

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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Step Up 2011 is a series of six solo exhibitions open to emerging artists living in New York, New Jersey or New England. The Step Up exhibition series seeks to provide emerging artists in our region an exhibition and publication opportunity at a critical moment in their careers. The Step Up 2011 jurors were Yona Backer (Director/Curator, Third Streaming Gallery); Xaviera Simmons (Artist); and Susan Talbott (Director and CEO, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art).

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Real Art Ways is an alternative multidisciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work and creatively engages, builds and informs audiences and communities. As Real Art Ways grows, our commitment to supporting young and emerging artists remains a touchstone of the organization.

On the cover: *An Unnamed Flowing, Nowhere*, 2012, Installation view, Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT, Mixed media, dimensions variable.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways (staff photographer John Groo) and Samuel Rowlett.

Samuel Rowlett



An Unnamed Flowing, Nowhere, 2012, Installation View, Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT, Mixed media, dimensions variable

Paint by Landscape

By Denise Markonish

No shadow walks. The river is fateful,
Like the last one. But there is no ferryman.
He could not bend against its propelling force.

— From "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" by Wallace Stevens (1955)

Like many artists before him, Samuel Rowlett set off on an expedition into the landscape, carrying with him a canvas on his back. No, he did not intend to do a series of plein air paintings, nor did he set out to make small sketches that would become virtuosic landscape paintings. Instead Rowlett let the landscape make the pictures. After spending most of his life as a painter—early on tackling the landscape and later moving to the figure—Rowlett came to an impasse in his practice where the medium's history started to weigh heavily on him. Rather than shrug off this weight, he decided to devise a series of contraptions made from hikers' backpacks that would allow him to journey into the landscape with large canvases strapped to his back (large to the point of absurdity, adding a gentle air of slapstick to Rowlett's pursuits). Rather than carting paint along with him, Rowlett brought a camera to document the spectacular instances when the landscape would cast its shadows across his blank canvas. Here Rowlett proves that he doesn't need to paint to create a painting, instead he leaves his hand off of the canvas and allows the landscape to do the work.

Samuel Rowlett earned his M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, MI, and his B.F.A. from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, OR. Rowlett's work has been featured in numerous exhibitions including the Arts Center of the Capital Region (Troy, NY), the Yale School of Art Galleries (New Haven, CT), and The Art Gym at Marylhurst University (Portland, OR).

He has received several honors, including a Yale University School of Art fellowship awarded to attend The Norfolk Program, and a full-fellowship residency at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, Vermont. Most recently, Rowlett was invited to create a site-specific installation project as an artist-in-residence for Kidspace at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art [MASS MoCA] in North Adams, MA. Rowlett was born in Leicester, England and raised in Vermont, and currently lives and works in Western Massachusetts.

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After a Thunderstorm, After Thomas Cole, 2012, Performance still from the series Landscape Painting in the Expanded Field

The act of painting is so steeped in tradition that, even in his attempt to free himself from it, Rowlett circles back to painting's history. One poignant example is the image of Rowlett, canvas on back, standing over the Connecticut River Valley, in the exact spot that inspired Thomas Cole's painting *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836). Rowlett makes this pilgrimage so that his "painting" can behold history, and so that viewers can take in the changes the landscape has undergone in the last century. This image of Rowlett is reminiscent of the iconic figure in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818)—a solitary figure or, in Rowlett's case, a solitary figure with canvas, witnessing the history of the landscape spread out before him. A shift away from Thomas Cole-like pictorialism came about in the early twentieth century with Marcel Duchamp's radical readymade—the first in 1914 was a bottle rack, unaltered and offered up as art. Just one year later, in another radical act, Kazimir Malevich created *Black Square*, a black square on white ground—one of the first truly abstract paintings. Decades later, many artists were influenced by theo-

ries discussed in two essays by Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) and *The Death of the Author* (1967). In the first, Barthes suggests that writing contains within it all that has been written, and therefore the writer is encumbered by this past. He states that literature "could no longer find purity anywhere but in the absence of all signs, finally proposing the realization of this Orphean dream: a writer without Literature."¹ In *The Death of the Author*, he adds that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."² These literary theories propelled the beginnings of post-painting zero degree as artists like Robert Ryman and Daniel Buren in the sixties (and still today) attempted to make un-authored, post-painting objects.

In many ways Rowlett is a part of this tradition, blending this past with more recent artistic forays into open practice and community-based working methods. The white canvas Rowlett carries no doubt references Malevich and Ryman, and the gesture of letting that which is already out there be the work (here the landscape) is decidedly Duchampian.

Nothing Ever Really Goes Away, 2012, Performance still from a historic walking tour across Hartford with block of marble



Rowlett is practicing "painting zero degree," getting to the essence of making a painting absent of the act of painting.³ Despite this, Rowlett takes his project one step further and begins to blur the boundaries of art and life, bringing the sketch and process into the field and, into the museum, by inviting others to accompany him on his journey. Rowlett even created a brochure for "Art Expeditions," in which people can book a trip with Rowlett that will "push your studio practice to the limit," and "fuse time-honored traditions with the latest technology."⁴ These expeditions include "exploration of art and ecology... conquering epic landscapes... and experimental drawing boot camp,"⁵ In the guise of explorer, artist and wilderness guide, Rowlett expands his practice, invites collaboration, pushes beyond the canvas and opens up the idea of the solitary artist in the studio.

Most recently Rowlett made a canoe that he paddled down the Connecticut River. The hand-built vessel (made out of wood and canvas), reflects and picks up marks from its journey, extending the language of painting. For his exhibition at Real Art Ways, Rowlett trekked down Hartford's Park River, which now flows underneath the city, and he also decided to tackle sculpture by dragging a seventy-pound block of marble behind him (also rigged on a wilderness backpack) through the city of Hartford. Like canvas is to painting, marble is to traditional sculpture, so Rowlett chose this material in order to reference monumental public sculpture. And just as the environment acts upon his canoe (or canvas) so it does on the marble, etching and wearing away its surface as he drags it along (also making a line drawing of his path on the ground).

In the end, Rowlett's show encompasses both the history of painting, as well as its proposed death and rebirth as a new collaborative object. Along the way are beautiful moments of endurance (Rowlett traipsing through the water with a canvas on his back), absurdity (Rowlett's fly fish ties made out of paint brushes), and poignancy (the visit to The Oxbow). With this mix of humor and reverence it becomes clear that Rowlett's attempts to rid his work of the burden of painting's history are not successful. The moment Rowlett straps a canvas on his back he is encompassing Thomas Cole, Malevich, Duchamp, Ryman... et al., all in a single gesture.



Hybrid Patterns, 2012, Hand-tied fly fishing flies, fish hooks, ferules, pen and fly-tying vise, dimensions variable

The excerpt from Wallace Stevens' poem at the start of this essay captures the essence of Rowlett's work. Unlike Stevens' unmoving shadow, however, Rowlett's shadows do indeed walk; in some ways they are brief glimpses of fleeting moments, while at the same time, ghosts of painting and landscapes past. Landscape-made painting—a new genre to add to the history books.

Denise Markonish is the curator at MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) where she recently opened three outdoor projects in 2011 by Michael Oatman, Stephen Vitiello and Jane Philbrick. Previous to her work at MASS MoCA, Markonish was the curator at Artspace in New Haven, CT, and taught at University of New Haven, Stonehill College, and the Rhode Island School of Design. Markonish opened the exhibition Oh, Canada, a survey of contemporary Canadian art, in 2012.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1968), 16.

² Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 148.

³ The term "painting zero degree" was used by curator Carlos Basulado for a traveling exhibition of the same name in 2000, for Independent Curators International (ICI).

⁴ From the brochure *Art Expeditions*, created by Rowlett and available at the exhibition.

⁵ *Ibid.*