

RICHARD
REZAC

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Learning to Converse:
Richard Rezac

by Graham Bader

Address: such was the title of Richard Rezac’s stellar career-spanning 2018 exhibition at The Renaissance Society in Chicago. Devised by the artist himself, this moniker mimics in many ways his own practice. Formally elegant (note the silken flow of those paired d’s and s’s) and seemingly matter-of-fact, the term rumbles with semantic complexity just below the surface. For “address” suggests both location and action, denoting equally the label on an envelope, the act of this label’s writing, and the physical destination to which it points. As Rezac noted in conversation with the Chicago show’s curator, Solveig Øvstebø, this seemingly straightforward word is in fact strangely elusive, “so common it sort of suspends itself as invisible.”¹

To apply Rezac’s observation to our specific example of the address on an envelope: though it necessarily functions through its visibility as communicated information (123 Main St., etc.), it is ideally invisible as a thing in itself. When an address demands notice for its own sake—because the ink has smeared, the writing is particular, or the formatting is off—is precisely when problems arise. In calling attention to itself as a quasi-independent entity, the address in such cases overwhelms the posted item it is meant to serve, which in the process may be delayed (the scanner can’t read the zip code) or simply lost (the street number is washed away).

Another way to describe this is to say the address in such instances has inserted itself, as a specific material form, into the regularly transparent processes of postal communication



Stance (set)

and exchange. Through this insertion of its own specificities of suggestion and substance into operations that are meant to work seamlessly and automatically, the address in such cases has disrupted, slowed down, and complicated the informational circuits it is meant to serve, ideally invisibly.

Rezac's sculptures, in the most basic terms, achieve this same effect. His pieces instantiate an address—face-to-face rather than epistolary—that doesn't so much communicate information as insert itself into and, in the process, decelerate and disorder our regular experience of spaces and things. Similar to script on an envelope that we recognize as a destination but can't otherwise make out, Rezac's component elements almost—but don't—suggest familiar associations and uses; his colors almost—but don't—evoke specific objects and experiences; and his overall compositions almost—but don't—present themselves as commonplace, maybe even functional, things. That his objects are carefully made and intricately conceptualized is clear enough, but just what these objects are, why they take the form they do, and how they might function in the world, all remain—seemingly just—beyond our grasp.

Note the specific means by which Rezac's sculptures occupy space. While about half are wall-bound—jutting out, projecting from its surface, or cutting across corners—the rest stand or sit on the floor, hang from ceilings, inhabit their own integrated tables and platforms, or demarcate area through division. These placements are all utterly precise and carefully orchestrated by the artist, suggesting in each case a quasi-agency of the object at hand and its active insertion into space rather than passive anticipation of contact.

In this implied action, Rezac's objects appear to direct us missives that can be discerned but not yet understood. They



Untitled (19-11)

begin a conversation. In doing so, they ask us to learn their idiom, not by acquiring a new language but by reanimating an old: that of the entwined frameworks of use, memory, and material correspondence by which our knowledge and experience of the world's forms are realized. These are the words with which Rezac's objects speak—and that of the exchange to which they invite us.

Like most artists, Rezac began his career as a painter, and a figurative one at that. But he soon moved into abstraction and, shortly after completing his M.F.A. at the Maryland Institute College of Art in the early 1980s, began to extend his surfaces into space, utilizing simple structural frameworks and materials and initially refraining from any applied coloration. In developing these images-cum-objects, Rezac identified a channel by which he could retain a connection to painting's deep traditions and capacities—its quality, Jennifer R. Gross writes of the artist's thinking, as “a construct that is exceptional, almost magical”—while simultaneously amplifying his increasing interest in the direct presentation of objects in and of themselves.²

This initial inter-medial suspension can be understood as the deep root of Rezac's ongoing straddling of image and thing, of illegibility and near-recognition. For his works maintain their hold of painting's potentiality as a “magical construct,” which seems uniquely suited to the transformation of thought into form, but its realization is through the matter-of-fact substance of constructed, three-dimensional objects in the world. This process, which most often begins



Untitled (19-02)

with one or more careful sketches (functioning initially as persuasive devices to convince him an idea is worth turning into an object, and then as subsequent guides for making), demonstrates the ongoing entwinement of image and object within Rezac's thinking, as does the impeccability of coloristic decisions and procedures with which he finalizes each piece.

A closer look at some works from the present exhibition can help clarify the ideas driving Rezac's creative process. First, consider the hanging piece *Chigi, Pamphili*. Though such suspended pieces are relatively rare in Rezac's oeuvre, they play an outsized role in his practice due to their specific capacity to animate space, calling our attention to the co-generation of objects and their spatial frameworks of floor, wall, ceiling, and surrounding environment.

In the case of *Chigi, Pamphili*, Rezac began with a desire to work with the clustered mounds of his earlier floor piece, *Chigi*, in miniature. More specifically, he wished to set these in dialogue with another element derived, as were his yellow mounds, from the family crest of one of the chief patron families of the Italian Baroque architect Francesco Borromini. Architecture has long been a primary intellectual interest and repository of forms for Rezac, especially, over the last two decades, that of the Baroque, which he sees as an encapsulation of "complexity...held in an organized way."³ Indeed, the realization of such organized complexity, it could be claimed, is the very project of *Chigi, Pamphili*. Combining a multiplicity of materials, forms, and reference points in a construction that reaches in all directions, the piece is a kind of material concretization of the Baroque itself, one realized through paratactic assemblage rather than conceptual definition.



Chigi, Pamphili



Chigi, Pamphili

In devising *Chigi, Pamphili*, Rezac paired his tightly grouped mounds—reduced to four from the original “six hills” of the emblematic Chigi crest and rendered far more playful (even cartoon-like) as a volumetric form—with the olive-branch-grasping dove of the Pamphili family’s insignia. In doing so, he was immediately struck by the elements’ essential material contrast between heavy earthen forms and potentially flight-bound bird, the latter of which he realized as an origami-like construction of three integrated and hand-loomed cotton sheets. This contrastive dialogue became a central engine of the piece’s design. Most notably, it generated the work’s diagonal format as well as its suspended and divided orientation: the former emerged from the composition’s relations of weight (both actual—its yellow mounds are heavy cast bronze—and merely suggested), while the latter was a means to spatially animate its relations of similarity-through-difference. Mimicking our own encounter with Rezac’s work, each of the piece’s two primary elements faces the other as if a muted echo; both paired and austere divided, they remain forever just out of reach of one another.

To describe the particular compositional and conceptual decisions that produced *Chigi, Pamphili* could take up pages. Each of its units is made with the utmost specificity—from the yellow hue of its mounded forms and the precisely rendered gap that separates them from their aluminum plate base, to the interlocked triangles of its suspended aluminum bracket and the graduated multicolor grid of the cloth this bracket secures (composed of three separately woven sheets that move from a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch plaid, to $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch, to $\frac{3}{4}$ in their center-most rectangular panel). In all cases, Rezac is working between the constitutive elements of our perceptual experience of

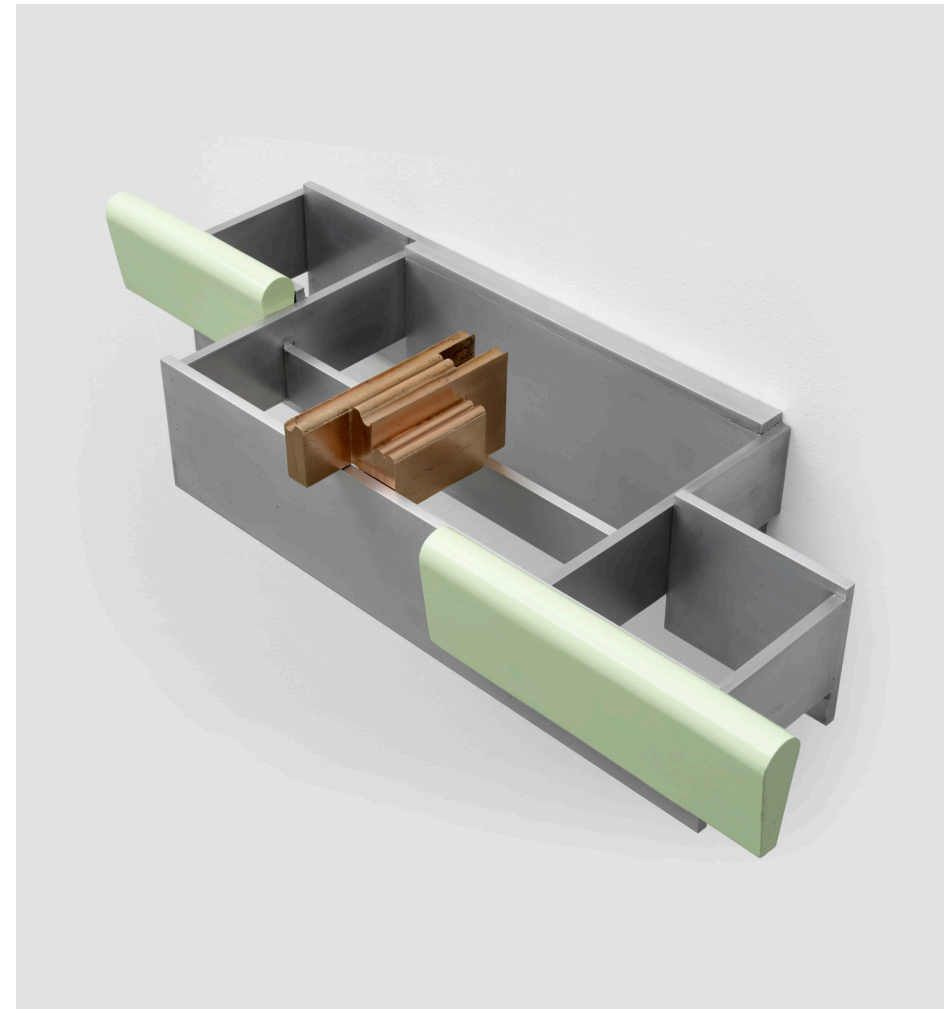


Chigi, Pamphili

Chigi, Pamphili in the here-and-now—his staggered grids, for instance, echo and amplify the shifting vision of each cloth plane as we perceive them in space—and the work's generation from and permeation by specific historical forms and iconographies, themselves saturated by deeply rooted associations and antecedents. We could push this further—considering, for instance, the kissing birds of Raphael's tomb in the Pantheon, the bees on the Barberini family crest, or even the gridded tablecloths of red-sauce Italian restaurants—but let us instead look, before ending, at one further work from the present show.

Soliloquy, rendered in cast bronze and cast and plate aluminum, is arguably a more typical work for Rezac than *Chigi, Pamphili*. It occupies the wall, for one thing, and its overall composition is more streamlined, with less divergence between its individual parts. The piece also addresses its viewers (there's that word again) far more explicitly: its broad front plate and yellow-green teardrop forms directly face us, and the cast bronze element at its center juts out slightly as if to offer a quiet hello. To me, this element has a quasi-anthropomorphic friendliness to it, though I suppose others might be unable to let go of its resemblance to a pointed weapon. However, viewing the work in profile or up close—which means looking into it from above in the latter case, given *Soliloquy*'s belly-level installation—such associations all but disappear. Instead, we see the almost dainty imperfections of this central form's beautiful cast surface, the concatenation of planes of which it is comprised, and the tide of convex and concave ridges that flow across it.

Rezac talks of this central cast form as the generative unit of *Soliloquy* as a whole, which took shape as a framework



Soliloquy

in which it might “have a place to rest.”⁴ Surely the evocation of fragmented picture frames by this form’s component planes is crucial here, as is its inspiration (as noted by Rezac in conversation) from a series of Chinese scholars’ rocks.⁵ Such associations, rendered not as direct echoes but as abstract correspondences, are the primary fuel of a practice committed throughout to creating places of repose for such complex concretizations of cultural resonance. But this vocabulary of inactivity, it must be said—of rest and repose—isn’t quite right. For just as *Soliloquy*’s central element, however securely nestled it may be, is definitively active in its forward-jutting address, so all of Rezac’s work functions to enliven and entwine the densely layered cultural traces of which it is made: from Chinese rocks to Italian crests to the many stops that lie between.

Among these stops, of course, is the more immediate sculptural legacy out of which Rezac’s work emerged. Or perhaps more accurately, the not-quite-sculptural legacy begot by what Donald Judd described in 1965 as “specific objects,” or works of art that exist as neither painting nor sculpture but are “usually...related, closely or distantly, to one or the other.”⁶ Discussing a range of works from Frank Stella’s stripe paintings to Claes Oldenburg’s soft sculptures, Judd understood the primary motivation of such specific objects to be negative. For in existing as neither painting nor sculpture, he argued, they sought to escape the cultural baggage that weighed down them both.

Rezac, beginning roughly two decades later, flipped this logic on its head: he began to work between media not to escape, but to weave together (and thus complicate) the particular histories and resonances of individual cultural



Soliloquy

forms. These included not just Judd's *bête noires* of painting and sculpture, but also such diverse practices as heraldry, architecture, design, and even the isolation of "compression by forces of nature" in the collecting and display of exquisitely formed scholars' rocks.⁷ Through this process, these very histories and resonances became Rezac's own particular medium—a base material, like Michelangelo's stone or Judd's welded plates, to be made anew in the carved, welded, painted, joined, glazed, woven, filed, and cast forms of his objects.

This, to return to my opening, is the language spoken by Rezac's work—a beautiful one, certainly, in which to learn to converse.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rezac cited in "Running the Angles: A Conversation between Richard Rezac and Solveig Øvstebø," in *Richard Rezac: Address* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2018), 68.
- 2 Jennifer R. Gross, "Richard Rezac: Occupation Artist," *Ibid.*, 14.
- 3 Rezac as cited in "Running the Angles," 74.
- 4 Richard Rezac, conversation with the author, November 2019.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Contemporary Sculpture: Arts Yearbook 8* (1965): 74.
- 7 The phrase is Rezac's, from a November 2019 conversation with the author.



Untitled (19-05)

The artist wishes to express appreciation to Lauren Wittels, Lawrence Luhning, and Roland Augustine—and the gallery staff, for their support of this exhibition, and to Graham Bader for his insightful essay.

Stance (set)

2019, cast bronze, 16 x 10½ x 2½ inches

Untitled (19-11)

2019, painted wood, aluminum, 45 x 61¾ x 1¼ inches

Untitled (19-02)

2019, painted cherry wood, aluminum, 18 x 24½ x 7 inches

Chigi, Pamphili

2019, aluminum, painted cast bronze and woven cotton,
25½ x 26½ x 10½ inches

Soliliquy

2019, aluminum, cast bronze and painted cast aluminum,
9¼ x 34 x 13 inches

Untitled (19-05)

2019, plaster, painted wood, 38¾ x 36¾ x 16¼ inches

Design by Omnivore

Photography by Tom Van Eynde

