

Jackson Hole News & Guide

In Paul Villinski's work, once discarded objects take flight

By Leonor Grave on August 28, 2019



"Wave" by Paul Villinski, is made of found aluminum cans, gold leaf, stainless steel wire and enamel, and is 6-by-144-by-7 inches

When Paul Villinski first came to Wyoming the year was 1992 and he settled into an artists' colony in Ucross, a town outside Sheridan with a population of 25.

It was a transformative time for Villinski. In his personal life he dealt with addiction and recovery. In his professional life he was coming to the realization that painting, the craft to which he dedicated the first decade of his career, might not be what he wanted to pursue.

When Villinski stepped outside to attempt to paint the Ucross landscape en plein air, its sheer scale proved paralyzing.

“The landscape was so expansive, so large, that I couldn’t make these little paintings anymore,” he said. “So I started picking up these little pieces around me, a bird’s nest, a deer’s jawbone, a butterfly, some small plants, and making some very detailed pencil drawings of these things.”

Rather than draw them on paper, Villinski decided to use canvas gardener gloves as his surface. He used rabbit glue to stiffen them, giving the impression that they seem to be held up by ghost hands.

The final result was “Nature Drawings,” a piece made up of 16 gloves, each featuring a nature-inspired sketch. That piece represents Villinski’s shift to sculpture in that he did not forgo painting as much as add special dimensions to his art.

“Nature Drawings” will be on display at the artist’s show at Tayloe Piggott Gallery, which is set to run today through Oct. 5. The show serves as somewhat of a retrospective on Villinski’s prolific three-decade career.

“Compass” and “Wave,” two other sculptures in the show, are examples of more recent pieces in his career, from 2015 and 2017.

Both pieces include dozens of butterflies crafted from found aluminum cans. Though they are three-dimensional, Villinski doesn’t see the process of creating them as radically different from painting.

“A lot of these installations I do with the aluminum butterflies I do feel like I’m making a painting,” he said. “And each butterfly is a brushstroke, and I’m building a piece, one butterfly, one brushstroke at a time.”

The theme of transformation bleeds through in every gesture of Villinski's work. It's not surprising that butterflies, one of the most universal symbols of metamorphosis, are an image to which he keeps going back.

"Taking these worthless, discarded, unseen materials and transforming them and adding an aesthetic quality to them is really important to me, as it relates both to my personal biography and as a metaphor for possibility and exploring what is possible when you invest enough energy and enough love," he said.

In Villinski's work, found objects take flight — aluminum cans become butterflies, discarded gloves become angel wings.

Gloves had a particular fascination for Villinski. When he first began noticing lost gloves on the streets of New York City he began to see them everywhere, flooding the urban landscape.

In his wing sculptures the hundreds of lost gloves he collected take the place of feathers.

Villinski is fascinated by the way found objects stand in for the lives of those who previously owned them, and how they emerge in his work with a reborn narrative.

The recurring theme of flight is not coincidental. Villinski is a pilot of sailplanes, paragliders and single-engine airplanes.

Growing up an Air Force brat, Villinski's childhood heroes were the likes of Amelia Earhart, Charles Lindbergh and the Wright Brothers. As a child he was always interested in building and inventing and tinkering with the objects around him.

"The best thing my father ever did for me was teach me how to use tools when I was the tender age of 7 years old," Villinski said.

His interest in flight, both literal and metaphoric, has remained with him in his adult life, and in his work he strives to communicate the richness of the experience of flight.

“In general my experience of flying my sailplane is so moving to me, it’s so engaging and fascinating — it’s an experience I wish I could share with everyone I know,” he said. “Instead what I do is go into the studio and make work that has elements of that, that I can share from the confines of a gallery or a museum.”

Villinski’s career is evaluated and memorialized in the pages of a comprehensive new art book published earlier this year by Vivant Books. The publishing company’s founders, Becky and Mia R. Benenate, compiled a dozen essays about Villinski penned by fellow artists, critics and friends. They interspersed that writing with artist statements from Villinski and vivid photography of his work.

The artist’s show at Tayloe Piggot is also accompanied by the gallery’s first exhibition at the inaugural Jackson Hole Fine Art Fair, taking place Sept. 12 through Sept. 15. That exhibition will include Villinski’s work.