

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

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*Step Up 09* is a series of six solo exhibitions open to emerging artists living in New England, New Jersey or New York. The *Step Up* open call series seeks to provide emerging artists in our region with an exhibition and publication at a critical moment in their careers. The *Step Up 09* jurors were Susan Cross (Curator, MASS MoCA); Andrea Grover (Founding Director, Aurora Picture Show); and Deborah Willis (Professor and Chair of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University).

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Real Art Ways is an alternative multidisciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work and creatively engages, builds and informs audiences and communities. As Real Art Ways grows, our commitment to supporting young and emerging artists remains a touchstone of the organization.

Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways celebrates its 35th Anniversary with events in 2010 and 2011.

On the cover: *Untitled (Arrows #3)*, acrylic mirror, wire and light, 75"x68"x5", 2010 (detail).

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

# Robin Mandel



*Relative Stranger 4*, mixed media, 30"x37"x30", 2010 (detail).

## Robin Mandel: Packing Light

By Andrea Codrington Lippke

Robin Mandel dreams of packing light. Over the past few years he has moved constantly, splitting his time between short-term teaching positions and artist residencies throughout New England, and everything that can't fit in his truck is stowed in a 10 x 10 x 10-foot storage box in Rhode Island. "I started feeling the physical weight of things I was carrying around," he says of his recent experience. "I developed this desire to erase the stuff I have."

As a result, Mandel has been thinking a lot about the early films of Georges Méliès—especially a 1909 short called *Le Locataire Diabolique* (The Devilish Tenant), in which a man rents an empty room and proceeds to pull all of his furnishings out of a steamer trunk. First comes the table and chairs, a bookshelf, a piano, even a fireplace. Then come his wife and children, appearing out of nowhere thanks to Méliès' pioneering stop-trick substitution technique, which must have seemed like magic to early cinema-goers. The reverse happens when the tenant is unable to pay his rent and he has to leave before the police arrive with the angry landlord. A ten-second packing job of all the furniture and a quick escape out the window are all he needs to navigate the burden of material possessions. "Envious," says Mandel with a sigh.

Before filmmaking Méliès was a stage magician and had long mastered the physical manipulation of objects—a lesson that Mandel seems to be well on his way to learning himself. Although

Robin Mandel is an artist working in sculpture, photography and installation. His recent exhibition venues include the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, MA and the Freedman Gallery at Albright College in Reading, PA. He has also exhibited in Portland (Maine), Boston, New York, Montreal, Venice and Barcelona. He has been awarded grants from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the St. Botolph Club Foundation in Boston and residencies at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado, the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA. His teaching credits include the Rhode Island School of Design, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Colby College in Waterville, ME, where he was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Art.

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*Relative Stranger 4*, mixed media, 30"x37"x30", 2010.

he has no aspirations to be a magician, Mandel does have an overriding interest in dematerialization—de-bulking the physical world or, at the very least, playing with the viewer's perception of its concrete nature.

While these days the most common redoubt of those seeking to escape the burdens of three-dimensional reality is the digital realm, Mandel stays emphatically analogue. He admits to being charmed by low-tech optical effects, the kind borne of Mélièsian stage illusion, but he also uses physics experiments. He learned practical material-based skills as an assistant to a furniture designer in Boston just after college, which complemented his existing interest in physics. In other words, before beginning to dismantle the physical world, this artist understood how it was put together.

Mandel's work evokes a sense of the uncanny made all the more poignant by the deep familiarity of his materials. His is a domestic haunting comprised of everyday objects that seem to move on their own, give off mysterious light, point to cryptic forces or form hypnotic patterns. In *Relative*

*Strangers #4*, Mandel presents a card table that holds five ghostly beer bottles flickering above the surface, straddling solidity and immateriality like an animation or a hologram. The only clue as to the real nature of Mandel's phantasm is a slight mechanical hum and the appearance of a switch on the side of the table that, once flipped, reveals the work's optical trickery. The bottles, it turns out, are formed by flat Plexiglas cut-outs that are attached to rotating discs embedded in the table's surface. Their frosted edges, revolving at varying speeds, blur and form the illusion of three dimensionality. "Motion and light together have an incredible dematerializing effect," he says.

Mandel is a master of slipping between dimensions. In a seemingly inverse

move to *Relative Strangers*, one of his most recent works, *Aurora* (2010), transforms three-dimensional objects into a two-dimensional effect optically likened to the Northern Lights. The work plays out in a darkened room, where one wall becomes the screen upon which two amorphous washes of greenish-yellow light interact in cryptic motion. Mesmerizing and otherworldly in a similar way as their meteorological namesake, the lights are only in fact the result of two strong beams of light projected through slowly rotating wine bottles that are openly displayed by the artist. The theme of using familiar objects is reiterated, and artifacts of everyday life become defamiliarized, transformed into something with the mysterious visual effect of a solar wind.

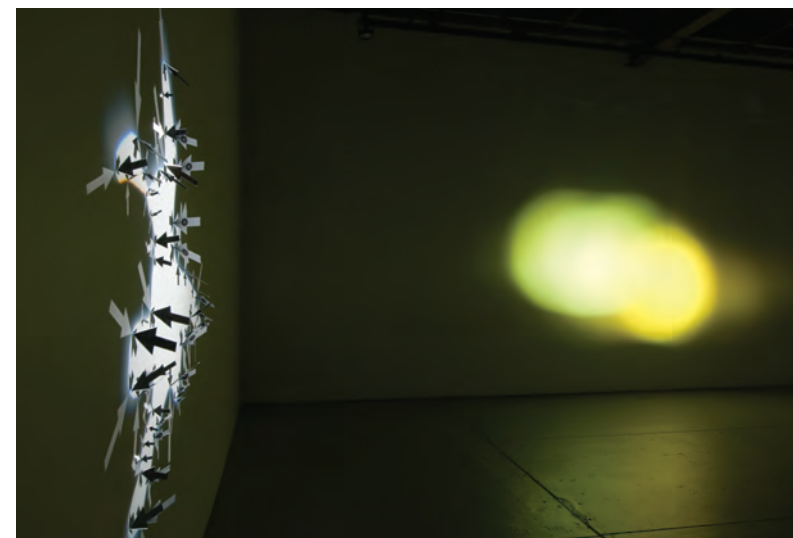
In another display, *Untitled (Arrows #3)* (2010), Mandel continues to indulge his fascination with optical effect by projecting a random shape

of light onto a blank wall and perpendicularly attaching mirrored arrows to its outline. The arrows, which cast both a shadow and a reflection of themselves onto the wall, are consequently tripled—seemingly affixing the light's shape like a specimen pin. The resulting image reads like some kind of physics-related vector diagram, yet what forces the vectors remains Mandel's secret.

Mandel emphasizes the fact that none of his work has been digitally manipulated, but he is not always so revealing about how he constructs his effects. A series of photographs entitled *Provincetown Harbor* (2010), for instance, look at first to be complete digital abstractions—concentric rings of colored light that in some instances resemble the inside of a CG-rendered sci-fi wormhole, and in others seem to be vividly electrified Spirographs. A closer look reveals, however, small hints that the photo's origins are far from abstract: the familiar cold-bluish tone of sodium vapor lamps, the warmer orange of incandescence, the red beacon of a salt-water buoy. When matched with the series title, these photographs emerge as landscapes—albeit unconventional—of the eponymous New England port.

If Mandel is telling the truth and his images aren't digitally

Installation view of *Untitled (Arrows #3)* (acrylic mirror, wire and light, 75"x68"x5", 2010) and *Aurora* (mixed media, 16"x24"x18", 2010).



*Provincetown Harbor 2/20/2010 12:16am*, digital c-print, 24"x18", 2010.

manipulated, then, the key to such defamiliarization must lie in the physical realm. In this instance, he built several rotating and swinging arms to which he attached his camera; setting his shutter speed to 30-second exposures, he was able to capture the blur of light as the camera rotated on a center axis in the winter darkness of northern Cape Cod.

Mandel has additionally experimented with his camera devices, setting them up in more populous locations, including Boston. In so doing, he has made one of the country's biggest and most recognizable cities disappear before our very eyes—a trick, no doubt, that would have made Georges Méliès green with envy.

**Andrea Codrington Lippke** is a Brooklyn-based editor and writer specializing in design and visual culture. She has been a columnist for *The New York Times*, an editor at *Phaidon Press*, senior editor at *I.D. Magazine* and a guest critic and lecturer at *Parsons School of Design*, *Yale University*, *Cranbrook Institute*, *University of the Arts and Pratt*. She is the author of the books *Kyle Cooper: Monographics* and *Greta Magnusson Grossman: A Car and Some Shorts* and has written extensively for such publications as *The Washington Post*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Elle*, *Metropolis* and *Cabinet*. She is an instructor in the *School of Visual Arts's MFA program in design criticism* and is currently working on her first novel.