

James Surls: *Looking Up* (Southwest Contemporary, Work in Progress Series)
Hills Snyder, July 2022

“The discoveries we make at the edge of our clearing in the forest are given shape by the nature of our looking. “

—Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Crack in The Cosmic Egg: New Concepts of Mind and Reality*, 1971

Colorado State Highway 82, which connects to the road that leads to James Surls’s Missouri Heights studio is lined with flowers—Asian poppies, scarlet bugler, yellow sweet clover, purple Larkspur, sunflowers. And when I pull up to the studio I’m immediately greeted by more tiny ambassadors—scarlet globemallows and pale blooming bindweed.



James Surls, *Fourteen Hanging Flowers*, 2002, steel, lodge pole pine, 14 ft. 6 in. x 25 ft. x 6 ft. Photo: Paul Millman. Courtesy James Surls.

All this florescence is fitting, given that the Umlauf Sculpture Garden in Austin, Texas, is showcasing a large-scale piece, *Fourteen Hanging Flowers*, with an opening at the site on December 7. In conversation about this event, Surls mentions a favorite Butch Hancock song, *Long Sunsets*, which features the lyric “winter knows what spring forgets.” The song sings of mortality, given the brief blossom that is life—for flowers...and for everyone.

Not to imply that Surls is at any kind of end. He no longer wields his six-foot-bar chainsaw—“it’s like holding a Volkswagen,” —but he works every day and is still going strong. In 2020 he received the International Sculpture Center’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

Since his late 2022 solo exhibition, *Axe and Pencil*, at the Bale Creek Allen Gallery in Ft. Worth, Surls exhibition activities have included a two-person show with life partner, Charmaine Locke, at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art; an ongoing collaboration with the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company; and a major solo exhibition, *Nightshade and Red Bone*, at KANEKO in Omaha, Nebraska, which opened March 24, running through August 13. This show will be accompanied by an extensive catalogue with essays by Paul Schimmel and Stephen Harrigan.

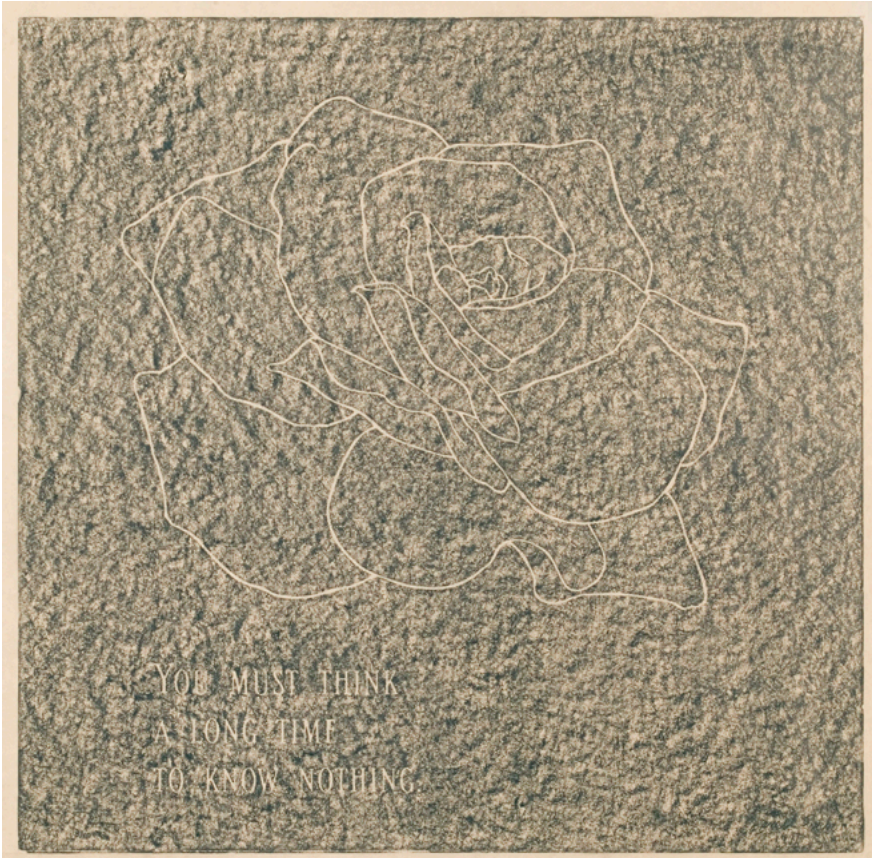
On Surls’ 80th birthday/Earth Day weekend this past April, Surls and Locke opened an exhibition at the Locke Surls Center for Art and Nature (formerly Splendora Gardens), in the East Texas compound north of Houston that served as their home and studios for over two decades before their move to Colorado in 1997. Titled *A Gift from The Bower*, the project features several open spaces (bowers, after the mating rituals of male bowerbirds) connected by pathways through the woods, with each space dedicated to one of thirteen artists and a fourteenth artist in the studio building now known as The Barn.



The exhibition *A Gift from the Bower* includes Jack Massing, *Next Exit*, 2023, fabricated metal sign, 12 x 14 ft. Photo: Paul Hester. Courtesy James Surls.

A Gift from The Bower will honor Houston art space sponsor Diverseworks with a closing on November 18, featuring a performance by legendary sax-expansion artist Dickie Landry, who as the first musician to play in Surls’ s Splendora studio, “blessed” the space in 1984.

Running parallel to *A Gift from The Bower*, *The Creeley/Surls Project* offers work from Surls's creative relationship with poet Robert Creeley in the form of seven granite stones engraved with Creeley's poems and Surls's images in response to them. Rubbings have been made from the stones and are framed and are the first exhibition in a new building dedicated to works on paper.



James Surls/Robert Creeley, *You Must Think A Long Time to Know Nothing*, 1991, hand rubbing, 36.5 x 36.5 in. Ed of 10. Courtesy James Surls.

Surls association with Creeley reaches back to the late seventies when they met at a reading that Creeley delivered at a John Chamberlain exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston and to the late eighties when they collaborated on a project titled *Poet's Walk* at Citicorp Plaza in Los Angeles. Terry Allen and Philip Levine were another artist/poet combo that were part of the project, producing a piece titled *Corporate Head*, that effectively countered the business district tone of the location.

Creeley's assertion that "form is never more than an extension of content," goes to the heart of something his poetry and Surls's art have in common: Surls knows that if he sees a vine squeezing the circumference of a tree, that the ghost of the vine is within, waiting for him to free it by making use of the twirling form he sees in his minds-eye before even taking the tree. The coiled energy trapped in the tree reveals the strength of the vine, just as the tree's potential for sculpture unlocks the vitality wound in his being. Surls is no barophobe. He figures if something can be done, he can do it—with assistance from the tree, of course.

Surls says about hearing Creeley read at the CAM: “I knew I was in the presence of someone who had been touched in mind and soul by a force greater than our own.”

At Surls’s Colorado studio, he has generously devoted the day to our conversation. On arrival, I’m greeted by Tai Pomara, Surls’ assistant and nephew of Texas painter John Pomara. He’s working on a new Surls piece, one of his number-based flowers.

Number, a fundamental truth in our universe, comes up again and again in Surls’s work. Dot, line, and plane are just other ways of saying, one, two, and three, but you’ll find Surls seeking it in the personal too. When gallerist Max Hutchinson turned 55 in 1981, James and Charmaine spent hours weighing Black Diamond watermelons from their abundant gardens, determined to find one that weighed fifty-five pounds. They succeeded, and in the subsequent celebration joyously participated in making it weigh less.

But for some small side spaces, the Missouri Heights studio is essentially three rooms --- the main work area, a clean room, and downstairs from that, a large room which houses work from six decades. To say Surls is prolific is like saying you can’t step in the same river once. Obvious, but with paradox thrown in for spice.



Details from James Surls's rural Colorado studio. Photo: Hills Snyder.

Looking through the closely packed third space is like looking through the thicket in *Splendor*, with woods so dense that on walks in the early days of their time there James and Charmaine sometimes found themselves walking home from a neighbor’s house in the dark, following a road flanked by seventy-foot trees, using only the road-wide band of stars above them to maintain their route toward home, almost as if the figure in Locke’s *Night Wonder* was herself their guide, the band of stars their own personal milky way. “It was so dark you couldn’t see

the road. Looking up was the only way to know where we were going,” says Surls, recounting the memory.



Charmaine Locke, *Night Wonder*, 2005, plaster and shoe polish, 92 x 48 in. Photo: Paul Millman. Courtesy Charmaine Lock.

“Looking up” falls neatly within the lexicon of phrases he writes on his drawings and could very well serve as the title of one of his sculptures.

Surls is a guy true to his East Texas roots, making art that was honest to the experience available to him as the son of a carpenter, who built the house they lived in. In 1982, a question came from the audience in attendance at a panel discussion that was part of the International Sculpture Conference that year in Oakland, California. When asked about his choice of materials, Surls replied with an answer that reveals an egalitarian nature, “Anyone can get wood.”

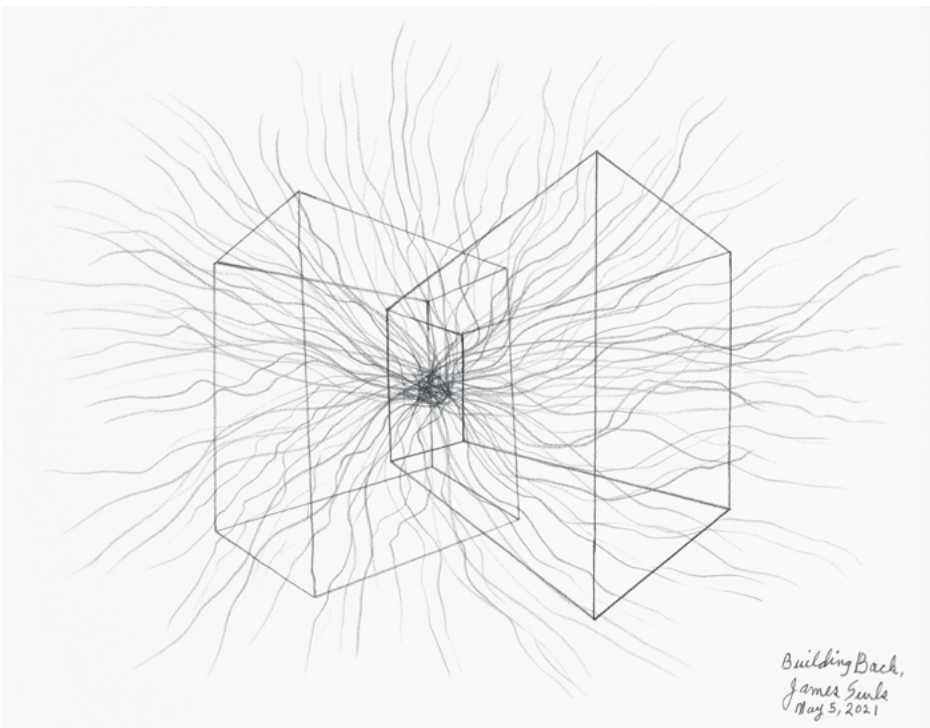
It’s been said from many quarters that Surls emergence in the seventies was an answer to Minimalism, and it’s true, when western art history is the frame you’re looking through, but the argument may also be made that Surls’s work is straight up storytelling, as natural as bird song. This view allows for an accessible art --- anyone can respond to a story, art historical awareness or not. Or maybe all that seventies and early-eighties narrative art that came to

challenge historical categories like field painting and minimalism reveals that it's really all storytelling. Even a subjectivity-denier like Frank Stella, in the mid-eighties to mid-nineties, eventually had to face the white whale.

Another question during a panel discussion at the same conference asked about his single decade rise to art stardom. His answer, "It's like riding a bullet." The simplicity of this metaphor contained so much that has remained true of Surls. No one sets out to create a zeitgeist, it's those keeping their head in their work that turn out to be the creators of what rises.



The exhibition *A Gift from the Bower* includes James Surls, *Oak Stump*, 1983-2023, oak wood, 44 in. x 11 x 11 ft. Photo: Paul Hester. Courtesy James Surls.



James Surls, *Building Back*, 2021, pencil on paper, 11 x 15 in. Courtesy the artist.