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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Won't You Step Into Sculptor & Phish Collaborator Lars Fisk's Shipping Container Homestead?

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Behind a chain link gate and across a Red Hook lot littered with weeds and broken-down machines, Lars Fisk lives in a one bedroom that sports some enviable amenities, including a reading lounge, a sunlit kitchen, spiral staircase, downstairs office, and, of course, an industrial-grade jib crane. Fisk, 45, is a Vermont-born sculptor who frequently creates giant works weighing thousands of pounds, and so the jib, like his home, is there out of necessity. After finishing graduate school at Columbia, he took a job at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, where he quickly re-purposed a disused container into a field office. Years went by and Fisk attached new containers, building out his home. Then, in 2013, he put them all on trailers and shipped his life to Red Hook. "I just figured it out on the way," he recalls. "The first job was to insulate them, and do what I could to control the climate. It was pretty rough in the early days—I was running an outdoor shower, an outdoor kitchen. It was crude. But it's always sort of evolving, and I imagine it'll continue to grow."

Fisk's faith in evolution is no doubt impacted by his connection to Phish, the trailblazing rock band that has been collaborating with him to make live art installations at their multi-day festivals for decades. Working as the group's art director, Fisk has buried a giant Big Boy halfway into a Maine field, set ramshackle lumber towers ablaze, and turned storage unit replicas into a secret late night Phish stage and metaphor for American consumerism. Outside of Phish's world, Fisk's works are frequently shown in outdoor public parks where their large scale and open-ended whimsy invite laughter and free-thinking play.

A dozen of Fisk's latest sculptures are currently on display at Marlborough Chelsea in a show titled *Mr. Softee*, after one of its standout pieces. All the trappings of the familiar ice cream trucks have been shrunk into a spaceship-esque ball; a look inside its windows reveals a steering wheel, gas pedals, and soft-serve dispensers. Another sphere, dubbed "Lot Ball," is covered in asphalt, cement, and paint—It's intended to recall a suburban parking lot, and at 15 feet tall it weighs roughly 4,000 pounds. Fisk and his team had to truck it over from his workshop assemble it at the gallery in many sections.

As both his sculpture work and personal take on homemaking reveals, Fisk is a kind-hearted destroyer who's happiest when he's misconstruing expectations and hacking familiar tropes. His creative vision makes familiar icons feel strange, and four empty containers feel like home.



The second-floor "living room" in Fisk's self-made shipping container home. (Scott Heins/Gothamist)

What is it about shipping containers? Obviously they're pretty cool and have a fascinating history, but—The mobility is important, that's part of it. But you know they're just around. We're just fortunate to live in a big port where there are an abundance of them. So its just because of ubiquity.

You've made for yourself what feels like a world apart. You're not one out of many people in a busy neighborhood where you can hear other people through a wall.

You've got some seclusion and autonomy in this space. To build a homestead is the best thing you can do for yourself. If you have any concern for your surrounding, build your home from scratch. I'm not a city guy, I'm a Vermonter, and I'm used to living in the country. And the nature of what I do, I gotta be able to move things around. I need space and I just build to suit the practice and the lifestyle.

Then why be in New York in the first place? Man that's a darn good question [laughs].

That question can lead a lot of people to a dark place. Nah, I love it. I do love it. I'm very happy here. I'd love to have a garden out back here, free-roaming cats and space to build outdoor sculpture.

What do you *have* to have in terms of your process, when it comes to sculpting?

Technically and conceptually, is this space all about fitting personal

parameters? Well I run a gantry out here. I got that aluminum hoist system. I've got a hoist built into my house. I have to be able to move heavy materials because they're often large scale and for the public realm, so these are impervious material—heavy stuff—you know! I need to build to make a good mess, I need to build to make a racket. I've got a dozen sculptures that range from really tiny up to a big monumental piece that runs floor-to-ceiling fifteen feet, and everything in between. A lot of different materials. The way I got about it, it's so varied, because the subject matter dictates the process. I stay true to the materials. Sculptures are all about just reproduction with this one simple transformation of form.

Well then, not to be too on-the-nose, but do you see your home as another of your sculpture works?

It's sheer practicality, really. I mean I can't help but apply what I've learned in making sculpture to building my home. It's a reflection of taste and sensibilities and what makes you feel at home. My dad and I milled lumber from his woodlands in New Hampshire to use in there, and it feels like home to me.

I love design and I respect design, so that's at play here. But the difference between art and design and craft and high art? Who the hell knows. It depends on the purpose.

I think that's a personal line that everyone kinda draws for themselves. Well, in the sculpture, I'm using people's perception of known design and known iconography and deal with the recognizability of a subject. So you know a UPS truck, because it's always brown and boxy, and the corporate identity that it carries, that they've invested in for this sort of media recognizability is what I can use to then shift perception.

Yeah you're fucking with the signification of that sign. Exactly.



Fisk's Street Ball repurposes cobblestones and a fabricated manhole. (Scott Heins/Gothamist)

With these transformations, what is it that you're trying to inspire in recipients of your art? Is it most importantly to cast something familiar in a disorienting light? Take for example a garbage can: a classic, galvanized, garbage pail. These things are not necessarily seen as icons of our streetscape, but they are ubiquitous. Every stoop's got a couple of them sitting out front. To use that as a subject I think carries with it something that's very specific to life in New York City.

I kind of want to take something and misrepresent it. To represent in one small misshapen state is to look at it again. I like to kind of see it for what it is not. So if you are confronted with an object and you recognize its materials, its texture, and the handling of its construction, but then you see it misshapen, you're going to experience a conflict in your perception that makes you think, "Now why this damn thing? And what is it that I know about this that I still recognize?"

Well I was thinking about even just how the guys in the band will jam and a song will wind up being quite different, and perhaps even uncomfortably different in a given rendition— That's what really nurtures the fans, you know. They just are always building.

How did you come to know Phish? We're all Vermonters. When I was a college kid, they were just the band around town, like the band to see. Then, as they grew, they brought in a management company from Boston, and they just happened to move into an office across the street from my studio, in like '95. They turned out to be people that I really grew very close to, so it was originally the management that I befriended.

Phish would kind of drift in and out for meetings and such. They were just beginning to concoct the big festival. The band wanted multimedia infusions, but I don't think they really knew what that was. But they were so interested in performance. So I think it just sort of sparked—well there's a guy across the street, he makes pretty cool stuff, should we just go and ask if he wants to make something? It was really that casual.

And since then your collaborations have grown? More and more so. Nowadays Mike Gordon can be really fun to work with cause he's like the wordsmith. His writing is amazing and we really click on the sort of fun surrealistic level of nonsensical wordplay. We fuck around a lot with that sort of thing. But Trey gets into folklore a lot, and so it could be like a few weeks out from a show and I'll be incubating my own kind of ideas and throw them out to him and he's really good at just spinning folklore. So we'll get on the phone, we'll have like a two hour phone conversation and just twisting again and again and again, and then it can develop into performative sort of fourth dimensions. It expands like that.



A Westfalia van in Fisk's studio serves as both guest bedroom and workshop stereo. (Scott Heins/Gothamist)



An unfinished sculpture rests in Fisk's slightly-wild home lot in Red Hook. (Scott Heins/Gothamist)

Do these end up being fixtures at a festival, lyrics in a song, just ideas for you guys to communicate through? You know, at the end of the day, everybody's just there to see the show. Their backs are turned to all the architecture that I've put into place and they're all about the stage, and we don't touch the stage, hardly ever.

When there's a new Phish festival coming up, do the guys come to you with a theme and brainstorm? No, I'm lucky if I get a name for the festival. Like that's something to go with. But oftentimes it's the time of year or location. Site is super important. Like a lot of the work I do in public art is really tailored to site. So if it's at a racetrack on the Fourth of July, we're going to build like a theme that's around like drag-racing and Americana.

Have you had to mitigate your share of festival art disasters? Well, I sort of function as a kind of art director, or art curator. We had a pretty interesting dilemma down in Big Cypress where one of our artists had devised an architectural feature built with ice. In the Everglades. So we trucked in loads and loads of megablocks, three by four by three foot blocks of ice. We hadn't really determined exactly how we were going to move them around. It became an obvious set of issues to try to maintain the structure in ice. I wouldn't say it was a disaster but...[smiles].

I don't know any other band that does this sort of thing. What is it do you think about... how they play, how they've structured their career with changing setlists, every show is a different episode in this series that has gone on for about 30 years now, I think. Is it just the improvisation, that it's always different that keeps people energized and coming back? What is it that they empower and make possible that other groups don't? Well it's pure devotion, I think. That sort of ability to wander that they have invested in—the craftsmanship of the music—extends to the experience of the shows. They have that devotion and the draw where they can get seventy thousand people to drive to the northeast tip of the country from the furthest opposite stretches of the land. To build their own city for a weekend, that happens to be the biggest city in that state for that weekend. And enter into this whole other world that could be anything, they're just willing, and that's what makes it interesting.

A lot of people don't take Phish seriously, and don't take jamming seriously. They see it as lava lamp, psychedelic, drugged-out bullshit. But I feel like there's very rigorous and critical thought going on in this scene. You're a serious artist. You're a Columbia grad school-educated sculptor, and a lot of people think that Phish's circle of cohorts are still like soaked in bong water. And it's too bad that that perception is still there. Yeah, it's kind of weird for me too because with some of this media attention that I'm fortunate to have at this moment in my own career, a lot of attention is being paid to all this, my involvement with them. But they've always allowed for the greatest autonomy in my approach to art. I think you know that there's a difficulty, because it's difficult music. It has it's own kind of athleticism that not everybody can keep up with. But hell man, if you train with that you know you're up to speed with it, it's really gratifying isn't it.

So after the gallery show, what's the rest of the year look like for you? Home improvements? Yeah, I tend to neglect a lot of the realities of life as I go into these deep output phases. It's been a year of working on them.

A year? Yeah. I gotta go to the dentist, I gotta fix my transmission, I gotta find my cat that's disappeared three days ago, I gotta build a new studio. Things like this.

Mr. Softee is open at Marlborough Chelsea (545 West 25th Street) through October 15th.