

Article and Images: Terra Scott
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Christopher Gulick has been sculpting in the Bethel College, Robert W. Regier art gallery during the entire month of November, 2014. As part of this “residency workshop”, Gulick invites anyone passing by to stop and participate in his work. I visited several times to soak in his wisdom and engage in his process. Gulick was enthusiastic to answer any questions I had.

Last year, Gulick held his first residency at Newman University in Wichita, KS. He plans to continue researching small liberal arts colleges interested in hosting such residency workshops. His preference is small liberal arts colleges because he’s found people to be “more open minded” in this setting. Here, he says, he is free to discuss just about anything.

How are you?

“I never had it so good” (He begins)

“...getting something done. I don’t even know if it’s any good, it’s just (first draft) work. But, I get to hang out with y’all and I get to work with your sketches (selections). It gets me out of my comfort zone....”



“I like light and delicate things. Even if it’s (actually) heavy and dense, I like it to have the appearance of delicacy.” [Grinding sounds from his drill and sounds of ambient music....]

What are you listening to?

“This is ‘Mellow Beats’. I’m tired of Mellow Beats. Let’s listen to some Berlin Techno, French hip-hop, Russian black metal is cool, or Bollywood stuff. I use a music site called Hype Machine Pretty weird for a Wichita juvenile delinquent Catholic school kid”, he professes. Weirder still for a self-proclaimed old guy to listen to such hip stuff.

Do you have an objective with this residency?

"I've been working on sculpture for about 25 years now, and about 8-10 years ago I decided to make this into a business. I do commission work (in addition to studio projects). I just finished a commission for a hotel in St. Petersburg, Russia. While that sounds all hoity-toity, it's no different than if I had been commissioned for a hotel in Winfield, Kansas. They all deserve the same kind of respect and work. This residency helps me because I will not only have sketches to show a potential client, but I will also have more (working) models to show potential clients."

What are your sources for inspiration, for ideas?

"I have that pile of "Interior Design" books over there. I do what my mom always told me not to and I draw in books like a kindergartener doing refrigerator art. Those books are full of ideas. I look at the (photos of) rooms in the magazines and say, 'oh! That looks really cool! They need one of my sculptures!' I'm just that egotistical. So I draw it in there and make it reality."

"That's where your part of the show is", as Gulick makes reference to his visitors. "If you're so inclined, pick up one of the magazines, peruse through it, and say 'Hey! I wonder if he could build that!?' and write your name on one of those post-it notes and stick it in there. I will pick up a book randomly and start a new sculpture and title it with your name and the date. There are very few of these selections (visitors) have picked that I would have picked myself, and that's what allows me to stretch my intellect. I'm learning from the college students, not the other way around."



Describe the materials you are using and why.

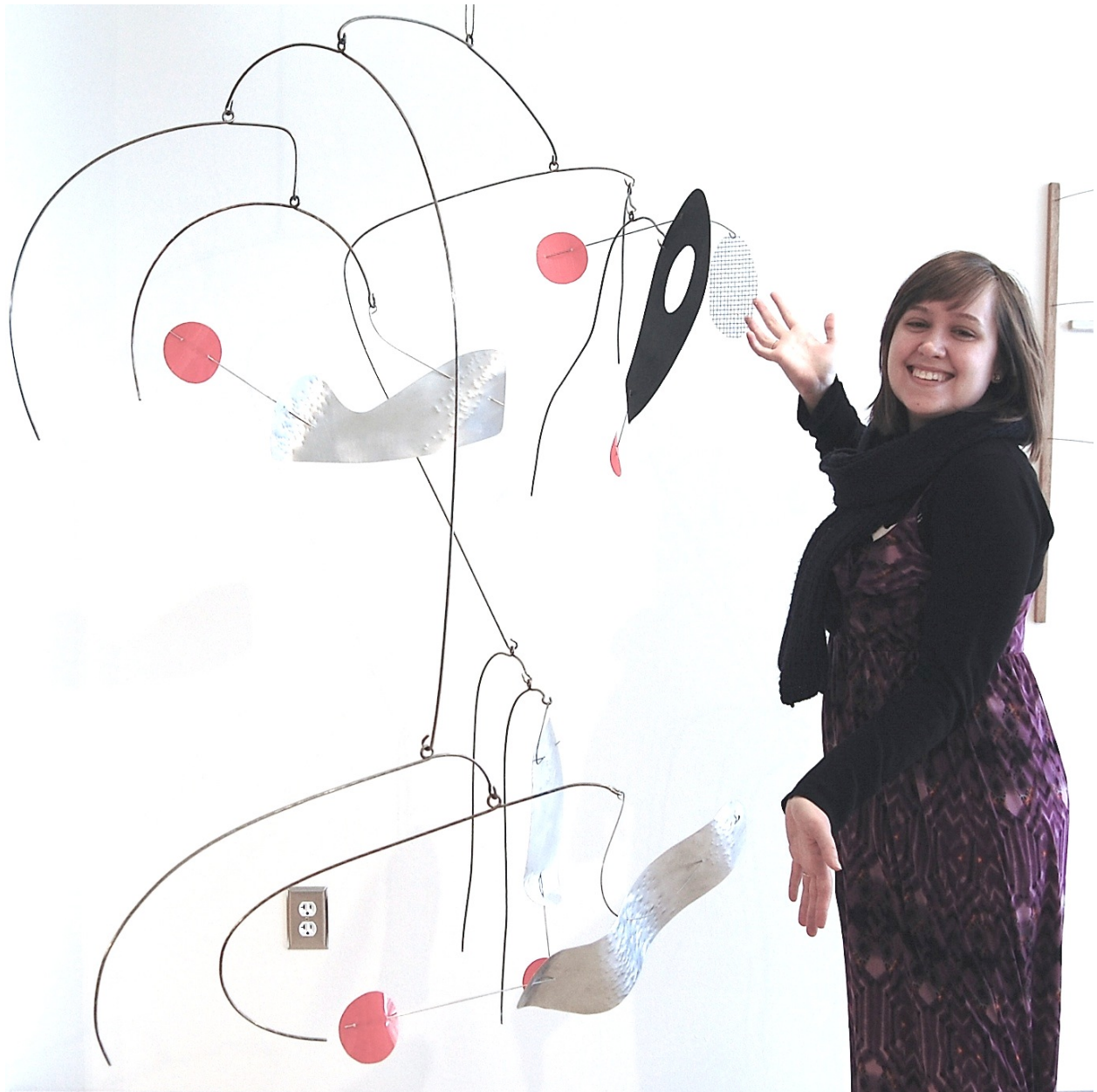
“I’m just working with the materials I have”. He points to a variety of metal rods, sheet metal and scrap found wood and plastic. “It’s a lot more of a mental, emotional, spiritual exercise – a lot of rules. Like in sports, there’s a set of rules and that’s where you have to operate. People always say, ‘why can’t you think outside the box?’, but that’s not the point. The real challenge is using your creativity while you’re in the box. I’m always thinking outside the box, I can’t help that. The real challenge is finding a way to stay in the box and still be creative.

Speaking of boxes,
I’ve got this box
here, labeled
empty box, and
this can. Have you
ever seen a can
with nothing on
it?! This is called
readymade art.
Marcel Duchamp
was (pretty much)
the beginning of
the Dada
movement, which
is anti art. He was
making fun of
snobbery in the art
world and started
making a big deal
of what is called
readymade. He’s
famous for turning
a urinal upside
down and signing
it and calling it
‘Fountain’. So this
is my idea of
readymade.”



“Ideas (come from) how I’m responding to something I see, something I feel, or something I want to copy [laughter]. Is there ever anything new in our day?
I’m reading the book ‘Making your Life as an Artist’. The author infers that whether you had the same idea as someone in history, or someone on the other side of the planet today, it’s still your original thought. That’s all that really matters.”

“What was it that that ‘populist-tripe, trailer trash’ writer, ...oh yeah, Shakespeare, said? ‘To thine own self are true.’ As long as you are true to yourself, that’s all that matters. As soon as we say, ‘I can fulfill this or that dream *IF...*’ then we’re putting limits on ourselves. We exist to follow through with our compelling nature.”



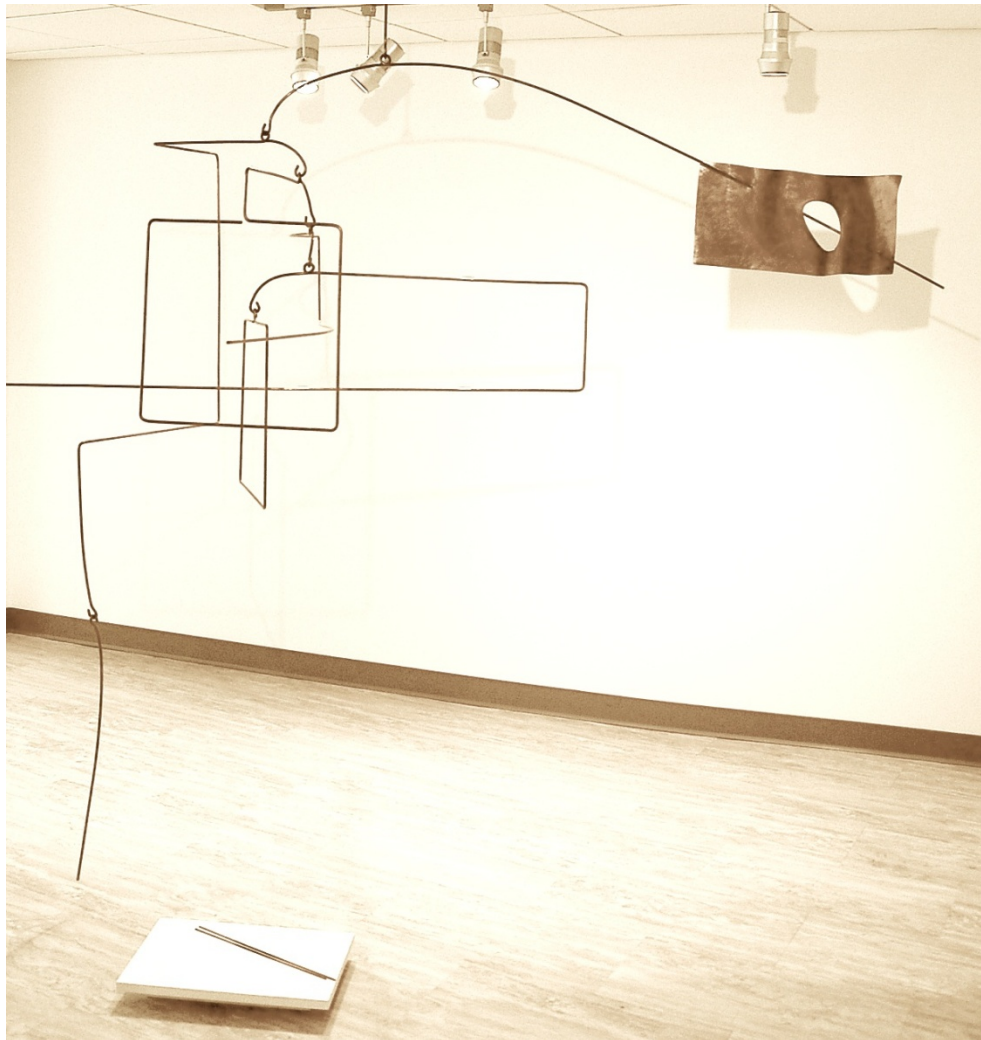
Allie Shoup with “Allie1-14”, the sculpture built from her sketch selection.

How did you get started on the road to kinetic sculpture?

"1989 was my year of personal epiphany. A whole lot of bad things, and a whole lot of good things, all happened to me at the same time. I was 31, driving by the art department at Friends University. There used to be a great big elm tree about ten yards away from the street, about halfway between the front door and the street. About eye level, someone had taken a bunch of farm gears and painted them primary and secondary colors and hung them by wire from the tree and here's this floating rainbow of metal. That one image made such an impact on my psyche; I went home that day and started making mobiles. I'm an old motor head so I'm always a fan of anything with an engine or wheels. That's how I got started. I've always been enamored with junk metal, stuff you'd find in the alleys, or working at the phone company, I had collected about four or five miles of wire coiled up that I used to pull out of dumpsters, stored in my basement. I would build a lot of religious icons, everything from renderings of last suppers, crucifixes, and even a few menorahs. I did a juju prayer bead necklace for a Buddhist buddy. I worked on mosaics for years. I was always working on the kinetic stuff. (As) I got back to the business aspect and I needed to figure out what it was I did best that set me apart from the crowd and it was this stuff (the kinetics). I play around with other things to get my ya-yas out, but this is the stuff I like to stay serious about."



Regarding the Bethel Symphony making use of one of your sculptures, did you intend to make a musical instrument?



“No! That’s the cool part! Alexander Calder, the inventor of mobiles, considered by a lot of critics and historians as the single most important American artist in the 20th century – and I agree with them – was commissioned by John Cage, a composer out of the Beat era. He would compose things like, **knock**. That was it, one snare. **Bap!** That would be the whole composition. He commissioned Calder to make a mobile, so one of his percussionists could play one of his compositions. I’d always thought it’d be so cool if I could do that someday or something along those lines. We stumbled by accident, (in this sculpture) upon the transfer of the sonic vibrations through the sculpture, through the negative space, to a positive space (the solid rectangle)– which is a good way also to explain, in a really ambient way, how the science of sound traveling through electronics functions. You actually have a microscopic sonic vibration that is being amplified by electricity. For example, you can come up and smack something, like this table, and you can feel it vibrate. When you add electricity to it and push it forward with

voltage, it's always going to go to the furthest ground, like when lightning hits something; it's going to go to the broadest land it can get to (in this case the speaker panel)."

This sculpture "Levered Cymbal", was then installed on stage in November and played in Bethel Symphony Orchestra performance of "Magneticfireflies" (one word) by Augusta Read Thomas.

In Closing

During a "closing reception" all maquettes produced during the residency went up for silent auction. Anonymous donors matched the overall auction amount. All monies were donated to the Bethel College, Robert W. Regier gallery expense fund.



Learn more about Gulick's work at christophergulick.com.