

## “The Sublime is Real”

Alexander Dumbadze



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**There is nothing easy about Larry Bamburg’s art: whether for him; for those who help realize his projects; for viewers who must make sense, in this case, of his arrangements of burls, hooves, and shells on top of a giant hunk of concrete.**

But to frame things in terms of difficulty is misleading. It suggests the effort exerted by all involved is the most important part of Bamburg’s work. One could be forgiven for thoughts along these lines, especially if one has been to his studio, or seen him install a show, or spent time with his art, puzzling together his amalgamations of organic and inorganic materials. His exhibitions, though, are absolutely pristine—seamless examples of technical virtuosity. And through a serious rumination on the potential of form, his art enables reflections on such things as the efficacy of the will and the agency of inanimate things. Everything on view is a response to a problem determined by Bamburg and conditioned by the context in which he solves it. What is fascinating is his commit-

ment to his own rules. It is an impressive display of determination. It is also the result of a collaboration between Bamburg and his materials, for each part of *BurlsHoovesandShells on a Pedestal of Conglomerates* has as much of say—if not more—as Bamburg in the outcome of the work.

For *BurlsHoovesandShells on a Pedestal of Conglomerates*, Bamburg built a kind of obelisk as high as possible. No steel rods or internal supports are used; all is held in place by gravity. The choice of materials is not accidental. Burls are a kind of tumor that grow on trees, often near the roots, sometimes on the trunk. They arise because of a wound or an infection, mutations that produce out of illness wonderfully intricate grains in the wood. It is the burls’ deformity that appeals to Bamburg. No two burls are alike, and their unabated growth is akin to the construction of his sculpture, which

is composed in a manner Bamburg calls “matchy”: the burls, hooves, and shells share enough similarity, whether in color or texture, for instance, to initiate an associative chain Bamburg sees out to the end. Bamburg never makes a big deal about his process or how he sources his materials. It is just something that needs to be done, nothing more; but it also highlights the way his intent serendipitously brings together the discarded and forgotten of the natural world, and through their conjunction the no longer animated becomes alive, at least metaphorically, in the form of a sculpture.

*BurlsHoovesandShells on a Pedestal of Conglomerates* is monumental. The reclaimed concrete foundation weighs about 8,000 pounds; the largest burls are themselves 300 to 400 pounds. The objects’ imposing physicality is mitigated by Bamburg’s delicate touch, as when he uses other chunks of found rock conglomerates to stabilize the massive support. Bamburg does not have a rote plan for how to assemble the form, but previous attempts offer guidance. The shells and hooves hold in place



the ascending arrangement of burls, and once Bamburg sets the final piece, he cedes control of the work. What happens next is up to the sculpture’s constituting parts. Permanence is not an aspect of the project, nor is a predetermined collapse. Bamburg wants to push a formal system to the edge of failure, which for him is not a mere artistic problem but a way of understanding the world.

The first time Bamburg showed sculptures of this kind they were not entirely freestanding. One point of the column touched the wall. Still, their structural integrity was precarious, and for the show’s opening, masking tape was adhered to the floor about a foot away from the works. It was a warning for viewers not to get too close. There were going to be kids running around. The tape was pulled the following morning, but one night, about three weeks later, the smaller of the two stacks came down. No one knows exactly what happened, but burls were scattered about, and several shells were broken beyond repair. Bamburg reassembled the piece, although it was now different. No art space in their right mind would show *BurlsHoovesandShells on a Pedestal of Conglomerates* on its own, but instead of altering the integrity of the work to appease worried administrators, Bamburg has added on his own accord a safety wall and a viewing glass. The problem-solving logic enmeshed in the sculpture has been integrated in his dealings with institutional concerns. If anything, the barrier is there to give viewers and the gallery a sense of comfort, that they are protected from harm. None of this, however, alters the destiny of the sculpture. It has a will of its own.



By chance, I began writing this text not long after Hurricane Harvey made landfall. Nearly a week later, Tropical Storm Harvey has inundated Houston and Harris County with unprecedented flooding, and as I write these words, Port Arthur and Beaumont are under water and a chemical plant has caught fire. The amount of destruction is unfathomable. There can never be a normal sense of normal again.



I was in Bamburg’s studio in Brooklyn during another horrific disaster in the Gulf of Mexico: the catastrophic failure of the offshore drilling rig Deepwater Horizon and the ensuing environmental calamity. Bamburg was born and raised in Houston. He knew people who worked on oil rigs, and he explained to me how he saw this complex, mechanical behemoth as a kind of formal system: a whole network of human and nonhuman actors that had tragically exceeded its limits. What he kept coming back to was the point right before breakage, and then he started to give me other examples, things taken from everyday life, from his observations around the city, the home and the studio, and it was at this moment that I got a glimpse at how his mind works. It is a kind of thinking that’s very visual; it doesn’t translate well into words.

Bamburg’s work is deeply imbricated in the nonhuman world. So much of what he does is about the give and take between himself and

other organic and inorganic things. I have found it hard not to think of *BurlsHoovesandShells on a Pedestal of Conglomerates* in relation to what is unfolding in Houston and along the Texas coast. The images are harrowing, the stories of rescues dramatic, the amazing way people have helped one another heartening. The storm’s statistics defy comprehension, and what really saddens me is that I know, like many others, that this is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. It is clear that climate change affected Harvey, and it is clear that more dramatic and extreme weather occurrences will become increasingly frequent. Bamburg’s new piece presents in his own unassuming way the fragility of existence, the battle of wills between the human and nonhuman, and the sheer beauty and miracle of the natural world. But a sadness also lurks, a resignation to the forces of fate. *BurlsHoovesandShells on a Pedestal of Conglomerates*’ delicate balance is our own. The sublime is real.



**Larry Bamburg**  
*Burls, Hooves, and Shells on a  
Pedestal of Conglomerates*

September 22 – December 9 / 2017

**The Author**

Alexander Dumbadze teaches contemporary art, theory, and historiography. He is the author of *Bas Jan Ader: Death Is Elsewhere* (University of Chicago Press, 2013) and co-editor and co-author, with Suzanne Hudson, of *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). He is at work on a book titled *Jack Goldstein: All Day Night Sky*. In 2011, he received a Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. He is a founder of the Society of Contemporary Art Historians and the Contemporary Art Think Tank. He chairs the Department of Fine Arts and Art History at George Washington University.

**The Artist**

Larry Bamburg (b. 1974, Houston, Texas) experiments with elements of the natural world, resulting in his sculptural works. His process is rooted in discovery—he often establishes an end goal and then works backwards in figuring how it can be realized. Bamburg earned a BFA in Painting and Metalsmithing from Texas Tech University and an MFA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Bamburg received an Emerging Artist Grant from the Rema Hort Mann Foundation in New York. He was a recent artist in residence at San Antonio's Artpace. He currently has a large scale outdoor project on display through March 2018 on New York City's High Line titled *Avian Bird's-Eye Burl Perch Camera Trap: hinged, galvanized and grounded*. He is represented by Simone Subal Gallery in NYC.

**The Program**

The Visual Arts Center's Vaulted Gallery Artist-in-Residence Program invites emerging national and international artists to inhabit the space for three to five weeks to create new site-specific installations. Situated in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin, this dynamic residency fosters collaboration with campus and local communities and provides valuable educational opportunities to students.