

## IN CONVERSATION



## DANIEL TURNER with Phong Bui



In the midst of preparing for his new exhibit *PM* at Team Gallery (May 4 – June 1, 2014), the artist Daniel Turner (whose works were among those featured in the 2013 exhibit *Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Part I* this past autumn) welcomed publisher Phong Bui to his Greenpoint studio to talk about his life and work.

**Phong Bui (Rail):** Knowing your ongoing interest, which has been invested in the subject of the lurking violence or destruction that mediates between technology and nature, between an aura of ephemeral images and objecthood, as well as the transformation of familiar objects into absurd images, without any surrealist associations—and is as subtle as a strand of hair—I wonder if the burning of over three dozen of your paintings a few months after you graduated from San Francisco Art Institute (S.F.A.I) in 2006 prompted a new direction in your work?

**Daniel Turner:** First let me say that the paintings were of various scales, ranging from about eight by six feet to 18 feet by 26 feet, and were heavily made out of industrial materials, such as kerosene, diesel, liquid aluminum, bitumen emulsion, and were all made on a rural piece of property in southeast Virginia. What drove me in the end to burn them all, as they were becoming more three dimensional, is that they were weighing on me somewhere in the back of my mind. Burning them was a way to release that heavy burden for a fresh beginning. It was a positive action.

**Rail:** Would you say it was liberating and sensational simultaneously?!

**Turner:** Actually I almost caught the entire forest on fire. The fire department came. Unfortunately my digital camera died during the process so I only have about three or four images as documentation.

**Rail:** It doesn't surprise me since the works are loaded with flammable materials, which would accelerate the burning process even more intensely.

**Turner:** It certainly did. Also, I should say that on this piece of land we burned trash, we burned metals, copper, literally tons of material. So burning was a natural thing for me, not quite as dramatic as someone may think.

**Rail:** In James Shaeffer's essay on your work there was a reference made to the notion of the sublime and J.M.W. Turner, which reminded me of his landmark painting "The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons"—an event Turner himself witnessed on the evening of October 16, 1834. One could say that in regard to burning as a sublime experience—which has been explored by Kant to Edmund Burke, Kenneth Burke, among others—the bombing of Baghdad from March 9 to April 4, 2003, which was shown on television from a fixed vantage point quite far away from the event, evoked similar simultaneous excitement and terror. Some even thought it appeared celebratory like the Fourth of July. Also, from such a distance, it emphasized our sense of safety, as David Levi Strauss has pointed out in the past. Anyway, apart from being made from very unconventional, industrial, and flammable materials, your paintings seem to have been about the dark romantic sensibility, akin to the serene yet menacing monochrome paintings of late Rothko, of Lee Bontecou in the late '50s through the '60s. I can even think of the emblematic and weighty dark objects of Jannis Kounellis and Anselm Kiefer.

**Turner:** They were all very influential to my early works. The attraction to darkness or blackness may have begun with the landscape that I grew up in, which would turn pitch black after sunset—you can't even see your hand in front of your face, although

I probably cannot accurately refer to it as a singular source.

**Rail:** How about other additional sources that may have emerged, for example, while you were in art school?

**Turner:** Conversation became the most lucrative asset. Although in time I became increasingly unhappy there, partly because I had to work in a contained room with others, which I wasn't at all used to. As a result, I dropped out, went back to Virginia and I painted there for a year or so. Eventually I made my way back to California.

**Rail:** Was there a particular teacher who was sympathetic to what you were doing?

**Turner:** Yes. Three in particular: Carlos Villa, Dewey Crumpler, and Jeremy Morgan recognized a diversity in my thinking and social behavior as a student. Dewey always told me that I should just pay attention to the work, and not bother going into class, so I worked outside in the meadow.

**Rail:** What was the first work you made after the burning?

**Turner:** I started working with soot that was generated from a controlled condition of fire so that it would fall on Plexiglas, or other found objects. I actually began to look at these objects as they were either lying on the floor or leaning against the wall, then I realized that I should let them exist naturally, without any interference. I should also say that at that time I built a very important room, a 20-foot by 20-foot white cube space that would allow me to look at the work more carefully. Even though all the works were made outdoors, I could bring them in and look at them for a long time before claiming their existence in a particular context.

**Rail:** So "Sp.1" (2007), made of soot on Plexiglas was your first work since the burning?

**Turner:** Yes.

**Rail:** What does the abbreviation "Sp.1" stand for?

**Turner:** Soot Plexiglas 1.

**Rail:** Very simple. And in the same year you made "Norfolk Southern," a ready-made work of essentially two brass fireplace irons facing each other while lying on top of a piece of marble on the floor.



"Norfolk Southern," 2007. Brass fireplace tools, marble, soot, 14" x 47" x 14". Courtesy of artist.

**Turner:** Right. When I built this room as an extension of the studio, I was able to take ordinary objects that were around and look at them more critically, which really helped me see. In fact I still work this way today. I started to realize that there's something happening in objects or forms that were not happening in the previous paintings. My eyes began to pay more attention, and to really consider everything around me as a potential avenue. Sometimes the looking can take hours before the thinking starts to take place or vice versa.

**Rail:** When did you move to New York?

**Turner:** I first came in 2008, but again I was frustrated with the lack of space. So I retreated back to Virginia and worked there for a while until I was accepted into the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Residency by Wall Street

**Rail:** That was when you did the "PM" installation.

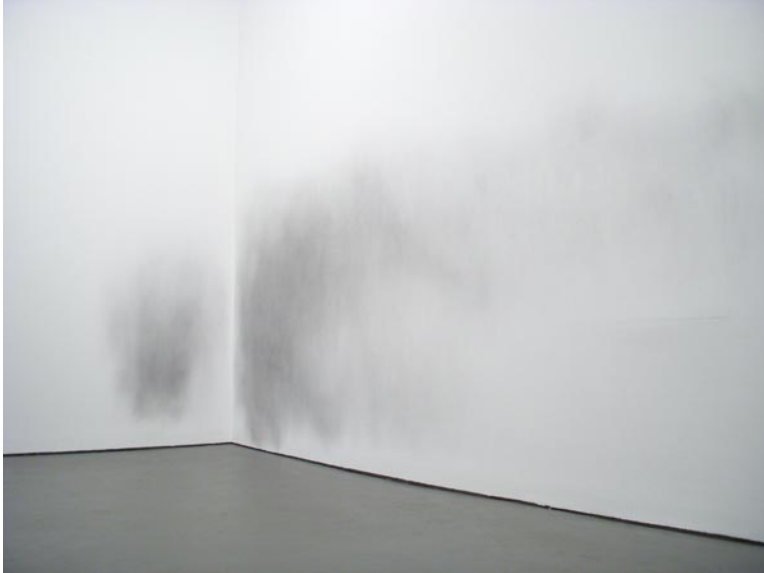
**Turner:** Yes.

**Rail:** Would you say that "PM" was a full-blown fabrication of a kitchen cabinet with a sink?

**Turner:** Yes, though it already existed before I arrived. In other words, my studio was the kitchen space and I tried to work in that studio, but gradually it became clear to me that nothing I could produce would be as interesting as this ready-made environment. It was loaded with

previous history as well as my recent relationship to it. So I just accepted the actual environment. Therefore my interventions were minimal. Filling the sink with iodine, controlling the drip of water from the sink to every 10, 15 seconds, chipping a small portion of the floor, and gradually pressing steel wool into the wall. I was trying to understand the space if one would inhabit it for a prolonged period of time. I would lean in the corner as a place to rest or I would get frustrated and start chipping the floor.

**Rail:** And you never had a desire to replicate that environment?



Daniel Turner, "Untitled," 2010. Steel wool burnish, dimensions variable. Courtesy of artist.

**Turner:** Not until a few years later. *[Laughs.]* I mean it was heavy in my mind for years, but I could never figure out quite what to do with it. I must admit though that I kept trying to produce things that were somewhat interesting, and I would hang them on the wall, and I would look at them on the floor, and they just didn't add up, and couldn't compete with the environment.

**Rail:** How long did the residency last?

**Turner:** About eight months.

**Rail:** Like a Zen meditation everyday.

**Turner:** I suppose you could say that.

**Rail:** I know you've mentioned in the past that the rubbed steel wool pieces came from the experience of being a guard in the New Museum, where any kind of leaning against the wall, which would inevitably leave some kind of mark, was prohibited.

**Turner:** Yes. I was also interested in the performative side of leaning as an act. Although at the time I felt compelled to produce a similar gesture of the lean with a material that is normally dealt with in terms of volume or weight. So after trying unsuccessfully with a range of materials applied to the wall and even paper I came to steel wool. Funny enough, it took a while to realize that I was

pushing steel into paint, not drywall.

**Rail:** *[Laughs.]* Well, it's the same concept with the metal or silver point techniques: the paper is sized with a couple of coats of bone dust mixed with water, so when you scratch it with the silverpoint, it produces a very light mark oxidized over time.

**Turner:** Right, I even tried to accelerate the oxidation process, but it's difficult because it became contradictory and overly painterly in nature. I would occasionally get results here and there but nothing that excited me.

Daniel Turner, Studio view, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council 2008. Courtesy of the artist.



Daniel Turner, Studio view, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

**Rail:** Can you determine how big, small, high, or low the rubbing would generate according to each given environment?

**Turner:** It's something that's hard to talk about because each case demands its own specific response to architecture. There is no set formula to any of them. I've made probably 10 or 15 of them in various spaces over the last few years and they are all completely different.

**Rail:** And each environment may also require a different grade of steel wools altogether.

**Turner:** Yes, some walls just don't take to the steel at all. For example, when I did the show at White Cube in London I tried for a few days and it wasn't working. So I had the preparators re-paint the walls with an entirely different paint so that it would catch the tooth.

**Rail:** I read that a rubbed piece that you recently did at Objectif Exhibitions in Antwerp took you 12 hours straight to execute?

**Turner:** That work is titled "12 hour Registration." Initially I was approached to do an entire exhibition with steel wool in Antwerp. I'd been previously thinking about the idea of fatigue for some time and ironically enough arrived to install quite exhausted myself. So once I arrived I laid down in a corner and thought I needed to reconfigure everything. Because to some degree I had been "painting" all along, so I removed the material "wool" and allowed my own body to make the reregistration by leaning and pressing my own body against the wall.

**Rail:** So the body—I mean you were wearing a black sweatshirt and jeans, plus a pair of black boots—became the rubbing instead of the hand rubbing steel wool on the wall.

**Turner:** Right, I needed to remove any external tool. Instead of applying a pad of wool in a painterly manner to the wall I decided to push my own body into the specific portion of the wall.

**Rail:** Were you aware of Jasper Johns's 1962 "Skin" drawing in which he pressed his face, hands, and head with oil against the piece of paper tacked on the wall, then only after many light strokes of charcoal applied on the paper, the imprints over the traces of the oil were revealed?

**Turner:** Sure, I'm also taken by a few of Chris Burden's early performances, particularly "Honest Labor." The idea of working for essentially no reason is interesting to me.

**Rail:** Have you had an interest in Beuys as well?

**Turner:** Of course, he was highly influential to me. You know I grew up picking up a lot of trash in my life early through my father's old business. My family's property essentially became a compound for recycling material. So questioning what is trash and what is not trash gave me a huge admiration for discarded objects. Beuys seemed to have the ability to inject material with a sense of universal reason.

**Rail:** What was the genesis of the iron oxide stain in "Untitled" (2011)?

**Turner:** I was trying to establish something equivalent to the stains left from industry that I noticed walking around the city, streets, or even in parking lots in the suburbs or in driveways. I was spilling iodine on the floor for a while, but it didn't make any sense—it led me to iron oxide.

**Rail:** So the one that you did at Martos Gallery a year later in 2011 in a two person show with Colin Snapp was the first of the pour pieces?

**Turner:** Yes.



Daniel Turner, "Untitled," 2013. Polyethylene, stainless steel, aluminum, iron, dimensions variable. Installation view Bischoff

**Rail:** In looking at the UV tinted glass and rubber pieces, "Untitled (4/13/12)," "Untitled Pylamyra (4/17/12)," and "Untitled Pylamyra (4/15/12)," the black rubber that covers the edges functions as a form of drawing as well as a container of space. In some ways they evoke Donald Judd's early works because the issues of art and objecthood, where they are between paintings, reliefs, and sculptures and were all mediated simultaneously through surface, color, form, and so on.

**Turner:** Although I admire Judd's work as well as his writings, Gerhard Richter's "Six Grey Mirrors" (No. 884/1 – 6, 2003) at Dia: Beacon had an enormous impact on me in terms of thinking about conflating the registers of painting, sculpture, and architecture into a unified environmental situation. Something that I like to really pay attention to these days: when an object doesn't need me. Recently I was approached to do an exhibition in Frankfurt with discarded refrigerator handles that I have been collecting. I arrived in Frankfurt with a suitcase full of them, got to the space, and I threw them across the floor and the composition was great. Afterwards I tried to arrange a few of the objects to my personal ideas of composition. It was clear they didn't want it to happen. That was a really great lesson, because certain



objects have their own life, they have their own energy. They don't need you. So if I'm able to even shed a touch of light on certain objects, individually or collectively, that's great. But when I try to impose my hand, that's when the argument starts to arise.

**Rail:** I have this feeling that you are a slow brewer.

**Turner:** Yes, I work incredibly slowly. I walk around the city for six months dwelling on an idea. Then in the studio maybe one or two things will happen, maybe nothing happens. Then I may try to just place one object on the floor and look at it for a while until it tells me what to do.

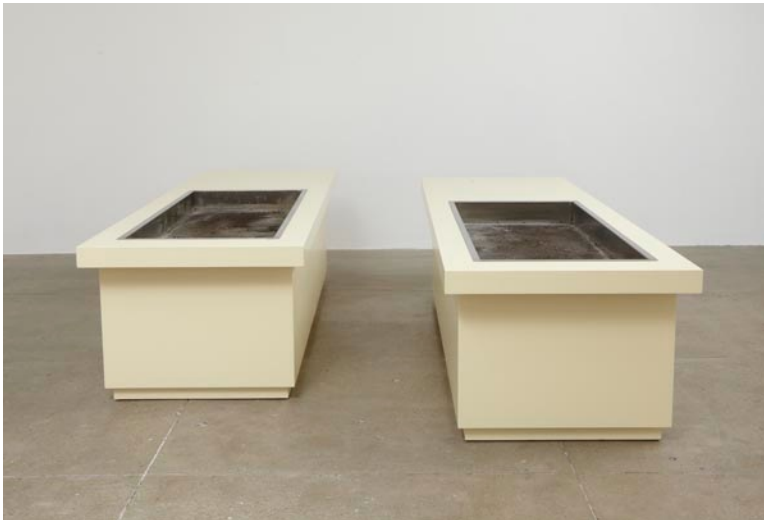
**Rail:** Is there a particular daily routine? Is it systematic, random, or a mixture of the two?

**Turner:** I walk a lot. I try at least to walk from my apartment in Chinatown to the studio in Greenpoint and back everyday. The walk is good for my work. It's an important part of my practice. I get in the studio, and a lot of days, nothing happens. I just sort of stare at the wall, a lot.

**Rail:** There's a very nice story of Jasper Johns visiting Brice Marden's studio, just before Marden's first show at Bykert Gallery in 1966. There was a long painting on the wall, and as the sun was just setting, it cast this big shadow across the painting. It seemed like hours passed that both were just sitting there waiting for the shadow to go away. And the second that it went off the edge, Johns looked at Marden and said, "That was nice."

**Turner:** I can certainly relate to that. [*Laughs.*]

**Rail:** You know, Daniel, when I first saw the countertop pieces in your Greenpoint studio, just before the Sandy exhibit last summer, I thought they were both coffin- or casket-like, which implies the death of your painting. But then they also appear in between a sink and a bathtub, as well as a countertop. The domestic environment associations seem to relate to "PM," the kitchen installation at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.



Daniel Turner, "Untitled," 2013. Maple, polyethylene, aluminum, stainless steel, mixed mediums, 24" x 28" x 108" each. Courtesy of artist.

**Turner:** That's right, it all stemmed for that psychologically numbing environment made from processed materials like linoleum, formica, and MDF.

**Rail:** How did you determine placing the countertops as a pair?

**Turner:** One is not enough and three is too many.

**Rail:** What about the issue of scale? How big, how small, how high, and how long, and so on?

**Turner:** I started paying attention to cattle feeders. Initially the proportions attracted me. The first works made in this series were scaled to a domestic proportion that we have become accustomed to on a day-to-day basis. And then I realized I had to throw them into another realm that suggests some sort of other potential phenomenon that's not equated with the domestic experience. Maybe it's something that deals with agricultural implications like factory farming, cleaning fish, or an elementary school cafeteria. Anyway, I started walking that line of ambiguity, and that was how the scale came to be.

**Rail:** So it's very visceral in terms of scale.

**Turner:** Very visceral, yeah.

**Rail:** And each work is made for a specific space?

**Turner:** Yes. As with this exhibit at Team, I've spent about a year looking at the space and thinking about how the scale of these objects make sense according to the scale of the actual room.

**Rail:** They'll be three pieces. One pair is measured—

**Turner:** Two works are 21 feet in length and another is about 10 feet in length—yet all are three just under 3 feet tall.

**Rail:** And a singular one would go perpendicularly.

**Turner:** Yes. The shortest of the three pieces. The idea is that when you walk into the space you first encounter the longer units, walk to the back of the gallery around the singular perpendicular unit, do a U-turn and then come back around and experience all three in totality before walking out the door onto Grand Street.

**Rail:** What about the base color on them? They look similar to the first "PM" installation.

**Turner:** It's a very similar color.

**Rail:** Is it a standardized color?

**Turner:** Not at all. It's neither pleasant nor offensive—it's more numbing than anything. You find it here or there at the DMV the Board of Elections, etc.

**Rail:** Cool. I'd like to shift to a different question: Were you already working with the water from the Newtown Creek before Superstorm Sandy?

**Turner:** I started to incorporate the water a few months or so before the storm hit. Just a short while after the storm I had about four feet of the Newtown Creek in my space.

**Rail:** That's very eerie that you were using the water and then let it evaporate before Sandy.

**Turner:** Very eerie indeed.