RODNEY DURSO

Designer

RODNEY DURSO IS A MAN OF MANY INTERESTS AND SKILLS. HE'S A DESIGNER, A PAINTER, A MUSICIAN, AND THE FOUNDER OF A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION CALLED ARTBRIDGE THAT TRANSFORMS CONSTRUCTION SITES INTO OPEN-AIR ART GALLERIES. HE'S ALSO GUEST LECTURER AT PARSONS, WHERE HE GIVES A LECTURE ON FAILURE. HE'S NOT AFRAID OF IT, AND HE SAYS, "I FEEL THAT ARTBRIDGE IS THE MANIFESTATION OF ALL MY FAILURES, ALL THE THINGS I NEVER QUITE CLOSED THE CIRCLE ON. I FEEL LIKE IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT FAILURE— IT'S IMPORTANT TO EXPERIENCE IT." WISE (AND BRAVE) WORDS IN A SOCIAL MEDIA SATURATED ERA WHERE EVERYBODY SEEMS TO ALWAYS BE #KILLINGIT.

How do you choose your sites?

In a way they choose us. We're always scouting. Our executive director Stephen Pierson and our deputy director Devon Mathis are always reaching out. One great lead for us is marketing and public relations companies. If you own a property that is controversial somehow, putting art up is a good piece of public relations. It engages the local community, the local artists. A lot of times a developer doesn't want to spend additional money, or they may have a scaffold up but it's only for three months, so it doesn't make sense. I think a scaffold has to be up for a full year for it to make sense to somebody.

You had a design company. You went from that to working on Artbridge full-time. Let's talk about the decision to leave a business that you trained for and prepared for and were running successfully to try something new. What has that experience been like?

Well, it has been absolutely freeing. One thing I love about design is having parameters. Without parameters, you don't know where to start or what to do. When I teach at Parsons—I used to teach a class on presentation—the designers would hand me this beautiful stuff and I would say, "If you can't tell me why you've done it, it's just a pretty picture." That's something I really loved about the design business. I felt like the parameters made me do better work. What I didn't love was the repetitive nature of it. I felt like I was doing the same thing over and over, and I felt unchallenged. At the same time, the stress of managing a staff was kind of crazy. I thought, "What else can I do that takes advantage of these skills?" So that's why I thought about painting. I love color. It really motivates me and moves me. And I love typography. I'm always writing on my paintings. The one thing I would say is the hardest is looking at a blank piece of paper and not having a clock moving, not having a calendar, not having a structure. So at first that was a little paralyzing. But then I kind of let go of that.

Do you have a specific goal as a painter?

You know, I don't know. It's new to me to be in my studio every day. My days consist of administrative Artbridge stuff in the morning, and then I come here around 1pm and start to paint. Do I know where it's going to lead? I've definitely had some shows, nothing major. One in Florida over Christmas, a couple of shows here in New York. I think it would be nice to be validated in that way, getting a gallery show.

What does it feel like to have a show? At the opening reception what are you thinking and feeling?

There is a little bit of feeling exposed. At the same time, at this show in Florida I was excited, there was a crowd, they were asking me questions. It's funny when people ask me about my art, it comes out of me so naturally. A lot of people talk about their work very academically, and I just don't get it. To me art is very visceral. It's a physical act. There isn't a lot of meaning behind it. It's a form of expression, kind of like running. Once you finish running, you're done. When I paint something, there's no story behind it usually.

"I SAID, 'IF YOU GIVE ME A FEW THOUSAND BUCKS, I'LL PUT AN ART SHOW UP ON YOUR BUILDING,' AND THEY SAID OKAY."

You've mentioned a couple of times that you do music. Is that something new, or have you always done that?

I've always played the piano. It's probably the creative thing I've done the most in my life, but I didn't really pursue it. It's just something that's in the background—it kind of takes a back seat to my other stuff.

What, to you, would be the definition of success?

Keeping my life super-simple, and focusing on one or two creative endeavors. When I get spread thin, I don't really achieve much. If I can stay focused on my painting, let's say, for this year, and stay as board president of Artbridge—if I can do those two things for one year, and maybe write some music, that would be success to me.

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How would you describe your primary occupation?

When people ask me what I do, I say I'm a designer, because that's really at the core of all of my interests. I think like a designer.

What does it mean to think like a designer?

I think it means to be constantly editing, and to distill ideas to their most simple, logical state. Even in my painting, in music—whatever I'm doing—I feel like I'm constantly editing and trying to get to the simplest form. I'm a big fan of white space in my paintings. Art and design and music need space. In my music I'm not afraid to hit a note and let it go by itself. At the moment I'm painting, or I'm ramping back up to painting again. A lot of the work you see around here is older, five or six years old. That's when I started Artbridge, and that took me down a different road. It took me away from my painting, which is why I'm going back. I was like, "It's off on its own, it has its own wings, it's going, and it's working without me."

Which is sort of the goal of any organization one starts, right?

I guess. But I've never done that before. It's new behavior for me. My old behavior was to start things, let them take over my life, let them run me into the ground, get resentful and close them down. I let my design company do that to me. I overworked it. I got exhausted, and then I just stopped one day. I had a tea company in my 20s, called Natural Planet. We sold medicinal teas, all the stuff you find on East Broadway, or in Chinatown in San Francisco. It was really combinations of herbs and sticks and rocks, that kind of thing. Very quickly it was in a bunch of Whole Foods stores around the country, but I let it take over my life, and it kind of ate me alive. I was like, I just can't do this. I had no sense of balance, and I feel like I have more of a sense of balance now. One of my goals for Artbridge was to grow it and let it go.

So let's talk a little bit about Artbridge. How did it come to be?

The genesis of the idea came from a studio I used to sublet—a corner of somebody's studio—so that I could explore painting. This was 2006, 2007, and there was tons of scaffolding up in Chelsea, particularly around my building, London Terrace. I would look at it every day, and I would think, there's a big blank canvas, there's got to be a better use for that stuff. I mulled it over for a while, and as I got to know painters in the building, I began to understand how difficult it was for emerging artists to get some exposure. The gallery system is vacuum-sealed. For the average person like me, there's no way in—it's kind of impossible. Anyway, I put those two ideas together: Big blank scaffolding, plywood canvases, and artists who needed exposure. It seemed like a perfect fit. So I went to the managers of London Terrace with my idea, and I said, "If you give me a few thousand bucks, I'll put an art show up on your building," and they said okay.

So they were into it?

One reason developers and building owners like us is that the shows kind of mitigate the ugliness of the building. It's a win-win for everybody. At the time I had no idea what I was getting into. It was just another one of these things that I thought I should try to do, and I just went and did it. That's how I've done most things. I put out a call for artists, and I got about 150 entries. The fun part was designing the brand, since that's what I had just come from. Of course, I never thought past that.

Aren't you worried about the art being ruined?

Well, it's never the actual art, it's always photographs of the art. We'll take a painting, photograph it super-high resolution, then print it on a seriously strong industrial vinyl. The art itself remains in the artist's hands. Does it get dirty? Absolutely? Does it rip sometimes? Absolutely. It rarely gets tagged, but sometimes it does.

That's really art as a living thing.

Some artists are okay with it. So it's not always a bad thing. Some of the best shows can be when it's all photography, because the production is a lot easier. The artist gives us a hi-res file, and then we can just print.

How long does it take to mount something like that?

All the developers have to do is say yes and hand us a check. Then we do the entire thing. But from the moment they say yes to the moment it's up could be anywhere from three to six months, depending on how big the site is, and depending on how much involvement the developers want to have in the process.