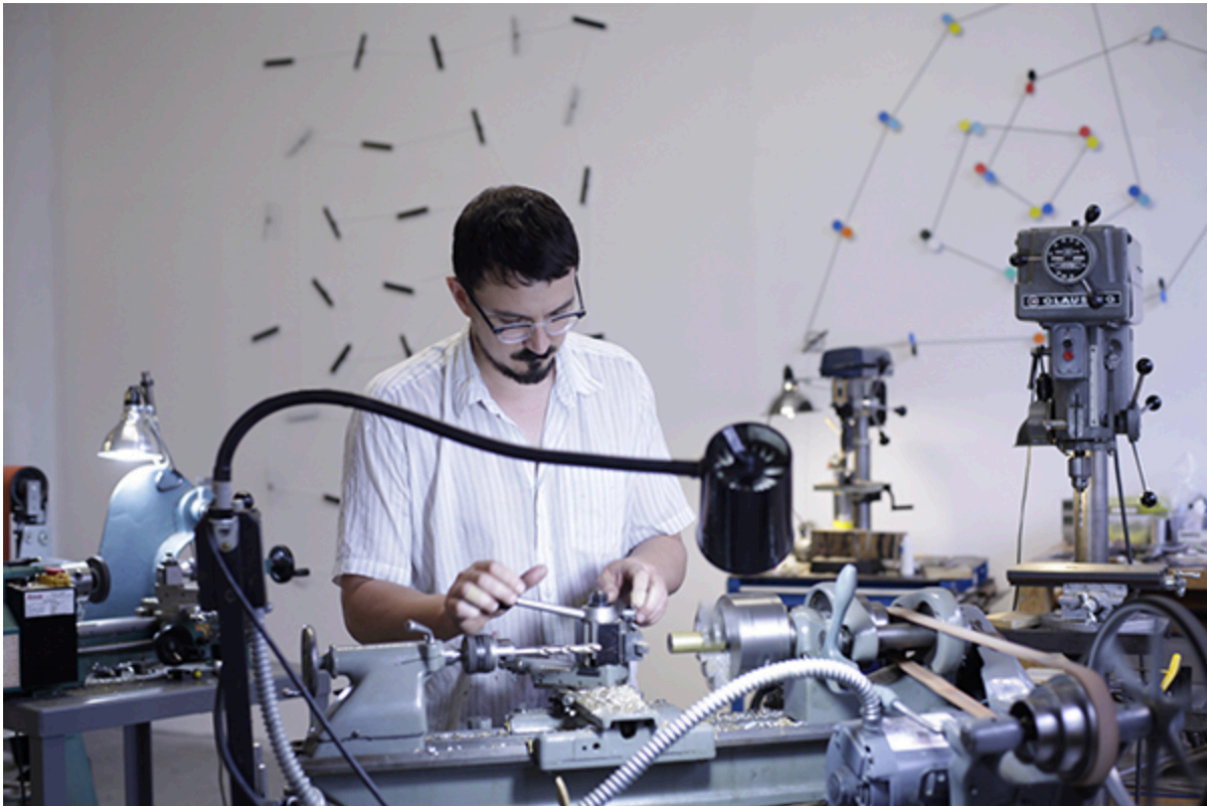


FRONTRUNNER

JUAN FONTANIVE: BIRDS, BUTTERFLIES, AND ANIMATED MACHINES

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Combining animation and machines, Brooklyn artist Juan Fontanive makes work that completely rethinks the traditional practice of sculpture. Juan's large kinetic sculptures take over the gallery space, creating an environment stimulated by moving abstract shapes and the repetitious drone of metal parts. His smaller, mechanized flip books present colorful birds and butterflies in flight. The turn of each page mimics the subject's fluttering wings.

I met up with Juan at his studio in Ridgewood, Queens. This would be my first viewing of his kinetic sculptures and flipbooks in person. And it didn't take long to realize that the conceptual process and fabrication behind Juan's work is incredibly vast. After a brief studio tour, Juan talked with me about his background, creative process, artistic interests, and plans for the summer.

You currently have an exhibition on view at Riflemaker Gallery in London, which features works from your Ornithology series. These mechanized “flip books” of birds are fascinating. When did you start making this kind of work? Can you talk about the process and ideas behind them?



I had been making flip books, animations, and claymations since high school. When I went to London for school, I started making physical machines that worked with the moving image. It just so happened that in the markets of East London, you could get clocks and clock parts for very cheap. So I would buy the clocks, and started taking them apart and making machines out of them. That first machine, which is my own invention, is based on an old flip clock, but it speeds up. Then I started using old bike parts to make machines that animate and work with the moving image.

The flipbooks give the impression of the earliest days of animation and motion film, specifically the studies of Eadweard Muybridge. Were you conscious of Muybridge and others like him when you first started making them?

Totally, actually that is what I was studying in London. I have a Master’s in animation. So Eadweard Muybridge, Oskar Fischinger, and Harry Smith were very influential.

Each of your machines is different from the next. What materials are they made of? And where do you get the parts?

Originally, I was using mostly found parts with some brass and copper pieces that I would drill with a machine. Eventually, I stopped using found parts and started using raw materials. I will get sheets of brass and stainless steel and machine the parts myself. My studio is kind of like a mini machine shop – I have a lathe and drills. Now, I can make any part I need, like a pulley for example. While I liked working with found objects, I appreciate more the possibilities that come with using raw materials.



I noticed that each flip book presents different species of birds. But they move in a continuous flight pattern, which makes them come across as one bird at first.

In the Ornithology series, each frame is a different type of hummingbird. So there are seventy-two different species of hummingbirds in one machine. They are still images, but end up looking like one bird in flight as they flip through the machine. This series in particular was made using 18th and 19th century ornithological illustrations. For some of the other flip book machines, I hand painted the images.

This leads me to think that it must take a staggering amount of work and attention to detail to make them? What is involved in their construction? How long do they usually take from start to finish?

It's a really involved 2-part process. First there are machines, which take a very long time to make. Every part is designed and made by me basically. Even the screws and all the interior parts except for the motor are fabricated.

The animation part takes a really long time as well. After the animation is done, it's screen printed using a four-color screen printing process on the front and back of each page. For example, one image of a butterfly is actually made up of CMYK dots, which make up all the colors that you see.

Since you are using found images in the Ornithology series, you also need to think about how to sequence the images in order to make the animation come across as though the bird is in a continuous flight pattern.



Right. For me, it's always interesting when I am using found images. I look through tons of images and then choose the ones that will be used for each frame and see how it animates. Then when I play back a whole animation, it can be a bit of a surprise. And I think, "Whoa, that's an interesting movement."

There's a strong audio component in your art. How does sense of sound affect the viewer's experience of your work?

I think sound is really important, I think about it a lot. Different types of machines have unique sounds. Various types of paper have different sounds. I also think about rhythm a lot and how objects have the capacity to create different sound patterns and repetitions.

Compared to the mechanized flip books of birds and butterflies, which are very illustrative, some of your other kinetic sculptures are more geometric and non-representational. Do you prefer one mode to the other, representational/illustrative or non-representation/geometric?

I tend to look at things in a more abstract way. Even when I am using more representational imagery, I am thinking in abstract terms. For example, butterflies are viewed more as pieces of color and shapes. Like the impression you have when you see a butterfly in movement out of the corner of your eye. It appears as a fuzzy thing made up of moving colors and shapes. That is more interesting to me than representational imagery.

You have a very interesting background, first studying English and Textual Studies at Syracuse University. You then received your MFA from the Royal College of Art in London. What were your interests during this time?



I was in the art school at Syracuse and then I transferred out. At the time, I was interested in theory, philosophy, and creative writing, specifically poetry and experimental fiction. There was some interesting stuff happening then like flash fiction. I feel like I've always been a visual artist, but have had many other interests. Maybe it is because my mom is a painter and visual art was always around me, I thought, "Well, I kind of already know how to do that, so I'll try studying other things." But when I eventually went back to visual art, I was really happy. Still, I am also glad that I studied those other subjects at Syracuse. Critical theory is very important. I think as an artist, it's essential to have a critical view of things. So having this background was very useful when I went on to study at the Royal College of Art.

Looking back, are there any particular experiences or people that influenced you, and helped form the artistic sensibilities you have today?

There are plenty of people who have influenced me. But, and this is going to sound like the biggest art cliché, Van Gogh was a big influence. I was really obsessed with Van Gogh for a while before I moved to London. I read all of his letters. He had written so many of them. You get this day-by-day, in-depth look at a painter during the 1800s. And there's the fact that he didn't even start painting until his late 20s. I was really taken by how dedicated he was to painting and his obsession with color.

Looking at your more abstract kinetic sculptures, I am wondering if Alexander Calder has had any influence on your art.

Sure, Calder broke sculpture open and made it more plant like. Until then, sculpture was this stationary object made out of some heavy material like marble. He separated this dense form out like tree, and often times his work looks like a branch with a leaf at the end. Calder's notions about opening sculpture up and freeing it, and making color float in midair fascinate me. I have a similar feeling of wanting to free images and colors from their surroundings.



Do you have any plans or project lined up for the summer?

I have a show coming up at Peana Projects in Monterrey, Mexico in November. I am planning to fill the gallery with one big machine. It's going to be in the vein of my abstract kinetic sculptures. This summer, I will be making the different parts that I need for the work like a pulley system.

