



Ant Farm 1.2.3.4. Notes and Ruminations
By Gary Carlson

GENESIS, TRICKS AND STUNTS

I was in Wal-Mart looking at TV remotes. Some of them are flat and angular but others have a nice organic shape to them—kind of like the body of some little critter. Kind of like an insect if you stuck some legs and a head on them. Kind of like ants. I never had an ant farm when I was a kid but I remember seeing them, with the ants burrowing around in their little tunnels and rooms behind a piece of glass. So the design came to me and by the time I got home I had most of the mechanics and most of the tricks and stunts.

Sometimes it happens like this and sometimes it takes a few years. But whenever it comes, it comes all in a rush. “Babies In Peril” started when I was pulling armored cable out of my cabin to rewire the place. One piece of cable had a 90 degree angle connector on the end with two pieces of wire sticking out a couple inches (it was an old two wire system). It looked like a snake flicking its tongue. I thought about it for a while but I didn’t have a snake venue so I stuck it in the joists in the basement where I could see it and about four years later the design came along.

The little details that add humor or verisimilitude to the piece I call “tricks.” In “Ant Farm 1.2.3.4.” some of the tricks are: umbrella/parasol, duct tape, miniature money, “Better Homes and Gardens,” drool, camera, and uninformative (to us) restroom door signs. Stunts are bigger; integral to the design. They set the tone of the scene, implying motion or purpose. Some of the stunts in this piece are: skull throne, treasure room, offering the sacrificial virgin, cityscape, and valiant but doomed doggy.

The very best part of building a piece of studio craft is the tricks and stunts. Whenever they come, they come like bullets and I have to write them down or they’ll be gone. The design may be a technical nightmare and I may be looking at months of problem solving but the tricks and stunts always come all of a piece.

I almost didn’t build “Quicksand” because only one trick came with the general design (the failed rescue broken tree branch). There didn’t seem to be enough going on to justify an elaborate (though tiny) set. Then the silent movie card stunt came along and I had the theme for the piece (and a long-awaited use for a Crown Royal bag). I also found out what a good and versatile medium cat litter is.

JAWS

I wanted some pretty serious mandibles on the queen ant because she's getting ready to chomp down a whole human arm. Actually, I think the arm is from a werewolf or some fantasy creature since the hand is more of a paw, with little claws on the fingers (I don't know what the arm comes from; I just found it lying around in the kitchen). It (the arm) is a nice deep tan color and that makes a good contrast with the white bone sticking out of it. For the bone I snapped off four pieces of 1/8" dowel and painted them true white acrylic. Then I chose the jagged end I liked best, bored a hole in the arm and stuck it in to the appropriate depth. No blood in this piece, of course; that would be stepping into a whole different genre.

Back to the mandibles. I used a small cut-off wheel to chop off just the serrated end of a pair of pliers. I put the cut off edges to the flat of a grinding wheel, trying to get them to flush up where they could be soldered together. They got ground down too short before they got flush and I started over with a new pair of old pliers. Experienced now, I got a good match-up but decided not to solder them because I liked the scruffy patina and the heat would destroy that. Tried super glue and it worked so well I couldn't break them apart. This is what super glue is made for: non-porous hard surfaces. The smallest amount possible to film one surface gives the strongest bond. I ground a true flat surface on the butt end of the join, lapped a small nail head flat and super glued 1/2" of nail sticking straight back from the jaws. I drilled and filed out a small rectangle in the head (which is the base of a florescent bulb with all the electronic stuff gutted out) to receive the jaws and filled the head cavity with hot glue, leaving enough room for the jaws to slip into the rectangle. The nail acted as a barb to hold the jaws in the solidified glue and still gave me a little wobbleability to get the best angle for eating the arm.

Drool is essential for a mouth like this but can be difficult to produce. When I made drool for "Mastodon" I squirted hot glue into water and after half a dozen tries got a nice gob with a 2" tail to hang from the lip (which is the toe of a cowboy boot). But I couldn't get this to work on a small enough scale for a queen ant.

After a few failures I ended up squirting some silicon goop into a pan of water, where it floated. I managed to pull out a nice tail from the main blob and everything looked good until the blob started to spread. This is what was happening: there was no resistance above (except atmospheric pressure) and lots of resistance below (density of water) so the mass of the blob automatically centered itself because the surface of the water was absolutely level (as is the surface of any body of water, anywhere). With air available only above, the blob congealed and set extra slowly, its mass equalizing itself by radiating over the perfectly level surface, same as the application of centrifugal force but without the motion (see A. Einstein's thoughts on this if you wish to pursue it further). This was interesting but I was already two months into this piece and had to move things along so I scissored a droplet shape out of the disk. A quick dip in lacquer thinner and puff dry removed the blush edge from the cutting and I think it will serve.

Mandibles for the worker ants were much easier. I cut and ground common alligator clips to size and soldered the butt ends so they opened about 30 degrees. This was almost a perfect fit to slide up under the tapered head and the join is almost invisible. Then I used

the same deal with a miniature alligator clip for the brutalization of the poor little doggy out in the middle of the greensward.

NUTS

I had a notion that a pecan would make a good mid section of a worker ant body so I bought a 3 pound bag of holiday nuts (which had exactly 6 pecans in it). Then I noticed that the proportions were about right to use almonds for the head and walnuts for the hind end. Simple enough, but since I was going to stick bobby pins through the shells for legs and needed points of attachment for all three pieces, the nuts inside were going to shatter or shrink or stink and not give me enough purchase to hold things together. So I drilled the shells and used a pick and compressed air to rat out all the nut meat. This was a little harder than it sounds because I didn't want any visible holes in the shells (a lot of picking and blowing). Then I filled them up with hot glue, which is nice and solid when it sets. But if you try this at home you have to squeeze in glue until it's a little bit proud. Hot glue in some quantity takes about two cigarettes to really set up, and, while it doesn't shrink, it takes time to displace air and get itself dispersed into the cavity.

So then I had something solid to drill into that would hold bits of painted pipe cleaner to put the body together. The pipe cleaner "dowels" would bend or flex a little bit and the bobbys were pushed through tiny holes and bent to get the posture I wanted.

O RINGS

O rings are good. They're durable, flexible, paintable, stretchable, and they come in all sizes. When people talk amongst themselves about studio craft they say, "Oh yeah, big trouble all the time with points of attachment." But points of transition can be equally problematic.

When I built "Ima Sturnbich" I cut the points off crossbow bolts and had them sticking out of her chest (two of them; left and right). They came through holes in her leather bustier but the holes showed a little bit of slightly ragged and differently colored edge. It looked like the arrow points and the bustier were not a unified outfit. This is exactly the kind of detail that a real Ima Sturnbich would be looking to deal out punishment over (ending a sentence with a preposition is okay; she's not into that stuff).

What an easy fix! The points were perfect cones (Perfect. Perfect. Everything has to be perfect) and I just slid O rings over them to snuggle up against the bustier. The leather was a little shiny, the O rings were a little shiny, and the outfit looked normal, like something manufactured that you could buy at Wal-Mart (in some towns).

I had a somewhat similar problem with the legs of the queen ant. The body, you remember, is a TV remote gutted out and filled with hot glue. I drilled holes through the body shell and into the hard glue and I could then shove the end of a leg into some pretty solid composition and it would stay in place. However, I used very large cotter pins for the legs and the shaft of a cotter pin is half round (going into a round hole). It wasn't a good transition but it was another easy fix. I slid O rings up the cotter pin shaft tight to the body and they look like some sort of exoskeleton structure from which the legs protrude.

TREPIDATION

The whole is different from the sum of its parts (big news). You can make as many design sketches as you want but you won't know what you've got until the piece is finished, or nearly so. This became apparent to me some years ago when I did a large stencil called "Underwater Scene – Seneca Lake" (57"x14" acrylic on wood). There, I painted two long leafy strands of underwater type plants; foreground lighter colored with some detail, background darker with less detail, for depth of field. I had sketched the plants and other elements of the scene and everything looked okay and I spent about three days cutting stencils and went to painting. Naturally, I did all the work with the piece horizontally on a bench. This gave me a foreshortened view of the scene as a whole. The piece was done, finished, over when I saw it on the vertical for the first time, and I made that noise women are said to make when they see a mouse. The plant leaves were much too small to provide contrast between foreground and background. They didn't give me any depth of field. They didn't do anything.

Lesson learned. Experience is what you get when you don't get what you wanted. This problem (or potential problem) of not knowing was compounded in "Ant Farm 1.2.3.4." because the design elements are isolated from each other and there is further and essential separation between above-ground and underground. To make matters worse (or at least nervouser) I wasn't building a straightforward set; I was creating an illusion. Take off the front panel and things are not what they appear to be. And as with any illusion, if any part is wrong the whole effect will probably fail.

There were other unknowns. I didn't know how much glare was going to come off the Plexiglass; how difficult it was going to be to simply see what was to be seen. But this piece is made for close-up viewing (even myopic peering). If one needs to shift the angle of sight to avoid glare, that's alright. The chambers and tunnels are related but no features are dependent upon others.

So I wasn't just trudging along hoping for the best. I was following a design plan that I thought would work.

THE QUEEN'S CHAMBER

You'll see on "Wild Discovery" type programs that the queen ant or termite has a big fat abdomen she can barely drag around. A toilet tank float as I applied it is actually smaller, proportionally, than the real thing, but zoological accuracy is not required in a set like this. I liked the segmented look of this brand of float and had to have it even though there was an ill-defined gross/disgusting aura about it. That's how the itchy-bitsy teenyweeny yellow polka dot bikini came into play. It gives the queen a little more regal appearance I think (and a trick in the title of the piece).

I junked out a typewriter a few years ago and put all the pieces in a beer box (this was a device people used to use for creating hard copy. Whacking an appropriate button actuated a thin steel stick with an alphabet letter engraved in bas-relief on its end. The engraved letter mashed up against an inked strip of cloth, behind which would be a piece of paper held against hard rubber backing. This left an inked impression of the letter on the paper. Then the machine automatically advanced the cloth strip so it wouldn't get a hole worn into it and also advanced the paper horizontally so that you could repeat the process and another letter would appear, in line, beside the first one. After some more button-whacking you would see a whole word appear on the paper. Then you could make the machine advance the paper horizontally without any letters, leaving a blank space, and you could begin the next letter of the next word). It was a complicated machine (obviously) and had many and many interesting little parts, among which were very small springs. I pulled most of the curl out of some springs and they made nifty but somewhat gross body hair for the queen's abdomen (ants really do have little hairs on their body).

Seeing as how we're dealing with murderous, diabolical, cannibalistic ants (but I guess they're not really cannibalistic since they're eating humans). Start over. Seeing as how we're dealing with grumpy ants, I thought a throne made of skulls would be just the ticket. I rolled clay into fat marble size (not quite a dollop), pinched them to shape and put the features in with little tools. This was fun for a while but the bloom came off after about forty or fifty. I like the result though, because all the skulls are unique (everything is important). They took three days to dry and then I ground flats on them with a belt sander so they would sit nicely atop one another. Superglue held them tentatively, section by section, so I could slather up the unseen side with Loctite Stick and Seal (very strong and invasive). Presentation of the sacrificial virgin (who isn't necessarily one) is a tribute to those great old horror flicks of my childhood. The de riguer scene was a psychopathic creature or contraption carrying around some unconscious broad in a white gown (see S. Freud's thoughts on this if you wish to pursue it further – could get kind of icky though). To get the ant into the upright carrying posture I ran a screw through the floor of the chamber into the bottom of the ant. This held it firmly enough that I could position the hind legs to make it appear the ant is standing. That left four legs to handle the unfortunate but mercifully unconscious fem, and handle her they do. It just about gave me the shivers to see those creepy appendages roaming over that nubile body (yuck).

TOPSIDE WORLD

I was a little apprehensive about motorizing the valiant but doomed dog. The worry was over the appearance of gimmickry. But I did want to draw some attention to the dog and consequently to the expanse of territory falling away to the horizon and cityscape. This is simple perspective – different from the depth of field techniques used in (usually) graphic designs.

I have to think of those roadside attractions one used to see when traveling the blue highways fifty years ago (Bob's Reptile World, May's Insect Museum, Live Two-Headed Calf, etc). Here and there one would find a MYSTERY SPOT where gravity was turned upside down. For a quarter you could set a ball rolling straight up an incline and watch water flow uphill. Maybe a ball on a string would be hanging 30 degrees out of plum. This all took place in a building that looked perfectly normal on the outside. Inside, however, walls, floors, ceilings, stairs, windows, doors, -- every construction element was slanted and canted in relation to every other element so that the total interior space was very wrong but appeared to be normal. Then your brain (that thing that can get you into so much trouble in so many ways) would insist that vertical and horizontal exist only in relation to you (you, you, you; the center of the universe) and the ball would roll scampishly up the grade.

Now, unless you're building a flat out trompe l'oeil piece you don't have to worry overly much about tricky perspective stuff; you're not trying to build a photo-realistic representation of the real world. Usually you're trying to create a representation of an illusion. But even if you have the best idea in history you still have to be able to execute it.

The set of "Nell's Nightmare" is an 1890s sawmill but I only had about a foot of interior depth to work with and I didn't want my players to appear to be squeezed into a tiny little room. The left and right walls were vertical "planks" which I indicated by cutting grooves floor to ceiling with a Dremel tool, but I cut the foreground two or three planks 1" wide, then a couple at $\frac{3}{4}$ ", then a couple at $\frac{1}{2}$ ", then $\frac{3}{8}$ ". So the planks farthest away appear smaller because they are narrower. I don't know how effective this is, or if anyone even notices it but, then again, if it is effective it should not be noticed. I also put a window in the back wall on the visually dominant right side. This has a kind of sinister looking reverse-glass painting of some skeletal ponderosa pines against the sunset. Then I dadoed a 1" groove in the back from the top of the window to the top of the box and lined it with tinfoil. This allows a little light to come through the window if the piece is mounted on a wall, as it should be. So the window tends to draw the eye through the interior instead of just into the interior and the sawmill gets bigger.

One wants to pay some mind to these details when making a piece of studio craft or found-object art. Alternately, you could become magical. This is a much easier route but (of course) more mysterious. Then you can throw together miscellaneous pieces of almost anything (you can even hang a car tire around the neck of a stuffed goat) and your followers (for fear of being branded ignoramuses I guess) will swoon and squeal about man's inhumanity to man or the isolation of self in a media-driven society. Harumph.

Back to the topside world. The diminishing size of the Bugs Bunny type holes is supposed to impart distance and therefore the idea that these commie rat-bastard badly behaving ants are everywhere. No one is safe.

I think the cityscape on the horizon works pretty well. Originally I put up a clip-art shot of Miami Beach but it looked too sparkly and new (seven high-rise cranes were abuilding – it was new). Dumpy old London to the rescue. The greensward I just rolled with light green and then dark green and gray which I pounced around with a big stencil brush until my hand got tired. Landscapes are not my strong suit.

The wings (of the topside scene) were a problem. I didn't know what to do with them but I knew that running the skyscape all the way around would fail. So I used "smoke" Plexiglass with the backside done in black enamel. This produces something of a mirror effect which encloses the theater while expanding the view. Some glare problems again but overall it does what I want.

GETTING STUCK

Boy, did I have a lot of trouble making dirt. The ant tunnels and chambers are burrowed out of dirt and the presentation is a cross section showing the tunnels and chambers with their painted dirt-like fabric interiors. Anything that isn't open space underground has to look like dirt and that is over half the whole view, so the dirt had to look good. I was convinced that the success of the piece would stand or fall on the appearance of dirt (besides, I like to use a technique that leaves people wondering how it was done). I tried several styles of reverse painting but it just didn't look dirty enough. Had to be real dirt. So I spread out a few pounds of cat litter (unused) and sprayed half of it black and half of it brown. The bottom half (how many halves is that?) which the paint didn't reach was clay color. So I ended up with a kind of gravel-ish mix. Then I sprayed Plexiglass with high tack adhesive and sprinkled on the cat litter. It stuck fairly well but when I lifted the panel a lot of cat litter fell off. It hadn't got into contact with the adhesive and so there were gaps. I sprayed the whole surface with black paint (to cover the gaps) but the adhesive tended to repel the paint (by the way, if you're doing any extensive painting buy the expensive paint. It costs three times as much and you may think you're only paying for a brand name but there's three times as much paint and, more important, it comes out three times faster. And anyway, if you're trying to pinch pennies find another hobby. The more expensive material isn't always the best but it usually is). Next try I sprayed the panel (a new panel) with adhesive, dribbled on the cat litter and sprayed a heavy coat over the top of everything. This made for a more stable mass but pieces were still liable to fall off. This dirt surface had to be a nice fixed solid mass and I wasn't getting it. But I was stuck on the idea of using spray adhesive, maybe because I am familiar with it from using it on stencils. So I kept globbing on more and more and probably with a few gallons of the stuff I would have succeeded, but there was more at play here than just solidifying the sheet of dirt.

The plan was to mask all areas of tunnel and chamber with contact paper cut outs. Then after all the sprinkling and spraying and painting and whatnot the contact paper would be

pulled away and you'd have your view into the tunnels. But with a quarter inch of sticky gunk covering everything it would be impossible to get a clean peel-off; there would be lifting and tearing all around the perimeters, and you can't mask the masking to prevent that. The spray adhesive was a good idea that turned rogue on me.

What to do. I'm an atheist so it didn't seem kosher to ask God for help. I would have to approach the problem with a fresh head, which is difficult to do once you've become stuck on an idea.

It was no grand epiphany but I did come up with the solution without extraterrestrial help. Help came from a bug, which I thought appropriate.

The lac beetle lives peacefully in India. It excretes stuff that is scraped up by cheerful field workers and dissolved in alcohol, making shellac. We know about shellac as a wood finish but it has almost supernatural properties of adhesion. I have never found anything that shellac won't cover, including dirt, wax, food, axle grease (and I really have put shellac on all that stuff). When I built "Low-Maint Pet" one of the tricks was shellacked rabbit turds in the latrine area of the cage/prison cell. They (the turds) have lasted many years with no harm or botheration to children or real pets (the pet in question is a mink and so far no sharp-eyed animal expert has pointed out that discrepancy to embarrass me. On the contrary, it would give me great pleasure to have some one count coup on me for misrepresentation of mink bowel movements. If you find it hard to believe I can be so big-hearted see "Twinkie Defense," coming up directly).

Still, shellac on a brush wasn't going to help me fix cat litter in place (use your head – it would stick to the brush). But a few years ago Zinsser started putting out their shellac in a spray can. Wonderful idea. Wonderful product. The only problem with shellac has always been its fast drying time; it starts to set up before you can get it stroked out if you're using a brush.

So. La. Spray shellac. Now I could lay down the masking, throw on the cat litter and use a little brush to sweep the masking clear just a smidgeon beyond the edge, so that no part of the fixed mass would lift when I pulled up the masking. And the mass was going to be very well fixed (years from now, when this piece is being trotted around to exhibitions I don't want chunks of cat litter getting into the carpet at the Louve ... SACRE BLEU!! Le poup le chat).

I started with a light spray from about two feet away. This got things settled in place. Dried in four minutes. A little closer a fairly heavy coat got things locked together pretty well. Then I shot the whole field with black and with brown paint to fill in the interstices. Then in several stages (to control flow) I carefully dribbled 95% wood glue over the whole topography. Just 5% water decreases the viscosity of glue dramatically (or does it increase it? Whichever, it makes the glue much more flowable without much decrease in strength. Strength wasn't at issue here anyway; only stability). The only tricky part was making sure the glue didn't flow over and set up on the masking. That's why I did it in stages.

It all turned out very nice. I not only had dirt, I had pretty dirt. In fact, the whole piece turned out unexpectedly pretty. Two colors of paint, three colors of cat litter, amber shellac and yellowish glue combined in a very pleasing variegated surface (which isn't really a surface, since the view is through the Plexi, looking at the bottom of all that stuff).

WHY BOTHER? (THE TWINKIE DEFENSE)

I'm not a professional or an academician or a teacher. I'm a saloon keeper. But I was raised by wolves (if you haven't figured that out by now) and I know certain things. Like how to make a grandiose pronouncement. Like this: whether we recognize it as such or not, what attracts us to the arts is unnecessary excellence. We like things to be better than they need to be. This is more apparent in the crafty arts than in the fine arts (would a Vermeer painting be better if something were changed or added?). But I don't mean just technical virtuosity. I mean the intangibles such as care and patience and affection and dedication. And this is more apparent in a primitive than in a studio piece. An almost hopelessly crude piece of work can possess great power (or whatever you choose to call it) if it shows some or all of those ingredients. As for studio pieces, think of Duane Hanson. He could have pasted really good quality wigs on his figures instead of poking a gazillion individual hairs into place.

Curiously enough, running along the same tack we often find a kind of obscurity or opacity in a piece. One might think the goal should be the widest appeal possible but that is a strategy of politicians, not artists. Confused? You can see this easily if you go to an antique store and buy an old cased pocket watch. Buy a hammer too. Put the watch on a table and smack it a few times. Get it into about thirty pieces. Use a loupe and look at the plates and stuff from deep inside and you'll see all sorts of beautiful engine-turnings, chase-work and scrolling. The watchmaker did all that so that another watchmaker a hundred years in the future could admire it when the watch was brought in for cleaning. No one else would ever see it.

I've shown "Nell's Nightmare" to quite a few people. Most people like it but unless they're familiar with Rocky the Flying Squirrel or "Perils of Pauline" they don't really get everything out of it that there is to be gotten. I didn't build it for an elite audience (once I had the design I had little choice) but the ones who get it are the ones who make it worthwhile.

I hate to digress (that's a joke, son) but I'm thinking about a newspaper column by Richard Cohen. In the piece he mentioned the Twinkie defense, which was the talk of the town almost thirty years ago. It had a day in the sun but it faded long ago. A whole generation has grown up with no knowledge of it. I suppose you might still Google "Twinkie Defense" (actually, Richard wrote only "Twinkies") and find out about it, but that's a little like cheating. Anyway, did Mr. Cohen hesitate over his keyboard (Geeze, does anybody still know about Twinkies)? He may have hesitated but not for long. So we end up with the rather peculiar situation wherein a newspaper columnist writes something that many people are not going to understand.

How big a deal do I want to make of this? Not very big. I doubt Richard Cohen was flooded with E-mails demanding to know what's up with Twinkies. He just shot it out and figured that those who know, know. He knew some people would make the connection (at least one did). You buys your ticket and you takes your chances.

NOTES TOWARD THE END

I don't remember why I decided to keep notes on this piece. I've never done it before. Partly, I guess, because it was quite a long time in construction (five months) and there were many times when I had to wait for something to cure or dry or I would be searching for the correct item or material. So there were intervals when I was just thinking about the piece without doing any work on it. I was a big surprise when the notes, in a way, seemed to become part of the piece or kind of a doppelganger piece themselves. Ideas and solutions seemed to present themselves because I was writing about them. Similar, I suppose, to what happens to the novelist when the muse is really foaming at the mouth: here we go – get out of the way and hang onto the pencil for dear life.

So I recommend note taking if one is building a piece of studio craft. I could recommend all kinds of things but that would just be me blathering (which I never do). Art comes from the artist and “Ant Farm 1.2.3.4.” comes from the digital electronics department of Wal-Mart.

I hope you've enjoyed reading about this little odyssey as much as I've enjoyed living it.