

COLUMN: STUDIO VISIT

LIZ LEE

Frank Poor

Rhode Island-based artist Frank Poor has developed an unusual habit over the last ten years. It involves taking long, meandering drives through the back roads of the American South.

"I just get lost," says Poor. We're talking at his studio, a squat garage building at the end of a dead-end street just outside of Providence. The garage door is open, letting in the rain and the sound of some church bells in the distance, as we stare out at the weedy parking lot and the slightly decrepit mill building across the street. It's a far cry from the back roads of rural Georgia, where Poor spent his youth and where he's been returning lately to take photographs, mostly of buildings.

Poor isn't a photographer by trade, but he uses the photographs as a means of exploration in his sculptural work. "I'll drive around south Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, whatever," he says, "and whatever I see that sort of rhymes with something I know about, reminds me of a building, or interests me in some way, I'll hop out of the car, take five or six pictures, get back in the car, and then I'm gone."

Poor never returns to the buildings he photographs. Instead he uses the images he captures to explore the concepts of memory and place, and the discrepancies between recollection and reality. The resulting three-dimensional frames of his subjects are partially outfitted, scaled-down buildings that incorporate bits and pieces of his photographs.

Hale County Barn (2013), for instance, which sits about 3' x 4.5' feet tall, is a bare-bones structure of its namesake, with photos of the actual barn printed directly onto the knotty pine veneer of its two walls. The effect is disorienting; the depth of field and the long shadows cast by a roof that's outside of the frame conflict with the flat plane of the sculpture's surface. A knot in the wood veneer peeks through the translucent image of the original wooden barn, further amplifying the distortion. In other works, Poor uses digital transpar-



Frank Poor working on a wall piece in his studio, 2017. Inkjet on knotty pine veneer. Courtesy of the artist.

ency for walls instead of wood, while others integrate large-scale photos in which the buildings have been excised and replaced with skeletal, three-dimensional structures as stand-ins.

These types of forms surround us—from wall-mounted pieces as small as 9" to free-standing ones as tall as 7"—as Poor walks me through his studio, excitedly telling me about his recent trip to Marfa, Texas. While there, he visited the Chinati Foundation, the art museum founded by American minimalist Donald Judd, who Poor says has been influential to his work. Like Judd, Poor seems to be constantly creating; his wooden frames stand erect or stacked against walls in various states of construction throughout the studio—a church steeple from Alabama, a feed mill from Texas, a pair of chimneys from a farmhouse in North Carolina.

Poor grew up in Woodstock, GA, during the 1960s and '70s, when it was a town of only about 500 or 600 people. Today Woodstock is home to about 30,000 and is one of the fastest-growing suburbs in the United States. About 20 years ago, Poor began studying family photos, trying to remember the floor plans of old family houses, recreating the surrounding landscape as it was in his mind. "So as a kind of exercise, I was trying to recreate those spaces without access to them anymore, and I was always wrong," he says. "So that idea of memory, the idea of place, and the sort of inaccuracies of those things and how they don't come together have really been the subject of the work for the last 20 years."

Above us in the rafters are four small boats, which Poor made himself. "I have to be busy all the time, I've got to be making something," he says. "Because the worst thing you can do is just be still. I can't think unless I'm moving." Yet the artist's calm demeanor and slow, soft-spoken manner seem to belie his frenetic New Englander tendencies. I ask him if he still feels like a Southern transplant, even after 25 years in Rhode Island.

"Oh, absolutely," he says. "And that's pretty much the basis of all this work."

Liz Lee is a freelance writer and communication designer. She lives in Providence, RI.

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