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It's About Time

BY **BRIAN K. MAHONEY** (/AUTHORS-POSTS/BRIAN%20K%20MAHONEY) | MARCH 16, 2015
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Steven Siegel's work challenges our idea of permanence - and our place on the planet.



(<http://craftcouncil.org/sites/craftcouncil.org/files/Steven-Siegel-Portrait.jpg>)

Post-consumer materials are a gold mine for Steven Siegel, who makes both wall works and outdoor sculptures. Here he stands between *Buried* (2014) in the foreground and *Montana* (2014). Photo: Chris Callis

PHOTO GALLERY (#)MAGES)

When [Steven Siegel](http://www.stevensiegel.net) (<http://www.stevensiegel.net>) sits down for an interview, he's just returned from installing his latest paper sculpture, *Hill and Valley*, and he's hopping a flight to Italy the next day to scout a possible site for another installation. Surrounded by woods in Red Hook, New York, two hours north of New York City, his workshop is a neat, utilitarian space, more like a carpentry shop than an artist's studio, reflecting the 20 years Siegel spent as a carpenter and cabinet maker while his art career built momentum. Lining the walls are pieces under construction – he isn't sure if they're finished – from his latest mixed-media series, *Building Pictures*. With dense expanses of yarn, acrylic-soaked paper, work gloves, hiking boots, skulls, and a handsaw, the pieces defy categorization and easy interpretation, yet

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their technical sophistication is undeniable and their juxtapositions of color and form striking. “When you look at my work, the techniques that you’re seeing [are things] somebody else might be doing, sort of, but nobody ever taught me,” says Siegel. “I just figured them out – because I want to be the new cells in the petri dish that grow into something. I’m really interested to see whatever things I have, how they evolve.”

That’s Siegel’s newest work. But the paper came first.

Hill and Valley is 30,000 pounds of paper stacked 15 feet high and undulating 90 feet around 28 lodgepole pines in a sculpture park in Lincoln, Montana. From a distance, the installation looks like stacked stone, a whimsical fortress wall snaking through a pine forest. It’s held together by gravity and 400 pounds of 5-inch nails, of which Siegel hammered his fair share during the three weeks he and an army of volunteers assembled it. “My right arm is still suffering as a result of that one, and I will probably never recover,” says Siegel, a fit 61, and an avid tennis player and hiker.

On site, Siegel played the role of general contractor and raconteur, simultaneously directing and entertaining his troops. “I do whatever it takes to engage, involve, and give ownership of the process to everyone working,” says Siegel. “This ranges from private discussions with students about their hopes and directions to group interactions about the craziness of stacking newspapers in the forest to a little politics (careful where you are!) to the occasional joke.”

For Siegel, the community that develops during the construction of a piece like *Hill and Valley* becomes an integral part of the artwork. “The memory is as much about the experience of building the project and having a good time as it is about the finished piece,” he says. “The work is easily taught, and it just happens. But there’s a real bonding that occurs through a shared experience. It’s like a barn-raising.”

Hill and Valley is the largest of Siegel’s nearly 35 paper works on four continents. (His first piece, *New Geology #1*, was sited at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island in 1990, not far from what was then the world’s largest landfill.) These pieces and other landscape work – bales of crushed plastic, giant worms made of wood mulch, cubes of compressed bespoke Italian sneakers – place him in the land art tradition of artists such as Robert Smithson and James Turrell, but not quite of it. The canonical land artists were seeking new means of expression and settings beyond traditional gallery walls, rearranging the natural landscape in artful, sometimes monumental ways; Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* comes to mind. Siegel is more interested in how humans alter materials and then reintroduce them into the landscape. He’s created a series of sited work from surplus industrial materials, as well as materials borrowed from recycling centers. A partial list of ingredients in his concoctions: car parts, plastic bottles, grass, computer waste, aluminum cans, shredded tires. Siegel calls it “an interruption of the solid waste stream.”

His fascination with post-consumer materials and site-specific sculptures has earned Siegel a reputation as the “recycling artist,” a label he resists. “These materials are free and available in enormous quantities,” says Siegel. “Recycling is interesting, consumerism is interesting – that’s all part of the picture here – but that’s just the surface.”

One of the great sea beasts dwelling below the surface in Siegel’s work is his preoccupation with time – deep time, as the geologists call it: the disconcerting fact that the Earth is 4.5 billion years old. John McPhee, in his book *Basin and Range* (a major influence on Siegel, who in his 20s hiked some of the Western landscapes in the book), explains deep time like this: “Consider the Earth’s history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the King’s nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. One

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stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases human history.”

Time’s influence on Siegel’s paper works is straightforward. Indeed, the fanned newspapers look like geological striations in a splintering shale cliff. And decomposition is built into their DNA; a handful of the pieces, not yet 15 years old, are already in a state of advanced degradation, if they haven’t been torn down and carted off for safety reasons. “What is permanence?” Siegel asks. “Do we really believe that humans and their things are going to be here forever, as long as the sun is going to last? I highly doubt that. When we talk about permanence, it’s all relative.” Saying this, the artist also acknowledges his desire to create more lasting work. “After doing 40-plus paper pieces and other temporary works that aren’t built to last, it’s really time to be making some more permanent work. It would be nice to know something will outlive me.”

One of the most thrilling examples of Siegel’s recent, more permanent work is *Carbon*, completed in 2013. The sculpture consists of five 100-foot rubber tentacles, seemingly ripped from H.R. Giger’s sketchbook for *Alien*, latched onto the front of the Nishi building in Canberra, Australia. *Carbon* is menacing, magisterial, creepy-beautiful, and eco-conscious. The Nishi building is the former home of the Australian Department of Climate Change, which has since been abolished by a new conservative administration. The building is owned by a developer, not the Australian government, so *Carbon* is permanent – for the time being.

The work that will surely outlive Siegel is his magnum opus, *Biography*, which he worked on from 2008 to 2013. (Siegel doesn’t say he’s finished with the piece, only that he “paused” in 2013.) The 156-foot-long piece is composed of 95 separate sections of form, color, and materials that begin simply, erupt in complexity, settle down, and erupt again in a linear progression from right to left, ending with white objects hurtling into a black void. On one level, it resembles a shag carpet gone horribly wrong. There are no discernible natural forms or figurative elements. Like the rest of Siegel’s work, *Biography* doesn’t imitate life – the classic artist’s task of mimesis – but seeks to replicate nature’s methodology through an evolutionary artistic process.

“Almost everything I do in the studio is based on very simple evolutionary principles,” Siegel says. “The No. 1 principle is: Nothing is designed. But bits of each vocabulary move into the next phase. Some of them will be dropped, just like in the evolutionary process. The way it works is by contingency and mutation. When I was working on section 87, I had no idea what section 95 was going to look like.”

The other thing about *Biography*: No one has ever seen it fully assembled – not even Siegel, and he’s OK with that. “The idea with *Biography* was, like a geologic timeline, the viewer can never see the whole thing at once.” Creating a work that’s so big it can’t be fully reckoned with in one shot – there’s deep time at work again. If Siegel does start working on *Biography* again in five years, the intervening period will be like a gap in the fossil record, a meteor-strike disruption that picks up with the most recent work. Besides, what’s five years when you’re thinking in eons?

Brian K. Mahoney is editor of Chronogram, a lifestyle magazine covering the Hudson Valley.