

STORM KING ART CENTER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ALEXANDER S. C. ROWER

April 19, 2018

Interviewed by Sarah Dziedzic
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Interview with Alexander S. C. Rower

Calder Foundation

Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic

2 audio files

April 19, 2018

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Audio File 1

Dziedzic: I know our time is limited, so I just want to jump into talking about *Grand Intuitions: Calder's Monumental Sculptures* (2001–03), and then we'll see what else we can cover after we get through that. So, if you could tell me, you know, from your perspective, how that exhibition came about.

Rower: Well, first of all, we should talk about what *Grand Intuitions* means, because it's very hard to title a Calder exhibition. You want to call it "Calder," but then that doesn't inform the audience about the peculiarities of a program. With that title, which sounds a little bit old-fashioned today, I was trying to deal with the issue that the show was about monumental sculpture, grand scale works—and the origin of those grand scale works in Calder's life and work—and the fact that Calder was an intuitive artist, which is something people have not [00:01:00] really understood. They understand it much more today than when we did the show at Storm King. I guess we were thinking it was poetic, but maybe it's a little less poetic today. But it covered both those bases.

The show is about the history of monumental work, and Calder, all the way back to the beginning, in the '30s, which weren't megalithic sculptures; they were smaller-scale garden sculptures for the outdoors. And it's about the intuitive process, because people get stuck on the fact that Calder had an engineering degree. He said he would have made mobiles without his engineering degree, that he didn't need that, that that was an effort to go and have a career independent of the arts because his parents—both artists—were suffering. They had a suffering life, and they wished him to have a different kind of life than they had. But, you know, he failed at that, and he went into the arts.

That whole intuitive process—[00:02:00] I used to sit and watch him work. I'd watch him make a mobile, and he'd cut out a bunch of shapes that had a certain harmonic of form. They weren't just the same form made smaller, made bigger, in a sequence. They were similar forms, harmonic forms, which then he would lay out on the tabletop and compose distances between those forms—the negative space being the key ingredient—and then stitch them together with wire and make these mobiles. And in the process of that intuitive analysis of space, he might start to rotate the forms, which hadn't been any kind of preconceived idea. Every step of the way, the sculpture evolved. Like mobiles: when they're presenting themselves, they evolve, they continue to unfold. His process of creation was very similar to that. And that includes the monumental sculptures, because he [00:03:00] continued to shape and form them and

change them, and even technical things had aesthetic components, where he would step into the process and push everyone aside and insert something else that was unexpected.

Dziedzic: And even the bolts, right? Special attention to the bolts.

Rower: The special attention to the bolts question is really interesting, because there are some sculptures where the bolts line up in a certain way, and then there are other sculptures where they have a random quality. The random quality, I think, is more pleasing, usually, because just allowing the workmen who were assembling the sculpture and installing the sculpture to tighten the bolt and leave it at that—not being conscious of its position—creates this kind of waterfall of form through the sculpture that can have its own interest outside of [00:04:00] the Calder form.

Dziedzic: So, you mentioned kind of wanting to emphasize the monumental work. Can you talk about, I guess, Storm King's ability to be a place to share that kind of work? And I'm just curious to think through these larger sculptures, which are often in urban environments, seeing them kind of in a natural space.

Rower: The *Grand Intuitions* project was—David Collens proposed an idea of doing a Calder show. I think originally the idea was just simply—not simply, but complicatedly—an outdoor show, and then I said, “Well, what about these indoor spaces that are not exactly museumological?” Back then they were less climatized. They were air-conditioned, but they weren't climatized spaces. [00:05:00] And I said, “We should utilize all of these spaces and tell a story.” One of the most successful parts of that show was the upstairs installation, where you could look out the window and see a monumental sculpture and observe its original handmade maquette by my grandfather at the same time. And that was really a wonderful teaching moment, I think, for the three years that the show was open—three whole, full seasons, so a lot of people had a chance to see it.

Dziedzic: Was this the first show that you had guest curated? What was your experience with working as a curator of your grandfather's work?

Rower: No, it wasn't the first show I had curated or worked on. What was the date? I've forgotten.

Dziedzic: It was 2001–03. [00:06:00]

Rower: Yes. I'd done many shows before that time—but nothing like this. It's hard to do a show on monumental sculpture. There are so few of them, and the truly large ones, huge ones, are relatively permanently installed. Can you imagine moving *The Arch* (1975) just temporarily—borrowing it for six weeks, putting it somewhere for a show? It would be a big challenge.

Dziedzic: You mentioned telling a story with the indoor spaces and the outdoor spaces. In terms of which works were selected, what was your strategy there?

Rower: Well, my grandfather began making outdoor sculpture in 1934, so presenting some of those pieces from the '30s—and presenting them in the catalog [00:07:00]—was part of my objective, to show how they began as studio scale sculptures that then became thicker and welded and bolted and demountable, and then evolved into industrially fabricated works—works that were made by people who were not artists in places that were not making art. They weren't made at foundries like we think about the 19th century, a bronze foundry where they made art or ornamentation every day of the week; that's what they did. All of my grandfather's outdoor steel sculptures were made by people who welded every day but made fire escapes and structural steel and bridges. Even the French foundry, Biémont, made large components of nuclear power plants [00:08:00] and things like that. They weren't that ecstatic to make Calder's work, but they got paid and they were amused by it. But they were much more interested in doing their industrial work.

One of the interesting parts, too, is how that unfolded: how he would teach these technicians his aesthetic. So, you can see the difference between sculptures made in Connecticut and sculptures made in France—the way the welding's done, the way certain welds are left—they're not ground off but left as lines in the plates. The way their footings ground the works, literally attached to the soil or the concrete. Those kind of details. And he allowed each different continent to have their own process. Of course, the French ones are metric, and the American ones are English, but beyond that, it's very obvious at a distance; you can immediately tell [00:09:00] where the sculpture was made.

Dziedzic: And then what about this element of seeing things outdoors that maybe had been in urban spaces before? I know a lot of the sculptures were already held by the foundation, the estate, that were in this exhibition. People have talked about, you know, it's so interesting to see all these large monumental sculptures together; that's an experience that artists have at Storm King quite often. So, what were the elements of that for this exhibition? Where were the sculptures coming from and what was the experience of seeing them together, and then seeing them in a kind of natural setting as opposed to an urban one?

Rower: Well, that's a few different questions.

Dziedzic: Three, four?

Rower: So, the sculptures were mostly estate- or Foundation-held works. There was one piece from [00:10:00] MoMA. There were a few other pieces that weren't ours, but mostly they were ours. Were there 18 sculptures in the show?

Dziedzic: Eighteen or 19. Outdoors, I think.

Rower: Yes. Very hard to do that show, again. It's so many sculptures, and it's so costly now. About seeing Calder outside of the urban environment: Peter Schjeldahl criticized the show—at once he said that two of the sculptures were two of the greatest sculptures made in the twentieth century by any artist, which was an amusing thing to say, and then he challenged the fact of putting Calder in the countryside. He didn't like that. He thought that Calder belonged in urban environments, sort of as a signal towards nature—he saw it as the opposite of how [00:11:00] Calder sculpture should be utilized, which was also an interesting viewpoint. I don't happen to agree with him. I should read his review again. You should read it.

Dziedzic: I should.

Rower: It was a very interesting review. He's an intelligent person, so to say such extremes was interesting to read. It's hard to site Calder sculptures, also, because every one of them needs to be sited and grounded in a purely perpendicular way. They have to be absolutely dead perpendicular. If they're not, they don't resonate with you in a way; you don't feel their mass. So, with a piece like *Five Swords* (1976), which is currently at Storm King and has been since the show, if it's a few degrees off and [00:12:00] tilted, it feels like it's sliding in one direction instead of sitting there in stasis, in mass. It's really an interesting problem. It's hard to describe and understand unless you're really standing in front of it and you see it, but not properly installed. It doesn't resonate.

File 2

Rower: It [the Calder Foundation] was in Tribeca when I first started it. Yes.

Dziedzic: I did want to ask about the founding of the Foundation, if you could share some of those details.

Rower: The Foundation?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Rower: Well, there was this guy, Ralph Ogden, and he got really excited—no, wrong foundation. [laughter] Yes, we have very different roots than Storm King.

Basically, when my grandfather died, he made no provision for a foundation. No artist did in those days, or even the concept of a foundation. When he died, I was 13, and I would say the Foundation started the summer of '77, when I was 14. I was in my grandfather's house, and there [00:01:00] were all these papers that were being collected to be thrown away. I thought that that was a mistake. So I put them into 14 boxes and sent them back to New York, and for the next 10 years, they were in my mother's fourth-floor closet. And then—by that time, I was 24—I decided to organize an archive. But, you know, 14 boxes, they're not accessible; they're not a tool. So, organizing those papers became a considered effort, trying to put them in a form where you could access them in a way. Those papers became the basis of the archive.

You've got James Johnson Sweeney, who was a curator and a critic in the '30s, eventually becoming a curator for MoMA, but [00:02:00] he knew Calder before he was at MoMA. He organized some shows, he wrote some things, he included Calder in a few projects. Then he's a curator at MoMA and curates the big Calder MoMA show in '43. Later, he's the director of the Guggenheim, and after that he's the director at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. You have Sweeney appearing in all these different places, and then the personal correspondence, so how do you file those Sweeney papers? Well, you file them in each place. You have an exhibition file for the MoMA show, and you have the personal correspondence in a personal file. But if you don't know all those interconnected parts and the lifelong relationship, you don't have access to the story. And I think that's one of the things I'm most proud of, is making an archive where people can access a history. Not just Calder's history, but Legér's, Calder's other friends and associates, many documents related to their lives and [00:03:00] flight from the Nazis and all those kinds of things that happened in the twentieth century.

Dziedzic: Yes. We were talking about archives earlier, so it's very exciting to hear that you're interested in that level of detail.

Rower: Well, I think we have something like 130,000 original documents—letters, receipts, correspondence that relate to commissions or with his dealers. It's a fantastic archive. And we're a paper-based archive, still, so my staff has the responsibility to print out their emails in paper form and file them, which is amusing. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Well, a couple other historic things [00:04:00] I wanted to ask about. I know you weren't involved firsthand with some of the earlier exchanges with Storm King—and I believe it was your father and your brother that were involved—but I wondered if you could talk about—

Rower: What exchanges do you mean?

Dziedzic: *The Arch* coming to Storm King. I don't know what sort of details you know, but if you do—

Rower: Well, the Calder estate was a complicated thing. I guess all great artists have complicated estates. I think at that time, *The Arch* being such a grand sculpture, where do you put it, how do you store it? What do you do with it? The estate decided that it would be well served if it belonged to a public collection that would put it on display. And the purchase exchange was a sweetheart deal for Storm King, [00:05:00] where the estate reacquired a small sculpture that was in Storm King's collection, who traded that back with some money to get this giant sculpture. And then on the other side—I don't know if you know—but the sculpture that was traded back [*7 Legged Beast*, 1957], my grandmother ended up donating to the Whitney. So, it was all a love affair; it was all about making Calder's work accessible. It wasn't really a financial transaction so much as putting his work out in public and finding a suitable home for a large sculpture. It had nothing to do with my brother, but my parents—my father and my mom and my aunt and uncle were the four executors and made those kinds of decisions.

Dziedzic: And you worked with Peter Stern as well as David Collens, right? [00:06:00]

Rower: Yes, Peter Stern was an amazing character. I loved my interactions with him. Anyone who ever met him knew about his charm, but he was very persuasive, and he was very frustrated that I didn't drink wine because he loved wine. He thought wine was the greatest thing ever and had a collection of wine and wanted to share it with me, and [laughs]—but I didn't drink wine. He just couldn't believe it. He said, "How could you be Sandy Calder's grandson if you don't drink wine?" Yes, it was funny. Peter's energy was really the thing. He was erudite, he was very well spoken, but his energy—he just made everyone a little bit happier when they were around him.

Dziedzic: That's really nice to hear. [00:07:00]

Rower: Did you ever meet him?

Dziedzic: No, sadly. I also don't drink wine, though, so.

Rower: But whiskey, I'm sure you like whiskey.

Dziedzic: I do.

Rower: Yes.

Dziedzic: Yes. Well, my understanding of Peter Stern is that he was really interested in a kind of strategic acquisition of monumental sculptures specifically and that *The Arch* was sort of the first and best, in a sense, of that lineage. So, I wondered if there was a sense of that theme in *Grand Intuitions*, of having a kind of responsibility towards representing this large sculpture, this sort of heavy industrial sculpture?

Rower: I don't follow your question, but I will answer part of it, which is that clearly *The Arch* is the greatest sculpture [00:08:00] at Storm King by any artist. It's a really formidable sculpture, and a great, great Calder. I'm very happy it's there. But I didn't understand your question.

Dziedzic: Well, not every sculpture at Storm King is really monumental. There's a lot of other traditions that sculpture falls into. And this is just a question about Peter Stern, I guess your understanding of his involvement. I know he wasn't a co-curator with you and David, but I'm just looking to see if there was any kind of push from him, I suppose, in shaping any part of the exhibition.

Rower: I don't recall that. [00:09:00] My associations with Peter were having a beautiful time together. He didn't play a role in the curatorial process, beyond the initial idea. I'm sure that he and David came up with the idea—but here I'm just speculating—of having a Calder show and then proposing it to me. But we didn't have any curatorial discussions that I recall.

Dziedzic: Well, so let's talk about working with David.

Rower: Have you met David?

Dziedzic: [laughs] Yes.

Rower: Yes, David's like some character out of the movies. He's really an interesting character, too. I think one of the things I appreciated the most in our exchanges, in our [00:10:00] curatorial process, was it was never ego. Neither one of us presented ego in the process. It was: how can we make the best show possible? How can we present the best show possible? And neither one of us was trying to impress the other with how much we knew. David was just smoothly elegant in the process. Occasionally he had to come in to negotiate some aspect, or representing Storm King, he had to deal with a lender, and he just—the process was very smooth. I never had any sense that something we wanted to do couldn't be possible. It just all seemed effortless.

Dziedzic: That's good to hear. I wanted to ask about the conservation and maintenance that some of the sculptures underwent before the exhibition in 2001. [00:11:00] My understanding is that a few of the sculptures—I think the ones that were brought over from Roxbury—needed to be repainted and, needed some of the kind of maintenance that's required for outside sculpture.

Rower: Well, all outdoor Calder sculptures need routine maintenance. Back in those days, we did the best we could and came up with scenarios that related to Calder's scenario. So, there were still paints available that were descended from the original paints that had been on the sculpture, and we had this idea that somehow the chemical formulation had a significance—as opposed to just dealing with the color, the reflectivity, the intensity, the aesthetics [00:12:00] of the paint. Since that time, we've developed a much more complex understanding about how a sculpture should be presented, how it should feel when you stand in front of it. And the aesthetics have become much more important than any kind of sense of formulation, or technicalities of how molecules glue together. And the new formulations have much more longevity and are much less toxic, so it's all beneficial.

I think the only thing that I miss is lead paint. When you put lead paint on steel, it really preserves it and protects it for a long, long time. We still have lead paint on a few sculptures, and they're in beautiful condition. So that's one of the inferior things. But nobody makes lead paint anymore, and you can't even apply it in a safe way on steel. It's very safe to use and very safe to have on steel, [00:13:00] but the dust from it and the formulating of it are what people are upset about, so it's not used anymore. Which is fine, we find ways around it.

But every Calder sculpture that's outside should be reviewed. Generally, in five, six, seven years, a sculpture needs to be repainted. Some museums around the world have this kind of strange notion that the paint that's on it is historic and needs to remain, but yet they leave it outside in the acid rain, so it's this kind of strange dichotomy. And Calder didn't apply that paint; it was applied by a technician. Having a technical surface on a sculpture should be renewed. Simple.

Dziedzic: And do you have a kind of aesthetic basis for that, a kind of signal of it's time to be repainted? [00:14:00]

Rower: Every sculpture tells us when it needs to be repainted. It's pretty clear. Some of the older paints looked great when you would paint them and would look great for a few weeks or even a month, but then after 12 months outside, that intense Calder—that warm red of Calder—would turn salmon, which was very unsatisfactory, in such a short time. The paint was stable, but the color was shot. That's what I was referring to before. We were a little bit too concerned about the stability of paint versus the aesthetic presentation, and now aesthetics are really much more forward.

Dziedzic: So, the paint's ability to protect the steel, basically, that's what you're talking about? Versus the paint's ability to present the color?

Rower: [00:15:00] Yes, that's right.

Dziedzic: Okay. So, you've worked closely with Storm King on some of these repainting missions?

Rower: I wouldn't say so. I would say that I was a certain gatekeeper—have been, still am—for anyone in these conservation projects, of our sculptures or anybody else's sculptures, about the aesthetics of it and the new paint formulations. We have this new paint—a military paint—that's been adapted for Calder sculptures and is now being used.

You have a sculpture that just left. A Louise Nevelson sculpture [*City on the High Mountain*, 1983] is about to receive this same paint. I don't know about its aesthetic formulation, but it's the same paint. [00:16:00] It's incredibly durable, and it's exciting it's getting restored.

Dziedzic: And that there are other sculptures that are able to benefit from this kind of—

Rower: Yes, yes. This has been a process involving the National Gallery in Washington. Abigail Mack, who's actually one of our Foundation advisors, and the Getty Institute, which is doing all this research on painted surfaces and artist intent, are the two parts of it. How do you make paint function well and how do you make it look the way the artist intended—and what is the artist's intent? So, 25 years ago, someone would call up a paint company and say, "I need this 7355," because they knew that's what Calder had used before, but the new formulation didn't look like Calder's red; it was a different color. Still red, but it wasn't the right red. And people thought they were doing the right thing because they were using "Calder's paint." But of course, it wasn't even the same technical formulation [00:17:00] and certainly wasn't the same pigment. It didn't look the same in any regard, because the paint company just continued to evolve their coatings.

Dziedzic: So, I want to ask you also about the Calder Hillside—

Rower: I think it's the whole hill, not just the side of it.

Dziedzic: Yes, I mean, based on what you said about the sculptures needing to be perpendicular to the ground, "hillside" is maybe a little misleading.

Rower: Yes.

Dziedzic: They are flat. [laughs]

Rower: Well, you know, they had to regrade. They created a new spot for these sculptures, and when the Calder hillside was being conceived of—where *Five Swords* is—that wasn't the shape of the hill before the Calders arrived. It was [00:18:00] totally different. And it's a magnificent site to explore the sculptures. To approach them from below, from the far side, coming up the hill at it. It's incredible; it's wonderful.

Dziedzic: Yes. Did you have any involvement in the sculptures that ended up being placed there after the hillside was finished?

Rower: Yes. It was a sort of loose process in the terms of the family's side. It was really David who came up with an idea of what should be those first five sculptures that were there, and then that changed over time. Sadly, right now, you only have two sculptures, and you're about to get a third installed. We took away two little red sculptures, but you're about to get a big black sculpture, which is terrific.

Dziedzic: I saw *Tripes* (1974)—[00:19:00] that's the new one, right?

Rower: Yes.

Dziedzic: Well, I know it's past 5:00, so—being conscious of time, I guess I just want to ask, very broadly, if there's anything about the Storm King story and the relationship with the Calder Foundation that I haven't asked you about that you want to speak to.

Rower: The Calder Foundation's relationship to Storm King developed over such a long time—I mean, that first installation was 1984, [00:20:00] if I remember. It's been a long time, a long, constant association, and one of the interesting things is that both institutions have grown significantly. The first time I asked how many visitors came to Storm King, it was something like 32,000 annually, but I think you're now up over 200,000, something tremendous. So, it's really great. And to see the kind of generational shift from Peter to John [Stern], and the growth—it used to be kind of a mom-and-pop place, as was the Calder Foundation. Now both institutions are rather independent. If David retired or if John went off to something else and other people took those positions, it would still flourish and [00:21:00] continue with the different kind of guidance, but it could exist independently. And it didn't seem that way before. When Ralph Ogden was alive, it just was his personal endeavor, and now it's a world-class institution.

Dziedzic: I'm glad you feel that way.

Rower: Yes, yes. It's spectacular. I was going up there a lot when Andy Goldsworthy was building his wall [*Storm King Wall*, 1997–98], and then there was a Goldsworthy show [*Andy Goldsworthy at Storm King Art Center*, 2000]. Was that right before or after the Calder show?

Dziedzic: Right before.

Rower: Andy was doing all these really cool installations. Did you see that show, by any chance?

Dziedzic: No.

Rower: He did this one piece that was inside the building and went out through the glass of the door and continued. [00:22:00] It was really great, the inside-outside thing. Had so many different pieces. That first big gallery on the right when you come in, he had a mud floor that was all cracked. It was like 10 inches thick, and it took weeks to dry and then develop all the cracks. It was a wonderful show. I don't remember what my point was. [laughter]

Dziedzic: The inside space, I think it really works for some people and it really doesn't for others, for other artists.

Rower: It's hard to turn a house into a museum. The Phillips Collection in Washington—the first museum of modern art in America—had all kinds of growing pains trying to figure out how to utilize those rooms. We did a show there of Calder and Miró, which was fantastic because they made their works to be in people's homes, so having [00:23:00] home-sized rooms to hang paintings and sculpture together was really fantastic. They weren't these giant white spaces, having to try to figure out how to use them. You know? I love the hominess of human-scale rooms. There's a certain grandeur to Storm King's building, but the rooms are a little bit bigger than most people's homes, especially that gallery on the right. What do you call that gallery? It has a name.

Dziedzic: I believe it's Gallery 1.

Rower: Gallery 1, okay. [laughter] I thought it had a nickname too.

Dziedzic: I can look back on the architectural drawings of the building and see if there's any kind of indication there. Yes, well, I guess I would just—I mean, you started talking about this with Andy

Goldsworthy a little bit, but if there are any works at Storm King that you really enjoy or feel [00:24:00] maybe have some kind of interesting dialogue with Calder?

Rower: So many of the sculptures have a dialogue with Calder. Richard Serra's work directly sprouts from Calder's process of using industrial steel in surprising ways. Richard has his own wonderful vocabulary, and using stock steel forms, stock steel plates in the way they originally came—and then stretching them and doing what he does with them, compacting them—is quite different than Calder. Calder's use of steel—he didn't use anything stock. Mark di Suvero buys I-beams, [00:25:00] cuts them up, reassembles them, welds them together, and creates these forms—you still see the original fabricated piece that came from a foundry, the I-beams, or whatever the material is. And my grandfather took those sheets and manipulated them, so you can't see their original forms. They're quite different—Serra, Calder, and di Suvero—but they have an incredible harmony. I think you really feel that at Storm King.

Dziedzic: Thanks. I could ask a few more questions, but I know that we're a little over time.

Rower: Two more. Two more great, great questions.

Dziedzic: [laughs] Two more questions. What was the impression you had, or what was the effect of seeing the sculptures that you brought together for *Grand Intuitions*? [00:26:00]

Rower: Well, there had never been a time where you could see this kind of chronology of process over four decades—how Calder conceived of capturing, utilizing, and engaging space—and engaging the viewer, the public. There've been other outdoor sculpture presentations and other sculpture shows that kind of touch on the subject, but to have some of the earliest, finest sculptures of the '30s all the way through '76—[00:27:00] *Five Swords* is from '76, Calder's last year—was a rich thing. It'd be very difficult to reproduce that, and I don't know where. I don't know where you'd want to reproduce that. Is there another great sculpture park? There are other sculpture parks, but are there other great sculpture parks?

Dziedzic: Maybe more like private collections. [laughs]

Rower: Well, there's Yorkshire.

Dziedzic: Yes. Which I haven't been to.

Rower: But it's not Storm King. The evolution of the landscape itself at Storm King is also something that you don't have a sense of if you haven't been going there for decades, like I have. It has such a naturalness, and it's gone through so many different phases of unnatural lines of trees to block the

highway to then taking those trees down [00:28:00] and showing the highway as part of the landscape. Whole different concepts, whole different shifts of attitudes. It's been really fun to see that evolve and grow and mature. It's now become a very mature place. I don't think the trees are bigger; the kind of complexity of how you experience the landscape has become wonderfully mature—in all kinds of weather, a wonderfully mature experience.

Dziedzic: And also, the grasses have been planted, the native grasses. To take what you're saying very literally.

Rower: I mean it literally.

Dziedzic: Yes. And then I guess, any other final thoughts you have about what you've done directly with Storm King and the relationship that you have with Storm King? [00:29:00]

Rower: I feel like Storm King—David and John and other board members—is kind of like family. We have many of the same challenges and many of the same attitudes about presenting art. Art comes first. And that's not something that's so common. The art world has expanded tremendously, but we haven't developed many more people who think of art coming first.

Dziedzic: All right. Well, let's keep it that way. [laughs] Thanks.

Rower: I agree.

[End of interview]