

Q&A with Nicholas R. Bell

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

If you follow at least one culturally minded Washington, D.C., resident on social media, you've likely seen images of *WONDER* (renwick.americanart.si.edu/wonder/gallery). Launched with the reopening of the Smithsonian Institution's newly renovated Renwick Gallery last November, the exhibition comprised nine contemporary works. (Two remain on view.) Each took over an entire gallery, filling the museum with rainbows of thread, a model of the Chesapeake Bay made from fiberglass marbles, and geometric designs fashioned from insect specimens. Irresistibly Instagrammable—the museum even posted “Photography Encouraged” signs (see astc.org/astc-dimensions/do-smartphones-and-their-cameras-enhance-or-detract-from-the-museum-experience-or-can-they-do-both)—the installations also happen to entice visitors interested in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) concepts. Nicholas R. Bell, the Fleur and Charles Bresler curator-in-charge of the Renwick Gallery, weighed in on how *WONDER* has accomplished so much.

Nicholas, was it part of your plan or perhaps part of the artists' plan to include STEM components in the works of *WONDER*?

Actually, it wasn't. I had a very basic proposal when I went to the artists. I called them up individually, and I said, you don't know me but here is what the Renwick Gallery's about—we were just then closing for renovation—here is what I'm thinking of as a concept for the reopening, and that's when I described the idea of *WONDER* very much in the abstract. And I asked them as individuals to come to the museum while it was closed, before the renovation really got underway, just to spend some time getting to know the building, and I invited them then to submit proposals for how they might take over a whole gallery with their artwork. I did not encourage or even discuss STEM-related practice. That seems to have come together really organically. It happened really serendipitously that so many of these artworks have that kind of sensibility. I think more than anything it's revealing of how a number of contemporary artists are thinking along the same themes and the same lines for what they think is important and what they think is important to communicate.

Right. And sort of along those lines, what are your thoughts about the confluence of science and art both in *WONDER* and in general?

Oh, I'm for it! [*Laughs.*] People who know me know that I am interdisciplinary almost to the point of being anti-disciplinary. I know that there are disciplines that we have to have and yet at the same time certainly in the humanities here I think

there is so much room for collaboration and to really blur the lines of how many of the practices that we associate with the arts that they really need to be brought together into conversation with each other. And in my mind, that includes the sciences as well. So, I am all for artists and scientists collaborating and discussing topics and really playing off each other because they often have such different worldviews and perspectives, and I think that they can learn so much by breaking out of those silos to get to know each other. So for example, just in the last week, we had the chief entomologist at the [Smithsonian's] National Museum of Natural History come and speak about Jennifer Angus's installation *In the Midnight Garden*, which is, as you know, made up of 5,000 insects. And we also had a program where Seán [Brady], the entomologist, and Jennifer almost interviewed each other, where they asked each other about their different approaches to working with insects. And I think that that was great, I think the public really enjoyed that, because the world we're in is all related. None of us actually get to live or work in these islands that are so strictly defined. So I think it's important that we communicate.

Definitely. Very cool. At this vantage point—how long has it been since *WONDER* opened now?

It has been I think just about about six months. We opened just before Thanksgiving.

OK, so six months. So I know there's been massive, unprecedented, maybe unexpected hubbub and attention around *WONDER*.

Definitely unexpected.

Unexpected. OK. So how do you think the exhibition and the reopening raised the museum's profile, and do you think it's made your museum and art in general more accessible or more appealing to new audiences?

I do think so. I have to say that we were known as one of the sleepier Smithsonian museums when we closed. We are certainly one of the smaller ones; our building is quite diminutive in comparison to some of the larger museums on the [National] Mall. And that also gave us the benefit of having virtually no expectations of how we would reopen the building. I think we were very much off the radar while we were closed, and then when we came back, we came back with a bang. We really took people off guard, and that I think has helped us grow our audience. It's certainly—the scale and aesthetics of the artworks are, I think, very inviting across all populations because I think they're more approachable in a way than many artworks can be, both in their abstraction and the fact that they are so large. They really invite you to come and wonder at what they are, quite literally, and really whether you're 5 years old or 90, there's something special about being in a room

with something that is so much larger than yourself that I think really adds a quality of that museum experience that sometimes isn't there for other kinds of artwork. So I think that one of the reasons that the show has been so popular is that it is so much an in-person experience. People have really recognized from the first day we opened that this is something that you can only really experience by coming. And people have of course done a lot of good with this word of mouth, so whether it's traditional word of mouth, by just telling their friends, or a more digital word of mouth, by going on Instagram or Twitter or Facebook and telling people, "You've got to come down and see this." And we do know from analyzing that social media that the things that people are saying online, and then going and talking to people in the galleries about why they've come and what drew them to the museum, often for the first time, that it is getting a sense from their friends and family from social media that this is something that they want to see in person. So we've been very interested in how our audience has grown exponentially through these different forms of communication and what it tells us about how we might move on into the future.

You actually touched on one of my questions. *Dimensions*, in this issue, is addressing how or whether, I guess, smartphones or cameras enhance or detract from the visitor experience.

Yes, everybody wants me to take a position on that.

Yeah, right, well, it sounds like you think it's mostly enhanced.

Well, I've had to be very careful about this, and I've finally settled on what I call my nonpartisan position, which is that I will not tell people whether or not they will have a better experience with or without those kind of media or technologies. As you know, we put up our "Photography Encouraged" signs, so obviously we are willing to accept that there is some benefit, but I'm careful to couch that in saying that we don't necessarily think that the benefit is that you are able to take photographs. But what we do recognize is that for certain populations and certainly for younger generations, they are more likely to have a positive museum experience in their minds if they have the freedom to choose whether or not they are going to document it through photography. And so when, as I've been asked now by various news outlets, when I'm asked to weigh in on whether or not taking photographs enhances or detracts from the museum experience, I tell them quite clearly: I don't think that the museum is the appropriate actor or body to render that judgment. I think that anybody who comes to the museum should be able to define for themselves whether or not taking photographs or documenting the show through technology is a better experience for them or not. But what I am very careful not to do is to tell people what kind of experience they should be having,

because anyone who walks in this door is perfectly capable of making that decision on their own.

It's a very good answer.

[Laughs.] Honed over being asked this question over many months.

I can imagine. So on a more personal note: another project that ASTC is pursuing is #myscimuseum [astc.org/myscimuseum], where they're collecting stories that people from various professions, various vantage points, have about their own experiences in science museums. So off-hand, off the top of your head, do you have any memories in science museums that have stayed with you?

That is a good question. I grew up in Vancouver, [British Columbia], Canada, in a city that doesn't have a really strong museum culture, but what they do have is a fantastic aquarium. And I don't know if you're including aquariums in your definition of science museums, but I certainly remember very fondly going there many times as a kid and just being wowed by the opportunity to really be engaged with and observe all of that marine life. And now I have children, and hands-down their favorite thing to do that is at all museum-oriented is certainly not going to an art museum; they want to go to an aquarium. They want to see whales or dolphins or seals or fish, and I can see that it's creating in them a fascination with the ocean, which I obviously think is great. So maybe that's a little more general than the response you're looking for but it is fostering an appreciation for that world, which is certainly science-based for us.

I think that's perfect.

When we go to—we go on holiday often to California, and we always make sure to stop in Santa Cruz when we're there, because [University of California,] Santa Cruz has a great marine research center where you can go, and it's so hands on. You get to go and really watch them behind the scenes conducting research with marine wildlife, and it's incredible. So I think that'll be a very strong memory for them. I hope.

This interview appeared in the May/June 2016 issue of Dimensions magazine, published by the Association of Science-Technology Centers, astc.org/publications/dimensions.