

## Something or Nothing

When I first met Jeff Chelf, he talked about woodworking like it was a past life. The Wisconsin-based artist has a more recent portfolio full of performative, conceptual projects --seemingly the artistic opposite of his erstwhile craftsmanship. We spoke about labor, handicraft and our shared Midwestern roots, remarking on the drastic divergence from his more traditional practice as a maker. Chelf's practice today is not easy to label. His medium, performance, is not so much the conundrum as is his meaning. In his practice, Chelf is constantly traversing a thematic spectrum about work, value and objects, but he never lands anywhere one would expect with his message. Chelf's body of work is full of earnest yet futile laboriousness, lengthy investigations into the inconsequential, and elaborate processes that don't yield anything tangible in the end.

Touching a bit on all three of these aspects is one of Chelf's recent projects, *Dutch Masters* (2020) with Ali Deane. The introduction of the small printed book that documents *Dutch Masters* explains that Chelf and Deane selected a scrap of printed paper board from the trash they had cleaned up from along a Madison, WI highway. The scrap, which turned out to be packaging from Dutch Masters brand cigars, is not terribly interesting to look at, and is reproduced in the book; nevertheless, the artist duo embarked on a month-long digital research binge that ended in them both smoking the mass-market cigars and then (presumably) sending the scrap back from whence it came: the garbage. The research Chelf and Deane turned up is of a mildly notable variety --some anecdotes from the brand's century-old origins, its contemporary popularity as a blunt wrapper. If the object itself nor the sum of the research are the focal point of the artistic exercise, then what is? As one pages through the *Dutch Masters* booklet, one finds oneself dwelling more on the absurdity of this venture in general than the information printed on the pages. *Dutch Masters* is just one of many instances in Chelf's body of work wherein a viewer spends their time not thinking about what the piece's intended message is, but *why* the artist has chosen to do it at all and why he expended so much effort in doing it.

In his own words, Chelf's relationship to labor is "strained." It's no small thing for a Midwesterner to flip the script on the notion that production --of material, of consumer goods-- is the genesis of value, as such production in the region has shaped the landscape, the population, our families, and even our own psyches.<sup>1</sup> And while the artist is no longer driven by an engagement in the labor (and subsequent commerce) of making, industriousness, in the abstract, remains an important vehicle for Chelf. In *To Cut a Lake in Half* (2020), Chelf again exerts himself in a tremendous undertaking; along with collaborator Derek Kiesling, Chelf literally cuts a line through the ice of a frozen lake with nothing but hand saws. This gesture speaks to the character of such Midwestern waterways, their simultaneous fragility and resilience, and their inextricable link to the region's industrial history. Like in *Dutch Masters*, there is an absurdity to the piece, an aspect of futility in laboring over something so ephemeral. If, as a woodworker, Chelf had previously been channeling his labor into the craft object in an attempt to imbue it with

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the textbooks issued to us for Michigan History class in fifth grade, the opening line is a quote from Henry Ford: "Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants, so long as it is black."

value, as a performance artist, he's now resituating the labor as the subject of a conceptual art piece. He's assigning meaning to his labor without creating a consumable product for a market.

However, when it comes to the value of an artwork, a viewer cannot just take Chelf's word for it. At least in *To Cut a Lake in Half*, there was a beginning and end to the project: the artists began cutting at different ends of the lake, and completed when they met in the middle. *To Bring Water to Land* (2020) has no such satisfying conclusion, no sense of accomplishment a viewer can appreciate vicariously. *To Bring Water to Land* is one of the most futile pieces in his oeuvre. Here, Chelf and Kiesling, outfitted with a pair of galvanized buckets, scoop water from a lake and deposit it on the shore. The photos that document this performance show the collaborators dressed for the autumn weather, soaked to the knee as they trudge back and forth from the water to the rocky bank. As one would expect, the water poured onto the beach flowed back down to the lake, and the artists' efforts made no perceptible impact on the water level. It's also likely that, after a few hours, the ground would have dried and it would appear as though Chelf and Kiesling were never even there. If in *Dutch Masters* and *To Cut a Lake in Half*, meaning shifts around between objects and actions, meaning is essentially questionable in *To Bring Water to Land*. In the latter piece, a viewer has to wonder: is this really something, or is it nothing at all?

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