

# Jean-Marie Mauclet: Art and Making as Tools for a Visionary

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JEAN-MARIE MAUCLET AND KIT LONEY

To walk into Jean-Marie Mauclet's studio at the rear of the house he shares with Gwylene Gallimard is to enter into a woodworking palace. Here is a large barn-type space filled with visual stimuli: particle board walls and slender rafters, lengths of lath and 1 x 2s, sheets of plywood and sections of steel mesh, a workbench crowded with tools and various equipment, an overhead loft of lumber, and numerous tables presenting Jean-Marie's current in-progress endeavor: Tiny Culinary.

First, I would like to say that Tiny Culinary is not only a series of sculptures that celebrate existing or past restaurants, and envision future possibilities. Tiny Culinary also includes a piece that Jean-Marie has written: "A Tale of Charleston" in which he sets out to explore various public dining models and ideals. Although resting at present upon the energies of Jean-Marie, Tiny Culinary is actually an enormous concept, a place holder for community involvement in a kind of celebrating and reimagining of the very relationship of food, dining, restaurants, public spaces and sustainability.

Here, for example, is a maquette depicting a multilevel model of permaculture set below pisciculture with the idea that the lower level could be nourished by water and nutrients from the fish farming on the second floor. A top level has tables where patrons can gather and dine on the fruits of this arrangement. This was in part inspired by a meeting with a woman from Nairobi, an urban farmer.

Another section of the series includes a tri-pod tower made from strips of 1 x 2s and 1 x 1s criss-crossed like a construction crane, but, wait—something else is going on here: one of the tripod legs sits not on the floor, but on the

On this document, the left column is the original text by Kit. The right column was left blank for its original recipient, Jean-Marie, to respond in as many ways as possible. Maybe an alternative to the difficult, though ubiquitous Zoom format. A dialogue on paper. For sure a way to break with the one-sidedness (!) of most printed matters. An immediate right of response.

So, Kit, here I am!

Thank you for the opportunity.

. particle board? No, be technical a little: Oriented Strand Board, OSB. A high-tech material much cheaper than wood so far!

. full plywood sheets are called 4X8s. But no problem. Just a silly intro to a serious conversation!

. you are right to describe TinyCulinary this way. The whole purpose of TINYisPOWERFUL, of which TinyCulinary is a small part, is to affirm that art, as a discipline of knowledge acquiring, can be a very powerful tool for social change, as long as its maker(s), the artist(s), set goals always so large that no one can ever reach them alone: a chain of challenges to overcome the status-quo and implement a dream, a vision, a Tale (of Charleston, in this case).

. GG and I, find it unbearable, insulting, to see food-related programs invade our tv channel of choice, PBS. And they mostly cover exotic foods, specially those from cultures America so badly treats! Soul food, Low Country food are stars on the screen but victims on the ground!

. the pisciculture side is still unmastered, in progress! It may make much more sense to put the urban fish farm on the ground and the hydroponics above. Pumps can transport the nutrient-rich waters from one to the other.

. In 2007, the then Charleston Rhizome Collective went to the World Social Forum in Nairobi, where we met Emmy. To bring her back into our project stresses the global nature of the world food situation.

. in your description of the tripod tower, Kit, you show how much you enjoy the discipline of writing. Your description is a beautiful translation from the visual medium I propose to

shelf it stands next to, and the legs that do stand on the floor are each broken mid-air so the upper section is actually supported only by the criss-crossing lines, bringing a sense of visual surprise. It has the feeling of being both a construction and a deconstruction. It exemplifies the fine craftsmanship typical of Jean-Marie's carpentry, as well as his embrace of the skewed angle, dynamism, and open-endedness that does not offer any easy resolution. It is a conversation waiting to happen. Anything is possible.

Near this, "in defense of soul food and that Charleston tradition" is a maquette that portrays the plight of Bertha's Kitchen, an authentic soul food establishment, shown set into a village engulfed by highway ramps and exits. In Jean-Marie's maquette, these are shown as a crosshatching of roads hovering around and above the neighborhood of small gray blocks reminiscent of monopoly houses. Above all this maze of roadway is a billboard with the Bertha's Kitchen sign, itself a many-layered palimpsest, and below, under the table, can be discovered a network of steel rod "roots" that suggest a depth of cooking wisdom and time-tested recipes burrowing down through the floor of the studio. Extending out from the table holding this maquette is an organically shaped table, and a bench, an invitation to sit, to join others for a meal or a conversation.

Another puzzle piece here in this Tiny Culinary medley is a structure standing in as a wall of the now-closed Martha Lou's Kitchen, bearing the portrait of this late luminary in the Charleston soul food tradition. Unlike many past sculptures Jean-Marie has built, this series is not labeled with any additional text or lexicons. Jean-Marie speaks of wanting to use qr codes to give viewers access to information and resources connected to the visual elements of the piece. He is interested in the visual look of the geometric patterns that create this technology.

For Jean-Marie, from very early on, art was not separate from his passion for social justice, and he has always been

that of the written word, which you practice assiduously, we know. What is most intriguing here is that my process as a sculptor is also a translation: from the deconstruction of everyday's grave incertitudes, my socio-political consciousness, to the construction of a metaphorical object which, at the same time, must fit the purpose of TinyCulinary. As for the idea of a tower, it was activated by Morgan's many towers, one of which she uses as a protective space for meditation. So, when you use the word 'open endedness', you literally break open the normative borders between disciplines and between people. 'Anything is possible' you say!

. Bertha's resilience is remarkable. A posture she shares with so many TINY BUSINESS enterprises. Bertha has survived the takeover by highways, built where it really hurts: across poor communities in order to better serve commerce or the privilege of wealthier neighborhoods. . the use of the word maquette questions me! There is no intent to scale down existing buildings and mimic reality. Every choice of every detail aspires to reach the level of cultural archetype, opening the mind to more poetic references which, in turn, may generate dreams and new possibilities. As for the table and bench(es), they indeed invite community interactions. Their total lack of comfort is yet another metaphor!

. Originally, the use of QR Codes to push words, references, statements, out of the visual field of the finished installation, and use them only for their potential graphic qualities was quickly dropped, after Gwylène and I went to the Venice Architecture Biennale this fall. There, QR Codes were so ubiquitous that they became a sign of the new elitism of high technology and illustrated the upcoming digital divide, where only those with the latest computer paraphernalia have access to deep knowledge.

. Kit, thank you for insisting on the necessary intersection between creativity and justice. At Cooper Union though, I objected to much more than modernist architecture. My deep hurt was to

willing to challenge systems that allow injustice to continue. “I was becoming so good at antagonizing the establishment,” says Jean-Marie. As an architecture student at Cooper Union he rebelled against the pressure to produce certain kinds of design-- right angles and contemporary aesthetics with no social purpose. “If there is no social purpose, I’m not interested. Social justice is what gets me going.”

But Jean-Marie also found a mentor at Cooper Union: Leo Amino, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Black Mountain teacher and assistant to Noguchi. Jean-Marie describes him as “a fabulous human being” who was always talking politics and who “filled my head with fabulous thoughts.” Jean-Marie came away with the conviction that there is “no aesthetic without function or without ethics.”

So how does this work? Jean-Marie speaks of how he and Gwylene created Fast & French. It began as a vision of an elongated building where rich and poor meet and eat in a space open to everybody and the rich one pays. Then, having envisioned this, he and Gwylene set their sights on opening up a café to make it happen. They gave themselves nine months to become “fluent in cooking.” They filled a box with drawings and documents, and built a maquette to solidify their vision. They then drove around Atlanta, Greensboro, Columbia, Savannah, until they found the spot on Broad Street in Charleston. Bringing it into being was approached as an art process, all along the way learning what needed to be learned, assessing what worked what didn’t, and proceeding step by step.

Which is what Jean-Marie now bravely works to visualize and build toward with Tiny Culinary. What might be possible? What can you imagine? What is the next step in this process?

have to design buildings for millionaires although the school was sitting on top of the Bowery which, at the time, was basically the refugee camp for the ordinary New-York homeless population. I even witnessed a conversation where a teacher ironized with an other about giving into the then temporarily fashionable trend of socially-conscious design! That did it for me and architecture. I crossed the street and enrolled in art school!

. Yes, Leo Amino was a fantastic teacher because he was a fantastic human being. Actually, there must be an art genie somewhere: his work is being discovered these days, Check out this site!

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/07/the-unseen-professors-exhibition-asian-american-artists>

(besides, Leo Amino worked with one of the best: Isamu Noguchi!)

At this point, I could say more about Fast& French. But I, we, GG and I have said so much about Fast & French! The lesson from the Fast&French experiment, for me, is that, alone, one never knows enough, to do, every day, a better job than the day before. At least in the field of Art in/with Community. Yes, Fast&French was an Art in/with Community experiment. It may be why it is still alive and well in Charleston ... a lot of hard hope too!