



Allan McCollum. *Shapes from Maine*. Installation Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, 2009. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery.

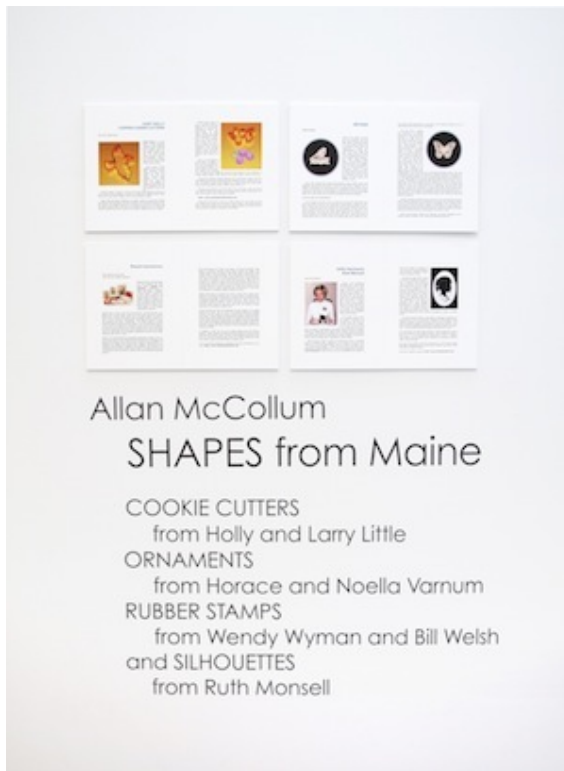
Allan McCollum

CHARMAINE WHEATLEY

Vinyl letters on the wall leading into the Friedrich Petzel Gallery, in Chelsea, NYC, suggest a group show: Allan McCollum “Shapes from Maine”; “Cookie Cutters” Aunt Holly and Larry Little; “Ornaments” Artasia: Horace and Noella Varnum; “Rubber Stamps” Repeat Impressions: Wendy Wyman and Bill Welsh; “Silhouettes” Artful Heirlooms: Ruth Monsell.

Allan McCollum went online and at random found four home-based businesses in Maine. After an exchange of e-mails with each he placed custom orders for the businesses to fabricate his designs using their own standard materials and crafting techniques. “Shapes from Maine” are artworks made for, and with, Allan McCollum that reflect his appreciation of and identification with the spirit of entrepreneurial, self-starter cottage industries.

2160 “Shapes” are spread out evenly over three large, custom-built, simple white tables and displayed preciously as individual artworks, set atop grids of mini gallery bases. The



Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Shapes From Maine*, wall labels and brochures, at entrance to the gallery. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.

titled “Drawings,” 1989-93. The logic for “The Shapes Project” stems from the system for “Drawings.”

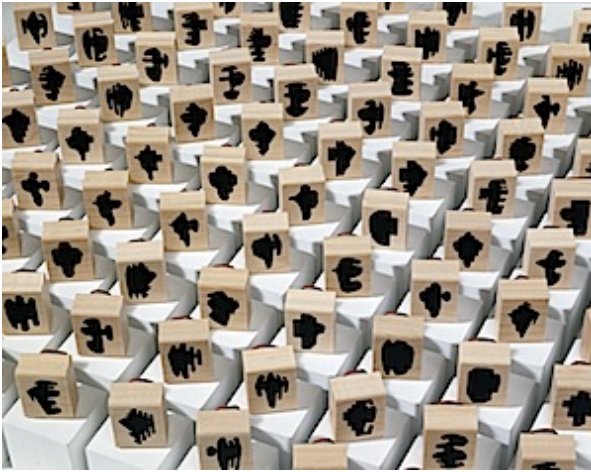
This installation follows McCollum’s aesthetic tradition of filling a gallery with same-but-different artworks, such as his “Plaster Surrogates,” begun in 1982, or “Natural Copies From the Coal Mines of Central Utah,” begun in 1994. Allan McCollum has hired many fabricators over the past two or three decades to help him create large-scale installations, and for a number of years I was his studio manager. Never before this current project has he made such an effort to publicly credit and promote the work of the craftspeople involved, a decision he says was influenced by one of Andrea Zittel’s projects, (www.smockshop.org). With that project Zittel offered her basic smock

abstract contours subtly call to mind the biomorphic sculptures of 20th century French Dadaist, Jean Arp. Of equal prominence, 72 framed black “Shapes” hang on the walls surrounding the tables. The installation required five full-time employees, working five days.

In the first table are 288 pristine, sparkling standard-sized *Shapes Copper Cookie Cutters*, crafted by Aunt Holly’s Copper Cookie Cutters in Trescott. The second table has 720 *Shapes Ornaments* made in Sedgwick by Artasia. The ornaments are fabricated from New England Rock Maple and are about the diameter of a tennis ball. The third table holds 1152 regular-sized *Shapes Rubber Stamps* made by Repeat Impressions in Freeport. Ruth Monsell of Artful Heirlooms in Damariscotta hand-cut the 72 *Shapes Silhouettes* from acid-free black silhouette paper, which are professionally mounted in white frames, each measuring 17 x 22 centimetres. These pieces look like smaller versions of McCollum’s past work



Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Shapes From Maine*, *Shapes Copper Cookie Cutters*, 2005/ 2008, copper, collections of 144, 4 x 6 x 1” each. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.



Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Shapes From Maine, Shapes Rubber Stamps*, 2005/2008, wood and rubber, collections of 144, 1-1/4 x 1-1/8 x 1-3/4" each. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.

mid-21st century. The concept of a billion has replaced our former fascination with a million as exemplified by On Kawara's *One Million Years*, 1970-71. With the world's economic plummet we're collectively identifying with what a billion looks like. Allan's program for producing 31 billion "Shapes" revolves around making combinations from a vocabulary of 144 "tops" and 144 "bottoms." Each top or bottom comprises at least two different curved lines, or what he calls "steps," which are assigned identification numbers. Combinations of four to six steps are used for each "Shape." So far "Shapes" consist of four steps, but if he were to prepare a work order for 9 billion "Shapes" he'd create pairings with six steps to insure no forms get repeated. Almost 13,000 of these artworks have been produced over the past five years with installations that include "Shapes" made from Corian, laminated birch plywood, and digital prints on archival paper.

McCollum doesn't tell a collector what to do, he says, but would prefer it if the collections are maintained in pristine condition. He'd be equally comfortable, though, with a set being broken up to make gifts, as with the "Visible Markers" project. 1997-2002. The artist encourages gifting "Shapes from Maine" by conveniently packaging each object individually in plastic zipper bags, with the "Shapes" own identification number on a signed card.

dress design to up-and-coming artists and designers to create their own unique look, then she helped promote their creations and careers. In a similar way, Allan uses his success and resources as an established artist to help promote family-owned businesses. Ruth Monsell, the *Shapes Silhouettes* crafter, travelled from Maine for the opening reception, sharing her excitement about being in "her first New York exhibition."

McCollum has devised a system that allows for the possible production of 31 billion unique shapes. More "Shapes" than people, as the projected spike in the earth's population anticipates, come



Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Shapes From Maine, Shapes Ornaments*, 2005/ 2008, New England Rock Maple, collections of 144, 2-1/4 x 3-3/8 x 1/2" each. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.



Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Shapes From Maine, Shapes Silhouettes*, 2005/2008, acid-free silhouette paper on 4-ply museum board, groups of 12, each one mounted and framed, 6-3/4 x 8-3/4 x 3/4".
Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.

Because the Shapes Silhouettes are more fragile, it was necessary that they be framed and set in collections of 12, with their authentication information on labels on the backs of each frame. The entire system and process exist transparently in an extensive library of three-ring binders, outlining an intricate web of "Shapes from Maine" identification numbers. McCollum always maintains careful records of each art-work made. Gifts are an "unpublic" part of Allan's studio practice. When his studio produced "Plaster Surrogates," the artist assembled smaller sets of eight that were only available through his studio as an employee bonus, or perhaps as a donation for a fundraiser exhibition.

The cookie cutters and ink stamps are the first overtly "useful" art objects that McCollum has commissioned. At the exhibition's opening, I spoke to a collector who plans to buy a collection of Shapes Rubber Stamps. I asked him if he'd ever ever use the rubber stamps and he immediately answered: "oh yes, of course." The collector's stated intention

raises questions. The point of "The Shapes Project" is never repeat a shape. By using the cookie cutters and rubber stamps, shapes get repeated. Would a sheet of paper with 25 of the same ink stamped shape run counter to the conceptual premise for the entire project of making 31 billion unique forms? If McCollum's "Shapes" are used to make inked stamp prints or batches of cookies, does evidence of wear and tear on the objects (as with most other art commodities) affect the monetary value as an investment? Can art objects for contemplation be used, or does usage diminish conceptual value?

An artist rooted in process, Allan McCollum "does projects to raise questions for which he has not yet found answers." "Shapes from Maine" engages the public to share in a discussion of issues relevant to all.

"Allan McCollum: Shapes from Maine" was exhibited at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, from January 16 to February 14, 2009.

Charmaine Wheatley is a Canadian performance artist living in New York. In 2009 a new bookwork titled 30% of Buffalo was published by Brooklyn Artists Alliance.