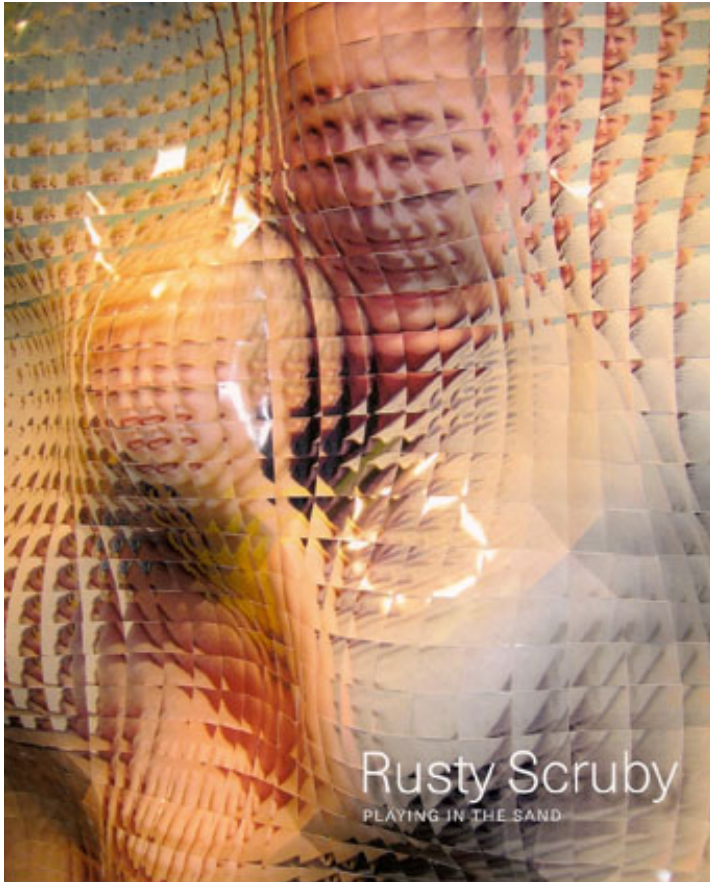


Rusty Scruby: Mathematical Harmonies

By Jennifer Jankauskas



Harmonies, resonance, dissonance, pattern. These are the guiding principles in Rusty Scruby's art and life. Mesmerized in his youth by numerical oddities such as π and counting the number of steps to school and between classes, Scruby, as an adult, continues to strive for a deeper understanding of the universe through both unseen and ubiquitous mathematical relationships. This love of numbers is a way to distill what is around him. He says, "I was obsessed with taking the physical world and mapping it out in my head." Scruby transcribes his inner world, brimming with numerical relationships, into two- and three-dimensional pieces that

have a lyrical presence. He translates the simple patterns of everyday life into complex and immersive mixed media constructions filled with both meaning and beauty. In essence, Scruby is a magician, conjuring up a new way to see the world.

Scruby mines his past to explore the present and several significant experiences shape his art. At the age of two he moved with his parents from Oregon to Kwajalein. This island, part of a coral atoll in the Marshall Islands, rests in the Pacific Ocean, north of the Equator and west of the International Date Line. Although a small island, Kwajalein has, since 1944, been a key site for the United States military. Scruby's father, a civilian science and math teacher, brought his family to the base

where military personnel engaged in procedures and target practice for shooting down missiles. At such a young age, Scruby had no awareness of these various activities, instead leading a simple life with his family and developing his love of nature by spending time playing in the water and on the beach while trying to make sense of the universe.

After a few years, Scruby moved back stateside and, with an interest in flying, later decided to study aerospace engineering at Texas A&M University. During his senior year, he began taking piano lessons, which brought him back to a childhood love of music instilled in him by his mother, a grade school teacher who participated in local music theater in Oregon. This love of music propelled him to switch schools and study music composition at the University of North Texas. While Scruby has no formal art training other than working after college in a design studio with ceramics and porcelain forms, he pieces together what he learned through these different subjects and his experiences to create innovative works of art. In fact, it is the various opposing relationships such as abstraction and focus, chaos and pattern, and dissonance and resonance that are intrinsic to both music and engineering that now inform his art process. Scruby cuts, weaves, and layers symmetrical shapes together from photographs and other materials to make works that defy strict categories. Working sculpturally, many projects are photographic tapestries woven from thousands of prints, while others are in-the-round globes, torpedoes, and zeppelins that cull the imagery from fewer prints and play with perspective, or are fully abstract formal constructions of paper and plastic that explore environmental concerns. His use of repetition in both pattern and process builds tension and resolution in what he calls a visual frequency, a concept born of his study in music composition. "Just as a composer combines two different pitches, two different frequencies and gets harmony or dissonance, I want to find where those relationships were visually."

The memory of his time on Kwajalein is the inspiration for almost all of Scruby's work over the past few years. Whether using family snapshots from that period, new images that he photographs or abstract patterns from other materials, Scruby creates works that symbolize how his time on the island shaped who he is along with his present concerns. Although somewhat nostalgic, the work is never

sentimental. In fact, Scruby investigates the very nature of memory itself. He wonders how, if forced to start over, we could piece our past together through images. His attempts to do so are a way to hold on to the past, yet he recognizes that our memory functions in the present, actively filling in the blanks, thus we can never fully recapture the reality of past events.

With *Kwajalein*, 2006, Scruby reconstructs a found family photograph. In his signature style, he interweaves multiple fractured images together from which a cohesive vision of his sister emerges. A closer look also reveals the artist as a young boy moving out of the frame to the right. To accomplish this effect Scruby scans the original photograph into his computer and prints thousands of images that he cuts, layers and weaves together. “My faceted image pieces that become abstract (blurred) with repetition are really “interior” pieces and take my mind to that interior place.” Moving away from works that exist on a flat plane and represent his inner self, Scruby’s art evolves more fully into three-dimensions, immersing the artist into the world. *Playing in the Sand*, 2008, a large installation composed of photographs shaped into hanging globes and torpedoes, features a boy frolicking in the sand. While Scruby does not know the young child (the artist took the image while in Miami) he evokes an image of the artist as a child open to a world of freedom and possibilities, and thus the piece becomes a symbolic self-portrait. Like the boy building sand castles, Scruby is interested in the process of construction, producing two additional three-dimensional structures in this series, *Beach Couple*, 2008 and *Leaving the Beach*, 2008. A combination of multiple globes, zeppelins and /or vertical torpedoes comprise each work and each individual object, placed in concert with the others, is only a portion of the overall scene. Scruby plays with space and perspective and invites viewers to interact with the almost life-sized figures by entering “the beach” and walking among those enjoying the shore.

The shoreline, and water itself, both powerfully dangerous and alluring are the inspiration for much of Scruby’s works of art. Growing up so near the water instilled in Scruby a love of water’s reflectivity and its potential for expansion. Additionally, on *Kwajalein*, there is a precarious balance between land and water. Current climate changes and conditions are the cause of evacuations on several neighboring islands. The news of these events, spurred Scruby to create pieces that investigate different

states of water. All white and a combination of clear and white these compositions are meditations on the different states and densities of water—ice, water, and gas/vapor. Devoid of identifiable images, these purely abstracted works investigate the symmetries and the building structures of natural elements. In his cloud pieces such as *Griffin*, 2009, and *Floating*, 2009, Scruby uses a process of folding and weaving paper together in such a way that the fronts and backs of the works exist on the same plane. His paper facets slightly ripple, playing rhythmically with light and shadow to expand the surface.

In *Cube Network*, 2007 and *Reef*, 2008 Scruby opens up his compositions to incorporate negative space. Still utilizing paper, he also introduces plastic as an additional material. *Cube Network* consists of stacked layers formed by numerous interlocking hexagonal shapes. Shaping space and creating contrasting areas of density, openness, and tension from the identical units is what interests Scruby. Similar to the way that the ocean, in its infinite complexity, forms waves from a few components that act on each other, Scruby uses these interchangeable components to produce numerous variations. For example, *Reef*, 2008, is a smaller version of another work (not in the exhibition), *Glass Bottom Boat*. Both of these hanging sculptures grew out of a memory of visiting his father on the island of Guam and looking through the floor of the glass-bottomed boat built by his father. For Scruby, this was a window to an abstracted and mystical underwater place filled with symmetries and patterns. Scruby pulls tools from the seemingly disparate disciplines of music and engineering in an attempt to capture, through his art, some of what he believes science overlooks. In this process, Scruby is “trying to find some precarious balance between the inner and real worlds... the intense hand-crafted nature and three-dimensional elements bring my thoughts back into the real world, while the repetition creates more of an interior space.” Negotiating between the theoretical and the physical, Scruby translates his clearly articulated vision into harmonious works of art.

Jennifer Jankauskas is the Associate Curator, John Michael Kohler Arts Center