

phoebe  
washburn  
true,  
false,  
and  
slightly  
better



**phoebe  
washburn**

**true,  
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better**

**24 january**

**23 march**

**2003**

**rice**

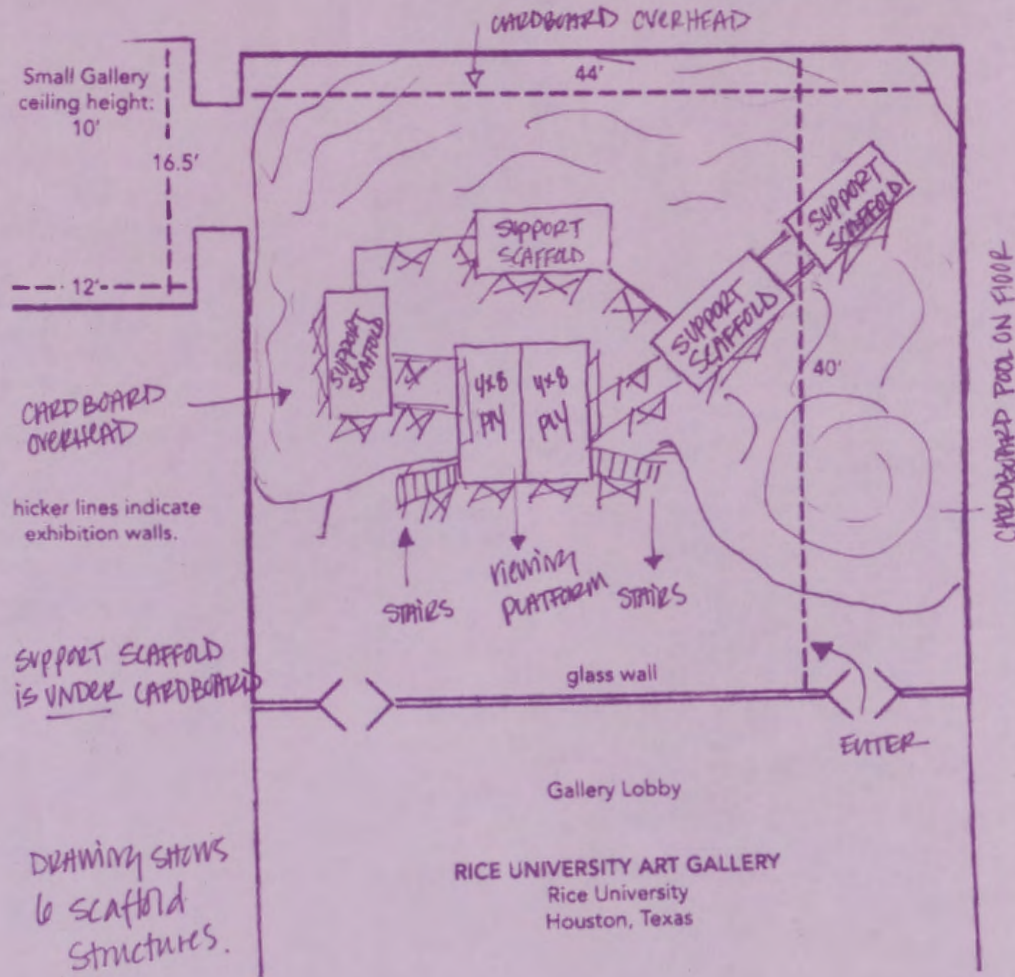
**university**

**art**

**gallery**



# foreword



During her site visit in August 2002, Phoebe Washburn spoke about creating an installation that would continue to reveal itself over time. Soon after she returned to New York, she faxed back a drawing showing the basic outline of her idea: a core structure around which circular lines swirled and shorter, concentric marks appeared as animated lines of energy. We would discover that this dynamic movement characterized not only the installation, but also Washburn's working process. Balanced on a series of scaffolding units, she and her assistants climbed up sixteen feet to the top of the gallery's back wall to undertake a three-week marathon of layering, fastening together and shaping more than four tons of painted cardboard. Daily, the installation took on a new appearance; one day it resembled a molten lava flow pouring out and subsuming everything in its path, while the next day it became a lighter-than-air arc that swept around the space in one dizzying motion. Phoebe was most often near its center, swiveling around to check the progress, and with drill in hand, shaping the form's downward spiral until on the last day only her head and shoulders remained visible.

*True, False, and Slightly Better*, the installation's enigmatic title, is indicative of Washburn's straightforward approach to her project. The "truth" is that the discarded cardboard she used was trash, and the mis-tinted paint she obtained was what someone else rejected. The painted cardboard, which Washburn rendered "only slightly better," comprised the top, "false" side of the structure. Visitors climbed up to the viewing platform to see this colorful surface, or ventured below to view the dark underside. Awed by the vast and beautiful expanse of interleaved colors at the top, viewers shared with staff their impressions of aerial landscapes, whirlpools, racecar tracks, flying carpets, Greek amphitheatres, and in the words of one harried admission director, infinitely multiplying file folders!

*True, False, and Slightly Better's* spontaneous, yet controlled form, derived in part from Washburn's acute observations of her New York environment. Urban landscapes, she pointed out, are characterized not just by traditional architecture like high-rises and bridges, but also by the "street architecture" of goods arranged on vendors' tables, and neatly compacted stacks of trash bags and boxes. These fluctuating, impermanent structures transform space momentarily, then are gone. Washburn created a monument to them and her project will be remembered as a stunning form that captured the tension of opposites: motion and stillness, brilliant surface and dark underside, weighty mass and soaring lightness.

Kimberly Davenport  
Director



excerpts  
from  
conversations  
between  
phoebe  
washburn  
and  
kimberly  
davenport

**Kimberly Davenport: Maybe you could start by talking about *Between Sweet and Low*, the installation you did at LFL Gallery in New York in summer 2002, a few months before coming to the Rice Gallery.**

Phoebe Washburn: The installation at LFL Gallery was quite large, about 25 feet by 17 feet. It started overhead, sort of sloped down in an undulating way, and engulfed the gallery space and some of the gallery furniture. The bulk of it was made out of found cardboard that I collected throughout the course of a year, broke down, painted on one side, and cut into strips. These were screwed together with 4-inch drywall screws, 5 or 6 pieces at a time. It was a very slow, organic building process. The way my installations are built is quite structural, though, because it's not like I bring in a large chunk of cardboard and set it up. The piece is actually built into the space.

**How do you decide what you'll do, what the form will be? Do you start with a concept when you go into a space?**

My work is not based on an idea or a concept. When I'm offered an opportunity to do a piece, I do like to see the space and spend as much time there as I can. I like to have the work, the process, and all the materials react within that space and create a resonance. Often the networks of structural supports that will support the bulk of the cardboard are already in the space. I try not to bring things from my studio, or prefab things, or to compose any other elements. For example, LFL printed my (exhibition announcement) cards early, and when the entire batch of 2,000 cards came in, they were all out of focus. There was this huge waste of cards, so those became absorbed into the piece; I used them as props, shims, and stuff like that. The cardboard becomes a means of getting to these serendipitous things that happen. The cardboard enables me to move around a space and pay close attention to it. That's what is most interesting to me about working with the cardboard in the space.



**How did you start collecting cardboard in the first place? Was it an economic necessity or were you attracted to it formally?**

Generally, there's a common theme that runs through the working process in all my work, in that I like to find a material, break it down, and rebuild with it.

As I work from project to project, I try to take note of some sort of dangling thread or idea that I can bring to the next project, whether it is something new that interests me, something that seems unresolved, or simply something very basic that might have potential. For example, I got interested in cardboard because I had to pack up another project, a room I had made out of 4,000 paperback books. When I dismantled the piece I had to haul the books off to a recycling plant, so I had to scavenge for cardboard boxes, and this process became interesting to me.

That's something that I try to pay attention to; really simple things like that in my working process often bear fruit. So much of my work is this logistical nightmare of having to crate, box, transport and navigate through the city with large amounts of material. A lot of my working time is not just purely art studio time. So I try to pay attention to every aspect of my working process, because it often turns out to be something that I can work with or develop.

**When we went to the recycling plant, you were very clear about the *kind* of cardboard you wanted.**

It's almost goofy.

**You didn't want the kind that was too squished. What are your criteria? What characterizes your ideal material?**

I guess because I've handled so much of it, and have been so intimate with it, that I know how certain kinds of cardboard react; how some types of cardboard don't take screws very well, or buckle too much, or crack. I think that for me it adds content to the work. I don't know if it comes across in the work, but for me that's important.

**Why do you paint the cardboard?**

It's important for me to impose my own sort of studio system on the material. I almost feel like I'm cooking in a way, because I make "batches" of cardboard. It's really strange; I've actually written out descriptive, painfully thorough recipes for how to collect and paint the cardboard. I don't think it would be as interesting for me to use just the raw cardboard. It would eliminate so many steps, so many ways that I can become familiar with the material. I'm interested in creating an "A-side" and a "B-side." The A-side, the painted side, is like a pictorial image. The flat, unpainted, real side is the B-side. I enjoy both sides.

**You use “mis-tints,” that is, cans of mixed paint that the customer rejects, which are sold very cheaply, but do you care about the colors? Are you selective? Would you ever use different colors — browns, blacks, and more intense colors — or do you really prefer the pastels that seem to predominate in your work?**

I think that I am drawn to the pastel colors because they reference interior wall paint and things that are somewhat domestic without being too specific. Generally, the mis-tints come in pastels, but before I got into buying the mis-tints, I would mix pigments in with a bunch of white paint so they always would come out pastel colors anyway. I think they're a nice contrast to the unpainted cardboard. I'm sure I could find darker colors, but then I don't think it would be worth painting it as much because I wouldn't see the contrast between the two sides.

It's really funny because the painting aspect of the cardboard becomes a really powerful part of the piece, but for me it's un-painterly painting. I don't rinse anything out. I don't even rinse my paint tray; I just pour the next color of paint on top of the last. I paint until the brush won't fit in the tray because it has so many layers of dried paint in it; then I either rip the dried, rubber-like latex off, or throw the whole thing away and get a new tray. I mean, people often talk about painting, but it's not about painting. The painterly aspect is a by-product.

**Could you describe your process of making an installation?**

I always have to start on a wall for structural purposes, because the piece has to be anchored into the wall. I drill holes and put anchors in the wall about a foot apart from each other. I start screwing the cardboard, little bit by little bit into the wall, and then it just starts growing out as I continue to add the cardboard. Layering it out from the wall, I feather the pieces together and drive in as many screws as possible, so it slowly starts growing out from the walls. The worst part is definitely the beginning, because it's sort of like a snow-ball; the first couple of rolls you don't see anything happening. It isn't until about the third day that you finally see the work coming out from the wall.

**So you just keep going. When do you start forming it into the shape?**

I have a sense of what I want to do. I have sketches, and I think about what is going to happen during the installation, but surprises always happen during building, because the cardboard — when you're forcing it together, forcing it around something — takes a while to recover. It buckles. It's not like a sheet of paper or a piece of fabric; ripples will start forming.





**“The worst part is definitely the beginning because it’s sort of like a snowball; the first couple of rolls you don’t see anything happening. It isn’t until about the third day that you finally see the work coming out from the wall.”**

**This would seem to lead to innumerable decisions that only you can make. How much can someone really assist you?**

I put someone in an area and say, ‘Fill this out a foot or so,’ then I have to look at it and make decisions as I see it growing. I can tell when I look at a piece what areas I didn’t work on. It doesn’t bother me because I’m always so much of a presence that I know when to step in and work on something. I know where someone else worked on an area because it never looks quite like something I would have done. It’s a different look, either more ordered or more chaotic than how I would build; but it’s fine, because it all fits into the system somehow. I probably see subtleties in the cardboard that other people don’t see. Actually, I know I do. I can recognize some pieces by remembering the colors or the labels, where and when I got them; but none of this can be seen in the larger view of the piece.

When I’m talking to the people working on the installation I say, ‘You can’t do anything to the piece that is bad.’ You can’t make a bad decision when you’re building it, because the individual sections and the individual pieces mean nothing. It’s all about what happens as a whole, the mass. It’s additive, so the strength of it is the big picture. It’s not at all about decisions that you make in this one little area. I think that’s something interesting that I learned here, working with a group of six people.







**It's actually quite painterly on one side,  
but it's also a big, clumsy thing in the room  
that you have to walk under, get around,  
and there's nothing magical about it.**



**The gallery has a 16-foot high ceiling. Did it inspire you to start at the top and make something gigantic?**

I was really excited because I'm afraid of heights! I'm not great on ladders, but there's something really satisfying about being at the top of the wall, and about showing that your presence was there; it's very nice. The goal was to anchor the piece as securely as possible to the wall and I wanted to get that part in myself. It's always tricky trying to maintain the balance between making the piece structurally sound and still maintaining the spontaneity.

The Rice Gallery's window is also a really nice, new element to work with. I couldn't use the window as a structural wall, but it is so huge, and it's such a prominent feature in this space. I mean, the space is really, really clean and tight but then there is this *window*. There's constant interaction with people walking by, and I wanted to somehow incorporate that. What I decided to do was give the crudest side to the window. I didn't want to make a piece that would reveal itself completely through the window. I wanted the viewer to have to come in, walk around and explore, possibly go up the main platform or the ladder; the more time that you would spend with the piece; the more the piece would give you.

Because the ceiling is so high and so much of the piece is elevated, there is this nice tension between, as I said, the A-side and the B-side, the topside and the underside. I really enjoy this tension of a beautiful, pictorial side that's very "landscapy," and this underside that is very crude. I like having them be equally important and having the viewer either "take sides" with one, or grapple with that relationship. The way this piece is built, you can't have one without the other, and it's nice because you're always having to confront this. It's actually quite painterly on one side, but it's also a big, clumsy thing in the room that you have to walk under, get around, and there's nothing magical about it.



**You have made it possible to experience the piece from multiple viewpoints.**

I think the multiple views are important because they help to reflect the additive process that creates the structure. There are things that happen as I'm building that are so nice, but I know that they'll never be seen. For instance, cardboard box labels make nice associations, nice juxtapositions, or there will be really beautiful colors that I know in ten more minutes working time will be totally covered up. This is part of the piece and I like this aspect of the building process. It reinforces the fact that the small decisions are not important. Everything is in service to the whole. It's important to try and have multiple views for something that can't be fully digested in one view. It lets visitors explore the piece on their own terms, with the understanding that there are things that will go unnoticed, or areas of the piece that are blocked from view. But to me this is an accurate understanding of the piece.



**"I wanted to record each day's work, so at the end of every day I would put a flag up, and it would give me a sense of how much ground we had covered, how many feet the piece grew."**





**There's a child-like aspect of your work, a visual sprightliness such as where an ordinary pencil appears to hold up a weighty mass, and the small flags scattered across the surface. Do you insert such humorous touches at the end, or do you have fun with the work, play with it, and do this kind of thing as you go along?**

There's a lot of dumb ridiculousness about the pieces. The process of screwing cardboard together is pretty ridiculous. The whole idea of it and the effort involved in transporting, storing, and shipping it, as we talked about before — it's all dumb. The quirky, spontaneous props seem to be well suited to it. The pencil actually did serve a purpose, because I needed to curve the cardboard in to an angle as I was working, so I jammed the pencil in there to force it into a curve. So it's funny, the cardboard is cumbersome and unruly, but it is trainable. I decided to leave the pencil in because it seemed like a fitting gesture. The building process is playful, so continuing this in the smaller details makes sense. I make these decisions very spontaneously and it often comes down to using what is at hand.

The flags are markers. During this installation, I wanted to record each day's work, so at the end of every day I would put a flag up, and it would give me a sense of how much ground we had covered, how many feet the piece grew.

Some of the scaffolding, actually all of the scaffolding that's part of the piece, we were on at some point, working. It's kind of nice that the piece was already shaping itself; the tools we were using became the piece. Some days I thought it looked beautiful in there with all the scaffolding and mess everywhere, so I decided to include some of the empty boxes from the screws. We filled them up with cardboard, taped them closed and used them as supports. It was like the whole process became the piece at the end.

**You have used a variety of objects including a locker, as props.**

Yes, I used the locker in *American Pool* (2001), an installation I did in my studio. The locker was in my studio so it became part of the piece. Just the word "prop" is interesting; things *prop up* the piece, but the word also implies that the work is theatrical. There are certain props that I think of as "blank" props, meaning objects that have no extra value or history — 2x2s are pretty non-descript, characterless. I would use those comfortably anywhere. I feel the same way about folding chairs. I use those a lot; they're sort of blank, characterless props.

I think though, that I wouldn't choose to go out and purposely bring things back to use as props; that would be adding another emotional level, like history. I try to keep in closer touch with what's happening as I build the piece. That goes back to what I was saying before. It just doesn't feel right to bring too many other things into the piece, because it adds emotional content that I don't want in the work. I want to give respect to that fact that this is really sort of dumb.

**Do you think about your work in relation to architecture?**

I look at a lot of architecture, but not architecture like you're thinking! I spend more time looking at the architecture of street vendors in New York City and temporary architecture, minor architecture, architecture of construction sites. I'm very interested in really basic, rudimentary, architectural gestures that I see everyday in the street. Vendors develop contraptions with multiple functions that fold up into carts and unfold into vending stands. I once worked for a street vendor. I was in charge of the setting up and taking down; I loved doing that. Or you'll see inventive architectural gestures at work on construction sites. Things used, misused, as shelter, props, whatever. "Garbage night" is amazing. The stacks and structures of organized garbage can be really architectural. I pay a lot of attention to this kind of thing. For the past year or so I've been collecting cardboard. So I've had to learn a lot about waste disposal.

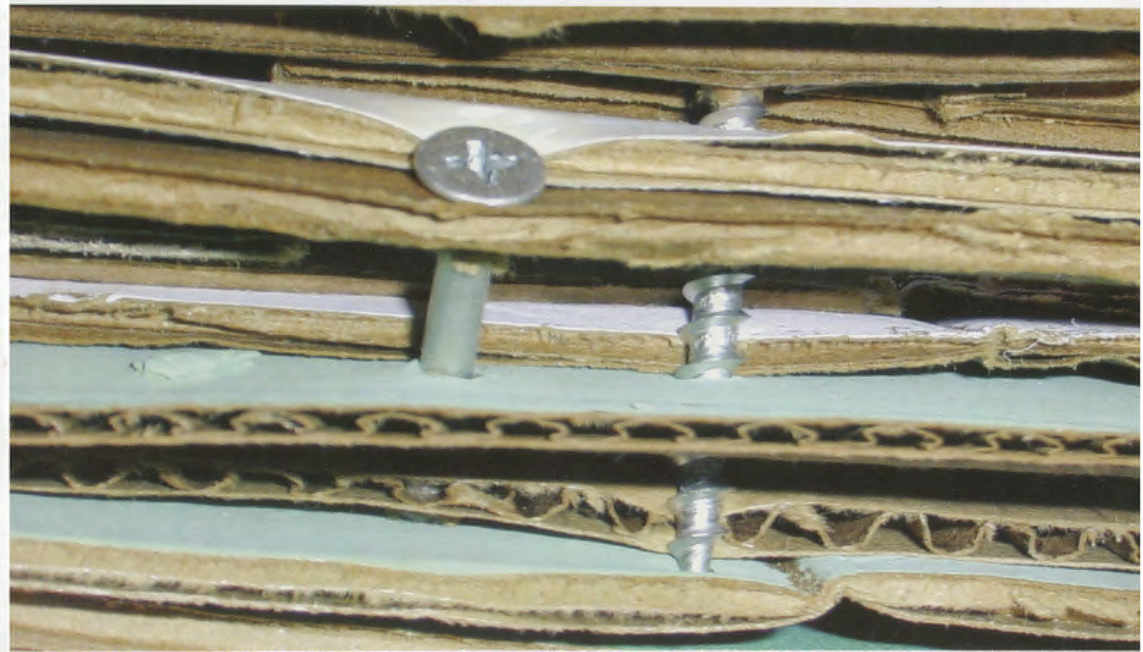
**Does recycling interest you?**

It doesn't really, but it comes up a lot. What interests me is the system itself: knowing the schedules of all the recycling pickups. I know which neighborhoods put trash out on which days, what stores have good clean boxes on their loading docks and when, you know, stuff like that; but I'm proud that I'm recycling cardboard.

**The title *True, False, and Slightly Better*?**

I think it works well. It references the "A-side/B-side" concept in the piece, and it also speaks to how the work is transformative — pictorial yet still grounded by the reality of the material. There is a very true side (the dumb cardboard side) of the piece and there is a very false side (the painted, transformed side).

Someone once described my process of collecting, painting and organizing the cardboard as making the cardboard only slightly better. I loved that. It is very basic, yet it is the most crucial part of my work.







### About the Artist

Phoebe Washburn received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of Visual Arts, New York, in 2002. Her other solo exhibitions include *Heavy Has Debt*, 2003, The Faulconer Gallery at Grinnell College, Iowa; and *Between Sweet and Low*, 2002, LFL Gallery, New York. Washburn's work has been included in numerous group shows including *Street Level*, 2003, Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York; and *Art New York*, 2002, Ort Verfunch Kusträume, Linz, Austria. Phoebe Washburn is a 2002 recipient of the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation Award. She is represented by LFL Gallery, New York.



Phoebe Washburn  
*True, False, and Slightly Better*, 2003  
 Commission, Rice University Art Gallery

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