

# Interview



## The Weight of Mary Mattingly's World

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September 4, 2013

Mary Mattingly is one of the most self-aware people you'll ever meet. Her work, which consists largely of sculptures and installations created from mass-produced objects she's collected over the years, speaks not only to her creative ability as an artist, but also to her deep sensitivity to the world around her. "My goal is to create these structures of bundled objects so that I'm really faced with everything I rely on and consume," she says. "And it's a lot." Mattingly photographs her sculptures in natural habitats, uniting our world of "things" to that of their organic beginnings. In the spirit of a kind of homecoming, Mattingly hopes to get people thinking about what we're taking from the earth, and how we can use what we already have to our best advantage. Her work presents our possessions through a restrictive lens, showing just how much we'd have to carry if we bundled our objects to our own backs.

Mattingly has shown at prestigious art festivals, galleries, and museums all over the world, including the International Center for Photography in 2006, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2009, and the Biennial shows in Venice and Istanbul in 2012. Most recently, she took part in MoMA's Expo1 initiative this past July, leading a lecture series about sustainable living for the future. Her new show, "House and Universe," a collection of her favorite works from the last few years, opens this Friday at the Robert Mann Gallery in Chelsea. Earlier this week, we caught up with Mattingly

at her Brooklyn studio to get the lowdown on what the show will feature.

**NOOR BRARA:** How did you come up with the idea of the bundled structure as the form for your work? I also heard you dragged your first bundle across the Bayonne Bridge. Why?

**MARY MATTINGLY:** Using the form of the bundle, I wanted to show literally how big it was—sort of emphasizing the magnitude of how much we depend on material things. You're faced with it in a way that's very different from being faced with your possessions in their individual forms because when you bundle them, they're oppressive. So I wanted to carry one across the Bayonne Bridge, which is about half a mile long and is the lowest bridge that cargo ships pass under. So all those ships carrying large containers can only come through when the tide is low because otherwise they're too tall, which I thought was kind of a beautiful story in relation to my project since I feel like most of the objects coming through the ports are pretty useless. It sort of speaks to this larger point of how much we're actually taking in versus how much we really need.

**BRARA:** You've said, "Maybe we need more art today because we're in a world with so many mass-produced things." Considering that your art is made from precisely those things, what did you mean by that?

**MATTINGLY:** I guess when I look at these sculptures I do see a bunch of mass produced objects, but in this case they're very personal; I think this is the most personal body of work that I've made and it's really a combination of my favorite things. I was thinking of Rauschenberg's *Combines* and how they made objects unique again. Through that I started to think, "What would the story be if they were in bundles instead of alone, as defined objects? How would their value change as a collective?" Maybe the story is that people have to carry these bundles around and they're kind of like time capsules from a past or a different place, and so they tell

this really large story that has to do with so much more than the object—in a way, people can really quantify their lives and experiences through their possessions. When I think about these sculptures and the individual object, it makes me think of the entire network of how objects are made and how they come to different places in the world. And then it almost negates the object and I think well, it's not about the object at all, it's about the larger story, from control to labor.

BRARA: Right, a story that never ends and lives with you. That said, do you see the creation of these bundled structures as a kind of lifelong project?

MATTINGLY: I actually do. These objects are very dear to me, and to put them here is letting them go into something else and while it's challenging, I think I'd really like to continue. Honestly I'd like to be at a place where I could say that I don't want to buy anything new anymore. And I think it can largely work, I'm just struggling with food right now in terms of buying new things—I like to have a pretty amazing spread of things.

BRARA: I think we can all relate to that. When you do buy things now, what's going through your head? Have you been purchasing things less over the years?

MATTINGLY: I've definitely been purchasing things less over the years, in part because I've been moving a lot, but also because I've been collecting things and I've got them all here and at some point I just realized what I'd amassed. So when I buy something now, I have a lot more respect for what went into making that object—I value it more.

BRARA: Tell me a little bit about your website, Own It.

MATTINGLY: Well, it started as an archive. I just wanted to literally photograph and create digital images of all of my things so I could have a record of them. I was also interested in

experiencing a different way of how our lives are recorded on the Internet and exploring the idea of creating an online community, which I feel can be a really powerful thing. So this website started as a way to just record the objects I have and share them—so that physical book, say, becomes an image, and from that comes an exchange. I wanted to make a site where I wasn't mailing physical things to people, but I was still giving people things, and I would have this relationship with that person, and if that person was interested in the object, they would have to email me and I would send that object digitally to them. So, I wanted the relationship with that person, however brief, and I wanted to spread the digital record of the things I have. We haven't launched it yet, and I'm hoping to launch it alongside the show's opening.

BRARA: Why did you feel the need to take each of your objects into account digitally?

MATTINGLY: I think it was probably two-fold. It was the ability to record and share those things. I also think we're at a point in time in our history of humanity where the systems we use for mass production have to be reevaluated, and it first struck me that online communities are a way to have local production with a universal reach. A good example of something like that would be Etsy—people making things of their own and then selling them. So I was really thinking about that and how the world would work if we relied on that more than mass production. If everyone used the Internet to share the things they created themselves, what would that look like? I think it makes objects special again. I guess I'm not really advocating for no objects in the world, but rather the idea of creating within our present means. Like the bundles—are these sculptures I'm creating, or are they possibly wearable homes?

BRARA: That gives them a new form of life in a way—and a pretty heavy one at that.

MATTINGLY: Yeah, it was interesting because when I started with the bundles, I tried to come up with the bare minimum and asked myself whether I could narrow it down to just a few things that I could fit in a backpack.

BRARA: I see it got a little bigger. Were you surprised when you found out how many things were actually precious to you?

MATTINGLY: I was. And it's a little sad to keep them in these bundles, because in a way it feels like they're leaving you. But at the same time, they kind of attain a more holistic identity when they play off each other. They tell a story about your life which, as sentimental and special as it can be, is also grounded in consumerism, which can be oppressive. So it's sort of paradoxical.

BRARA: Yeah, people often do tend to view their objects as pieces of their identity. In that same vein, though, all mass-production can't be entirely bad. As an artist who shows a lot of work through photographs of these sculptures, how do you justify photography as a form of mass production?

MATTINGLY: The way that I rationalize making photographs is because you're countering what's offensively mass-produced with something that you just want more people to see. I think photography is a universal language as far as storytelling goes, and I think that's what it's most successful at. It's also not this concrete thing. You can carry a photograph with you on a thumb drive, and you can make it bigger or smaller—it's a very malleable form of mass production. But certainly, it's something I've been questioning as I'm considering this life project that I want to keep pursuing.

BRARA: What sort of future do you envision, ideally?

MATTINGLY: Ideally I envision a future where people are supporting themselves and each other using the things we already have—perhaps a place where one can fully support oneself with the

help of others within smaller, sustainable communities. Being interdependent instead of relying mostly on machines for the things we need.

BRARA: Cumulatively, what would be the message you'd want people to take away from your show?

MATTINGLY: The overall message would be to be aware of just very simply how everything affects everyone. And these abstract bundles and the webs and stories that are wrapped around them are symbolic of that effect—people coming out of the show more sensitized to that relationship around them.

*“HOUSE AND UNIVERSE” OPENS THIS FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, AT ROBERT MANN GALLERY IN NEW YORK. FOR MORE ON MATTINGLY, VISIT HER [WEBSITE](#).*