

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' *Step Up '08* open call, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New England and New York. *Step Up '08* was juried by Chris Doyle (Multi-Media Artist, New York); Andrea Miller Keller (Independent Curator, Connecticut); and Herb Tam (Associate Curator, Exit Art, New York).

Step Up '08 was made possible with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Howard & Sandy Fromson, Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign, Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, the Wallace Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Travelers, Robinson & Nancy Grover, Gary E. West, and Real Art Ways Members.

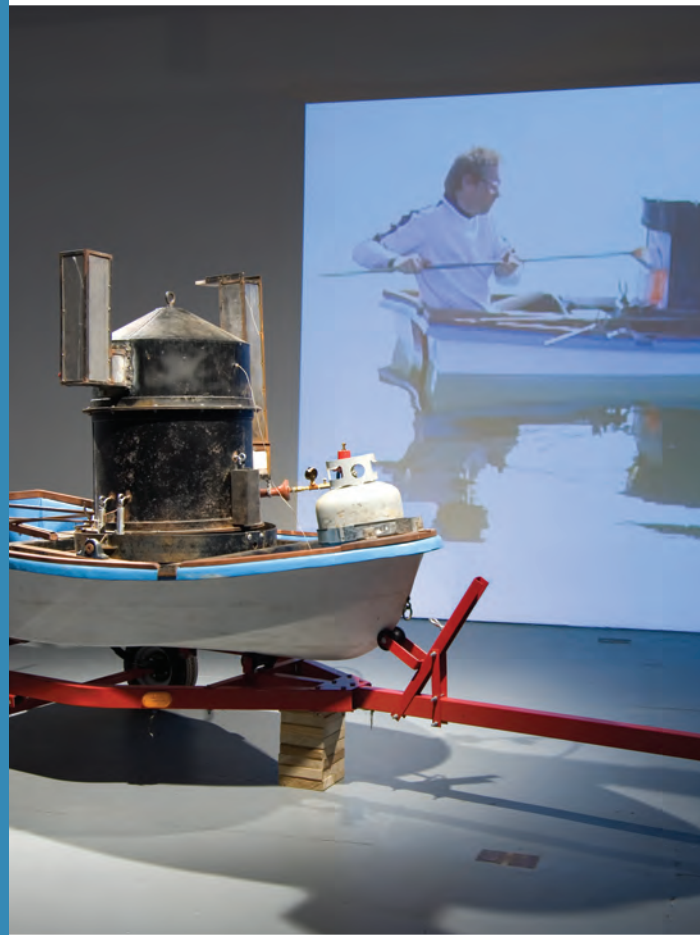


Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary art organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community.

On the cover: *Small Craft Advisory*, installation view at Real Art Ways, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2009.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

Chris Taylor



Small Craft Advisory, installation view at Real Art Ways, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2009.

You Can't Keep a Good Boat Down¹

By Denise Markonish

In 1991 Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss created a silkscreen entitled *How to Work Better*. It reads as a treatise of sorts, a ten commandments of productivity. It is number five that strikes a cord, stating "DISTINGUISH SENSE FROM NONSENSE." This "rule" seems particularly fitting for artist Chris Taylor. With Taylor, once the matter of distinguishing has been achieved, it is still unclear where we stand. Instead of choosing one state over the other Taylor keeps viewers in a kind of liminal zone between the two. As a result Taylor presents himself as a trickster, someone who constantly pushes the boundaries of his craft as a maker of glass objects, calling into question the location of the studio, process, and the traditions of glassblowing. This inversion of tradition comes in many forms, some quite literal, like when Taylor taught himself to blow glass while suspended upside down. Other projects call into question authenticity, as Taylor faithfully reproduced and deftly placed a 16th-century Venetian goblet in the collections room at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where even their curators could not distinguish it from the original. These two projects beg the question: What is next: sense or nonsense?

In *Small Craft Advisory*, Taylor continues to challenge ideas of craft and work. To put it simply (though it was no simple task) Taylor took it upon himself to build into a seven-foot dinghy a

Chris Taylor's work attempts to find a positive reception for the negativity that surrounds us by examining the intersection of formalism and everyday life. Taylor is currently a faculty member of the Glass Department at the Rhode Island School of Design. His exhibition experience includes *Ongoing Invention* at the Robert V. Fullerton Museum, San Bernadino, CA; *EXIT ART Biennial 2006*, New York, NY; and *Out of the Ashes* at Rahamtulla Towers, Nairobi, Kenya. Taylor has received numerous grants and awards, including two research grants to the People's Republic of China and with maestro Andrea Zilio in Murano, Italy. Taylor received his BFA from Ohio State University and his MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design.

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Small Craft Advisory, installation view at Real Art Ways, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2009.

functioning hot shop for glass blowing. On May 8, 2009, Taylor launched the boat into Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island, ending up squeezed inside his new portable studio adrift in the Atlantic Ocean just south of Block Island. It is important to note though, that in viewing the exhibition of *Small Craft Advisory* we are not presented with any finished objects created en-route, rather we see only the boat and an accompanying video of Taylor's journey. With this gesture, Taylor not only references conceptual art historical questionings of process over product but becomes part of a recent trend in artists turning to the water. Spencer Finch took to the Hudson River for *The River That Flows Both Ways* (2009), where he photographed the water 700 times using an intervalometer, a device that snaps a picture once a minute for 700 minutes.

Finch then selected a single color from each photograph and used it to create a series of stained glass windows chronologically depicting the color of the river. In Simon Starling's *shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)* (2005), the artist dismantled a shed, turned it into a boat and then, after a trip down the Rhine, took the boat apart only to rebuild the shed. Both of these gestures have a poetic absurdity to them, a device heightened even more so in Roman Signer's *Kajak* (2000), in which the artist towed his kayak behind a car, riding a river of asphalt rather than water. After going 20mph down a country road and being chased by cows, Signer pulls himself out of the boat, where he was waist-deep in gravel and dirt, to reveal the gaping hole created in the bottom of the kayak.

Though these projects provide good company for Taylor's investigation, upon viewing his work it soon becomes clear that the trickster comes alive again. Taylor, an avid sailor and glass blower, brings his two passions together, and his boat becomes not just a studio but a vessel of possibility. With this in mind, *Small Craft Advisory* seems more aligned to slapstick comedy and invention; it is part Buster Keaton and part Rube Goldberg with some Bruce Nauman thrown in for good measure. Taylor establishes a balance between sense and nonsense immediately with the title of the work; the term "craft" serving as a double entendre for the artist's physical object making as well as for the boat itself. The retrofitting of the boat and subsequent glass making on board are presented as precarious exercises of endurance akin to Buster Keaton's 1921 film *The Boat*. Keaton's film unfolds in a typically slapstick manner, when he builds a boat and upon completion realizes it is too big to get out of the house. Keaton chips away at the brick to provide just enough space to pull the craft out, after which the whole house collapses. After many trials and tribulations, and the usual masterful physicality of Keaton's actions, the boat sinks and the family ends up stuffed in a bathtub dinghy, only to have it too sink, revealing that they are merely in waist deep water.

The video documenting Taylor in his boat is pregnant with a similar sense of Keaton-esque absurdity. It begins with an aerial view of a small boat afloat in the Atlantic, a mere speck in a vast sea. As the camera moves in, we see Taylor crammed into his boat, with barely enough room to move. Miraculously, even as the boat rocks back and forth, he begins to blow glass. In this scenario, Taylor becomes an inventor in the spirit of Rube Goldberg, whose cartoons of sculpture/inventions were elaborate, convoluted devices that in the end perform simple tasks, like a self-operating napkin. Seeing Taylor's boat in person it is hard to believe it would actually function, it seems cobbled together and not quite seaworthy. In fact, in the video, the water level is so near the top edge of the boat that there is a constant fear that Taylor might start to go under. Surprisingly the thing actually manages to work.

Once the logistics of the boat are down, Taylor, like Keaton, becomes deeply involved with a choreography of movement. Glass blowing involves a careful set of actions, like a dance:

getting molten glass out of the furnace onto the rod and then spinning, blowing, and shaping its semi-liquid form into something tangible. However, in Taylor's case he has created a near immobile situation for himself. All the action is waist up and the furnace is right in front of his face. The result is a heightened sense of danger but also of confinement, not unlike Bruce Nauman's early videos produced in his studio (of the artist bouncing in the corner, pacing, etc.). Taylor, like Nauman uses the studio as the site of action and production, however, with a sly Keaton-ian twist, Taylor takes his studio on the road (or more aptly to the sea). There is a singular determination in Taylor's actions, a sense of faith in the task at hand however absurd it may be; a belief that there is always a way, as Fischli and Weiss would put it, to "work better."

Despite all of the labor that went into both the making of the boat and the glass work on board, there is a surprising moment in Taylor's video when he lets the molten glass fall into the ocean, further emphasizing the task over the product, debunking the authenticity of the object yet again. One day someone is bound to come upon a piece of sea glass on the shore, and put it in his/her pocket, not knowing from whence it came; unwittingly becoming the proud owner of a work by Chris Taylor. Sense or nonsense: you decide.

Denise Markonish is the curator at MASS MoCA where her exhibitions include These Days: Elegies for Modern Times and Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape which was accompanied by a catalogue published by the MIT Press. Previous to her work at MASS MoCA, Markonish was the curator at Artspace in New Haven, CT. Markonish has taught at University of New Haven, Stonehill College and the Rhode Island School of Design. She is currently working on multiple projects at MASS MoCA including a large scale commission with Inigo Manglano-Ovalle for Winter 2009 and a survey of Contemporary Canadian for Spring 2012.

¹ Phrase from Buster Keaton's film *The Boat*. (1921)