

SWRV

Step outside for a walk. An inverted plastic cup presents itself on the sidewalk, like a pylon. Step around it. Seconds later, unseen, it audibly scuttles into the curb. Fallen foliage reveals a previously hidden bird's nest, abandoned. Woven amongst its twigs and grasses, a strand of blue ribbon glints in the light. Its frayed tail dangles, dancing up with the breeze. Light overnight snow weighs on the bladetips of grass. In fifteen minutes, the sun will have risen sufficiently to sluff this burden away.

Gentle details momentarily pop to attention as a matter of course. They offer themselves as equilibria. However, they are transitory, available only in passage.

David Merritt began to gather such peripheral incidents in the ongoing series of sketchbooks he titles *Notices*. They now number upwards of eighty books. Each sheet contains a single drawing, rendered like a vignette that fuses to the material and dimensional primacy of the paper page. Some are graphite pencil, catching the elemental components of a given scene with clarity and immediacy. Sometimes these grey pictures are highlighted by a dash of telltale colour. Others are fully realized in watercolours.

Merritt consistently takes notice outdoors; committed to memory, he records them after the fact, sometimes days later. His subjects mix natural occurrences (as simple and basic as an opening bud or a bird on a wire) with the manmade (accidental monuments of litter tossed away or rubbish stacked curbside for removal). Frequently nature and human traces interlace. One snares or snarls the other.

From page to page, near rhythms and patterns emerge. Interspersed throughout the books are graphite drawings of spindly block letters arranged in brief, wordlike clusters, originally observed as graffiti. Some suggest sounds with sense but without meaning. Others — such as *SLUSH* or *PAVE* — infer a familiar state or condition, but become destabilized in their visual and phonetic isolation, which is emphatically graphic and sonic.

Step into the studio. With the years-long conditioning of his daily drawing, Merritt applies this retunement to his studio practice. How might the varied aspects of temporal, seasonal, thermal and contextual cycle and flux migrate into the comparatively static and singular work of art? Further, how do the artist's everchanging sensitivities and incremental tendencies sustain the finished work? And how are the works cultivated from the sparse studio environment — concrete floor, white walls, wooden posts — plus an assorted accumulation of materials, media, tools and furnishings?

Merritt responds to these issues most directly in a number of skeletal stick sculptures, each taking the form of a diminutive bare tree. Each is assembled from composite sticks, twigs, lumber scraps, dowels, toothpicks, matches and pencil ends — all found or cast off material. The dissimilar segments are variously glued, grafted or spliced together. They are without roots. Weighted clamps or stones fix them in place and upright on a flat surface. Several of the tabletop versions Merritt calls *arber*. Perhaps a fragment of a longer word, this neologism suggests the Latin root for *tree* as well as an armature for cultivating certain vines, herbs or flowers in the garden. Indeed, the sculptures appear meticulously cultivated, akin to a miniature bonsai tree. Their incremental structure reflects the duration brought to their development by Merritt. Daily attention prunes the artistic additions to its growth, removing that which is meretriciously imposed while retaining those bits deemed inherent to its nature. The wall-

mounted *spar* condenses the planar expanse of wall into an axial code of horizontal and vertical elements. However, as one's aspect skews slightly to one side or another, the dominant core grid disappears into the subtle gestural sweeps of its staggered and arcing extremities.

A variant of the stick sculptures is *stake*, a wooden broom handle anchored upright on the floor with a c-clamp. Its upper end has numerous splits, splayed apart by dessicated spitballs of mashed up maps, a berry-laden bush into which localities have puckered into tiny worlds. Another stick sculpture, *acot*, has snagged a different sort of flower, a windblown remnant of blue wrapping tissue.

Merritt pursues further botanical references in several drawings on paper, marble and lead. The delicately rendered *skew* and *clef*, lifesize renderings of a grass stem and a zigzag branch respectively, illusionistically merge into and emerge from the mute veining of white marble slabs. *clef* in fact is painted upon two square slabs slightly separated and laid flat across a tabletop. It has a close counterpart in *z'row*, a similarly configured branch painted on folded kraft paper that hangs vertically on the wall. *skew* is elsewhere echoed by *sway*, a portrait of a bent Timothy flower on rumpled tissue. A corona of feral grasses and weeds in red and blue silhouette, *crown*, has its opposite in the barren density of *hole*, a circular graphite rubbing of Merritt's studio floor, made to the diameter of a manhole. Its nicks and scrapes imply a deep, chaotic void. *blume*, an image of eight dandelion flowers on a forbidding sheet of lead takes for its partner *wondr*, the signature, primary-colour patterning of whitebread wrapping that seems to blow, weedlike, across vacant lots.

Merritt's titles notably fuse the notions of fractured bombers' and taggers' nomenclature that occurs in the notices. These gutteral statements form another crucial component of *SWRV*. *upr:lwr*, drawn on an oval marble slab, peculiarly indicates the lft and rgt sides of the stone. In this instance, the italicized block lettering, with its sharp angles and lines, suggests tangled, rootlike tendrils within the veining. Other works function as signs, simultaneously declarative in attitude and ambiguous in message: the boldly painted *hidden* vs. the liminally indicated *no1* and *each2*. Merritt treats his studio as an inverse, modern-day analogue of the immersive H. D. Thoreau Walden Woods excursion, intent to subsist therein by trailmarking, foraging and woodcraft.