentally, two newer, more affordable fairs took place in old buildings and had some room-sized installations – *the (Un)Fair* down 52<sup>nd</sup> Street and *Spring/Break* in Nolita. In all, Armory Week brought artists, art buyers, and curious visitors from around the world to many New York area neighborhoods.

By [Jan Garden Castro](#)

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**cristina taniguchi** says: REPLY

April 26, 2013 at 7:53 am

a challenging and intriguing notion of art view (a movement?)

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