

*"Tiny is the last refuge of the enormous"*

- Ken Price, quoting Joseph Cornell

In July of 2022, I packed up the car with my son and dog and drove from Seattle to Brooklyn with no particular plan. While my boy toiled away with the spiral-bound Road Atlas (a version of miniature America), I was trying to work out a new idea. I've found that long hours behind the wheel staring at vast American landscapes works wonders for getting the gears turning.

The idea in question came from earlier that year in San Francisco, when I met with David Breskin (the producer of this album) to spitball some possible directions for a new project. I needed to turn a page in terms of process, as it seemed that my current workflows had run their course and I figured that a visual metaphor might do the trick. This is a well that I've gone to many times in the past for creative nourishment.

I was mining for ideas about process, and Breskin suggested I check out some sculptures by Ken Price, an artist previously unknown to me. In the last decade of his life he made some remarkable and mysterious works that caught my attention. I sat for an afternoon in front of a couple of these and sketched them at different angles and magnifications. The Price sculptures have supple, undulating surfaces with endlessly complex schemes of wildly contrasting colors, resulting from a laborious process of sanding through many layers of acrylic paint. These pieces, meticulously crafted yet voluptuous and irreverent, seemed like they could point to a model for the production of small musical objects.

This thought clicked together with another that had been on the back burner since a 2007 visit to Dia Beacon, where I was entranced by the wall drawings of Sol Lewitt. The one that stayed with me the most was "Wall Drawing #123"(1972), a forest of wavy vertical lines. The charm of the piece is in the variety of lengths, weights, and contours of the lines, which come from the hand of many different people ("drafters"). It struck me for its willingness to relinquish the form of the final work to unpredictable variables (height, hand steadiness, errors in copying), and I filed that notion away for future use. So during my San Francisco brainstorm it occurred to me that I could write some Lewitt-ish instruction pieces to create the raw materials ("slabs," as I called them), and then excavate them, sanding and polishing in a Price-like way to find hidden musical artifacts. When this surfacing happens in musical real time, it's also a kind of surfing, playing the guitar along the contour of whichever instrument keeps the flow going. There are many pieces on this album that use variations on this technique, which makes

them less like compositions and more like sonic treasure hunts.

Along with the tiny objects, I wanted to use some tiny spoken phrases. I tried various things to get suitably random words that were expressive in small doses. One of them, a radically edited page of Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, made it to the recording. But Breskin came up with a more clever solution called a *findex*, a randomizer which is a compendium of final lines of a number of poems. I had a poetry anthology by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes called *The Rattle Bag* on my shelf and brought it in, selecting a pile of poems with juicy endings. Breskin edited my list and put them into workable groups, which in a way became new "found poems." The findex that we used is here, first the lines and then the sources:

Slow Group:

*Upon a Wheel of Cloud.*

*But colorless. Colorless.*

*And binding with briars, my joys & desires.*

*The amen of calm waters.*

*And the deep river ran on.*

*as our good manners required.*

Fast Group:

*Half an hour after our heads were cut off.*

*A clean slate, with your own face on.*

*With gently smiling jaws!*

*And Zero at the Bone —*

*The wind pours down.*

*But the show was over.*

Emily Dickinson "Like Rain it sounded till it curved"

Sylvia Plath "Poppies in July"

William Blake "The Garden of Love"

Derek Walcott "A Sea-Chantey"

W.H Auden "As I Walked Out One Evening"

Elizabeth Bishop "Manners"

Norman Cameron "She and I"

Sylvia Plath "You're "

Lewis Carroll "How Doth the Little Crocodile"

Emily Dickinson "A narrow Fellow in the Grass"

Wallace Stevens "Ploughing on Sunday"

William Carlos Williams "The Artist"

These are probably the most interesting peeks behind the curtain. There are a few other things at work throughout that are best left unexplained. It's better to just give a listen while looking at the cover art by the incomparable Ed Ruscha. I came across this image in *Cotton Puffs, Q-tips, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha* and knew immediately it was the one for this album. The evocative title paired with the expansive, infinite sky is the type of wide-interval counterpoint that leaves room for stories to be told with the inner voices. Especially miniature stories, which fit almost anywhere. Making tiny things is a particular kind of pleasure. It activates the impulse of play, where the child uses figurines, dolls, and train sets to build and control entire worlds.

In the context of this project, the tiny world is manifest in the studio with a congregation of musicians from every type of background, deliberately chosen for their ability to make unique and personal choices at any moment. The resulting wild moodswings remind me of one of the jukeboxes in Robert Frank's *The Americans*, glowing with the promise of random sonic pleasure from tiny discs. The choices for the mood aren't made by some all-powerful curator or algorithm: they come from the people in the room. In the studio, our micro-society pools together their skills to build a thing that no one controls, but trusts that a coherent structure will somehow collectively emerge.

In the context of the road trip, it seems that *Miniature America* could be a roadside attraction, just beyond that hill in the distance. It's announced on a billboard that promises something you've never seen before, a one-of-a-kind curiosity. It's getting late in the day, but maybe we can stop in before it closes and see if we can pick up a snack and a souvenir.

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