

ARTIST SURVIVAL SHACK

On August 1, 2013, Adam Stennett began a month-long installation/endurance performance, living and working in the 6.5 x 9.5 foot, self-sufficient, off-the-grid survival shack at an undisclosed location on the East End of Long Island. The supplies, food and water Stennett arrived with were all he had access to, and he did not leave the area for the thirty-one day duration of the performance. Stennett designed systems using solar, reflective insulation, parabolic mirrors, LED lights, fifty-five gallon water collection, vertical grow walls, vermiculture composting for solid waste, and urine collection (for later use as nitrogen rich fertilizer). The artist's mission was to survive physically and spiritually, and to create a new body of work that would be exhibited along with the Artist Survival Shack itself at the conclusion of the performance. A daily journal was kept and can be read at www.artistsurvivalshack.tumblr.com.

In conversation between: Steve Miller and Adam Stennett

Adam Stennett creates conceptual works from a post 9/11 perspective, investigating issues that affect our global society and their ramifications on the American psyche. Well known for his exquisite renderings in oil and acrylic, Stennett delved into sculpture and performance with Artist Survival Shack, a self-sufficient and off the grid exploration of an artist's necessities eventually installed at Glenn Horowitz in East Hampton. In this interview, Stennett talks to Steve Miller, who has lived and worked between New York City and Eastern Long Island since 1975. His career trajectory consists of over 40 solo exhibitions at venues such as the National Academy of Sciences, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Rose Art Museum, the Centre International d'Art Visuels CARGO in Marseilles, and the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux. His work has also been included in group exhibitions at the New Museum, the Bronx Museum, The Brooklyn Museum of Art, and The Everson Museum of Art.

Steve Miller: Having seen the Artist Survival Shack on Long Island, I was immediately attracted to all of the aspects of which you were thinking. The environmental concerns were obvious and relevant, but what struck me was this notion of surviving – just physical survival, and this complex set of relationships that we all have to live in now.

And that includes food, air, water, rent – we all have to pay rent no matter where we are, artist or not. But then, the other aspect of staying alive in the art world: how do you keep going? On every front that's a long-term strategy with many moving parts. The irony in your piece relates to summer rentals in the Hamptons, which are just about impossible to do on any normal artist's budget. So I think the interweaving of the complex relationships of environment, nature, studio practice, and the luxury world.

Adam Stennett: The Artist Survival Shack project grew out of my experiences of living and working as an artist in New York. I moved to New York 20 years ago, right after finishing my undergraduate education, to pursue a career of being an artist. And one of the biggest challenges that I discovered fairly quickly, was how to carve out a space to live and work as an artist in the fairly challenging environment. To be able to meet my expenses, and still have enough time to make work – and that time to make work became more and more precious and challenging. Along the way I started thinking about ways to maximize art-making [studio] time, and minimize overhead so that I could almost beat the system and have the space and time to make work as an artist.

**Adam Stennett**

Fig.1. *Artist Survival Shack*, installed in Bridgehampton, New York during a 31-day endurance performance, August 1-31, 2013.
(showing the 55 gallon water collection barrel, 100 watt solar panel and outdoor solar shower) © Sanchez

The Artist Survival Shack is a metaphor for that struggle, and an embodiment of the ways that I developed systems to think about what an artist needs to live and work, and how to turn that into something that is functional – a life that is functional. In this way the shack itself became an artwork that represented that struggle. (fig. 1)

SM: In some current artistic practices the traditional relationship between value and labour has been broken. Many of today's artistic practices seem to be executed with no regard towards physical effort, and are in turn more about a point of view on a subject in relationship with contemporary culture, rather than skills. The Instagram portraits of Richard Prince come to mind, because he makes them on his phone. I happen to be in love with that work; that's another story. Your work requires not exactly deprivation, but something close to that in the aspect of a 24/7 time commitment. How do you contextualize endurance and performance as one of

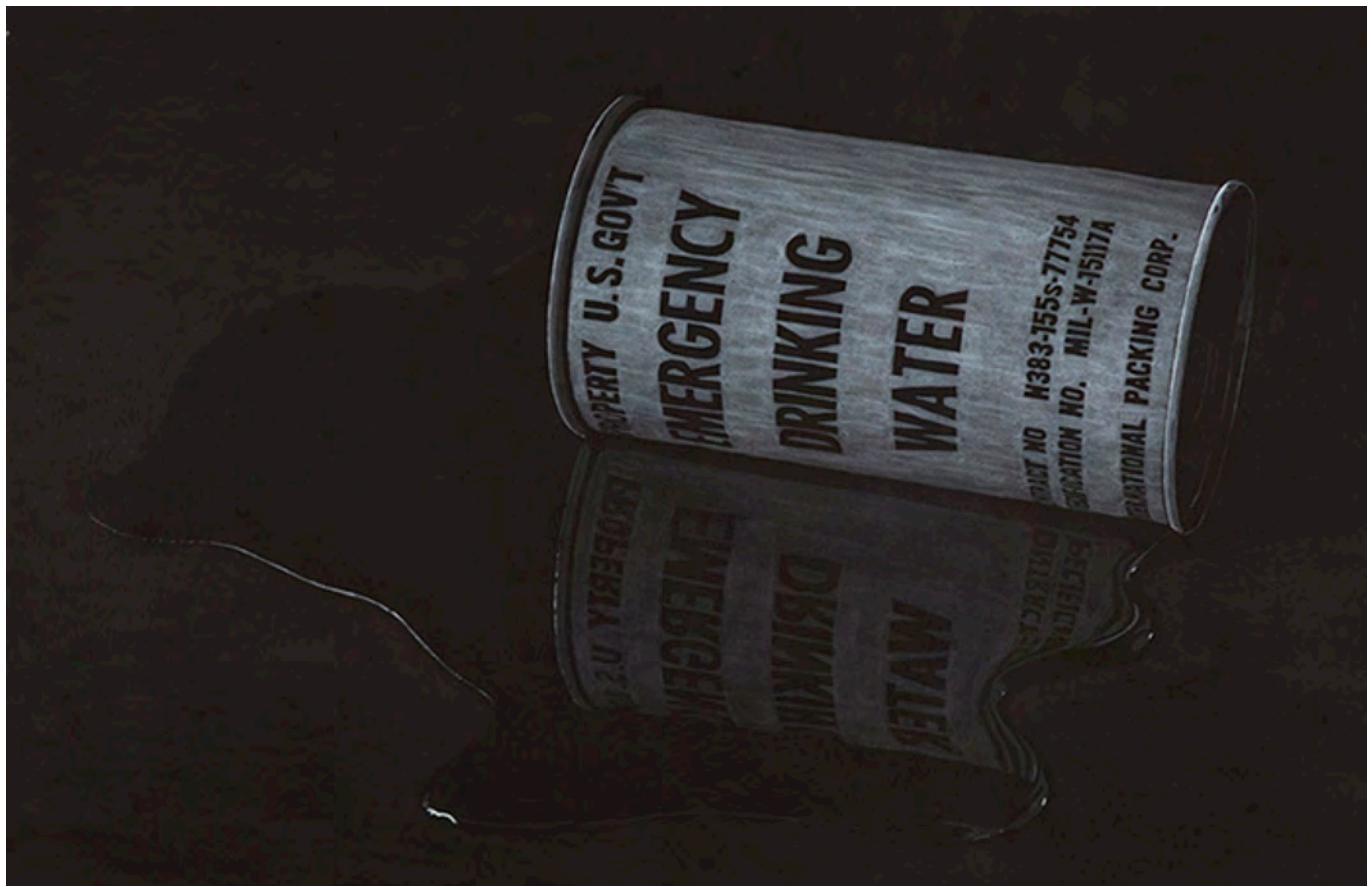
your mediums?

AS: I guess I wouldn't really think about it as deprivation, so as much as distillation – that I am trying to get down to the essentials, and get rid of all of the distractions. So in order to do so, spending a month in the shack working 24/7 without leaving the shack becomes an idea of an intense self-made residency. It was an attempt to get to the essentials and get rid of anything that would distract me from art making. For me art making is almost like meditation – through the physical practice I feel like I get into a mindset beyond the everyday way of thinking, and being in that art making headspace for me is very relaxing and enjoyable. I think that what you were saying about Richard Prince's work is that it seems like it's almost effortless. Right? That there is not an intense work ethic that goes into its creation in the same way as there is in my 24/7 endurance-performance piece. I think with Richard's work that is part of the



Adam Stennett

Fig.2. Black Military Surplus Water Can. 2013. acrylic on paper, 44 x 30 inches © Stennett



Adam Stennett

Fig.3. Emergency Drinking Water Spill. 2013. acrylic on paper, 30 x 44 inches © Stennett

illusion that he goes for – that there is this illusion, and that it is effortless, as if it's just something into which he has this idea that he puts out there, and then it becomes art. But, I would put forward the idea that Richard is in that art making habit 24/7 as well; that he's constantly working.

SM: I entirely agree with you. I'm 100% on board with that – in having personally known Richard. There is a joke within his family: how do you get him off the telephone? So, in that sense he is constantly thinking, and constantly conceptualizing, and I think that [requires just as much exertion as physical labor.] The physical "effort" of manual labor is an illusion, and regardless, while there is not an equation that can compare the strenuity of mental versus manual labor. So, you make this studio, and you create art, and you've answered the question, but we haven't actually talked about the objects that you make. You've almost answered the question in my mind, which is: you know you're

talking about the Shack as a place for meditation, and installation, and your drawings are-- which I love-- very minimal, clean, and efficient. How does that balance out the time component and the making of them?

AS: The art making process for me is as much about mark making as it is about – I mean, the paintings themselves end up looking pretty photographic a lot of times. Actually, when people aren't looking at them closely, they at first assume that they're photographs or photographic in some way. But the process for me is always a very abstract process; I'm separating myself from what it is that I'm drawing or painting in order to just look at the shapes, and the shadows, and the light and the dark. (fig. 2) And that process is kind of a translation in my mind and becomes a meditative process. I'm making marks and I'm looking at reference material, but I'm also – the way I think of it is almost reductive, like I'm marking out



Adam Stennett

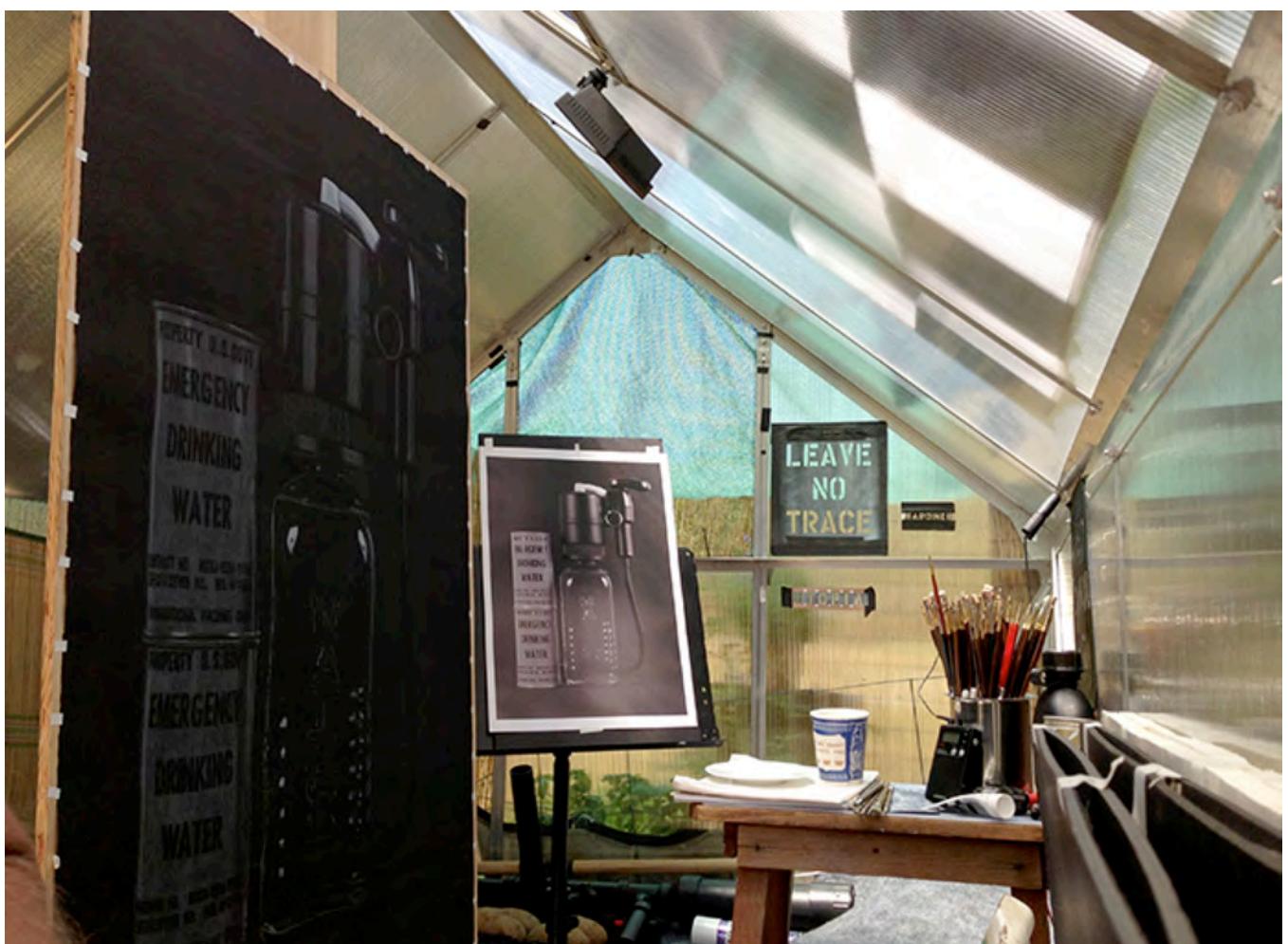
Fig.4. *Canteen Spill*. 2013. acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches © Stennett

what's wrong as much as I'm marking what's right. When I start with a blank piece of paper, obviously a lot of that blank piece of paper is "wrong," so I need to make marks that make it look the way that I want to make it. (fig. 3) This minimalist aesthetic also ties in with this whole fascination I have with streamlining and distilling things down to their essentials, and getting rid of all the crap that we don't really need. So the *Artist Survival Shack* itself is kind of a metaphor for that simplifying and distilling down to what is really necessary. Hopefully the work aesthetically also represents that idea. (fig. 4)

SM: Okay this is just a comment – I'm gonna get really corny here...Because you're using a black sheet of paper at least in that work that was in your Glenn Horowitz show^[1] (fig. 5-6) and its like you're bringing in the essential element – which is the light,

you're bringing the light into this darkness. I think that there's a glow to that work and a simplicity that does mirror all the work you do to set up the minimal footprint on the planet to show the essential imagery, and that is something I really respond to. In a way your work is very low tech and off the shelf materials that anyone can find, yet still you use technology to solve part of your survival solution. How do you see technology facing with the natural world, and do you extrapolate your premise as your personal surviving solution to look at the larger issues of what's going on with the planet? Climate change, for example.

AS: Well, the materials that I used for the shack I did want to be things that were easily attainable that anyone could go out and find. (fig. 7)



Adam Stennett

Fig.6 and 7. Above Artist Survival Shack.: 2012-2013. Installed at Glenn Horowitz in East Hampton, NY in the exhibition Adam Stennett: Survival, Evasion and Escape (The Artist's Studio) September 7- October 28, 2013; Below: Artist Survival Shack, interior (showing painting wall) © Stennett



Adam Stennett

Fig.8 Artist Survival Shack - system for waste management - includes 5-tray vermiculture composting bin, 1000 red wriggler composting worms, urine / nitrogen spray unit. 3 gallon bucket toilet and 11 gallon urine collection unit. All of the solid waste and liquid waste from the 31-day performance was processed by this system. The solid waste in the 5-tray composting bin was then displayed along with the shack in a gallery setting during the six week exhibition that followed. © Stennett

there, blog, share the experience – document. You're sharing the experience, but by sharing the experience you're willing to be watched because we're watching you and looking at what you're doing. This would be much more public in an urban environment, which we'll talk about in a minute, but how does the notion of surveillance incorporate itself in the art practice in a world in which many of us are willing to submit information to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, as if we're willing to be watched on our own terms. We all want to control how we're watched, and how we're looked at, and yet we also recognize that if you use a computer or if you use Google, for example – every search is being tracked; they've got an algorithm. What's the balance between getting yourself out there on social media and wanting people to watch

you? And this other larger issue of being watched without our permission, what do you think about that?

AS: I believe that art making and performance have an undeniable component of communication. Making art is attempting to communicate in some way with the viewer, and artists are always looking for new ways to communicate, and new tools to use to communicate with. Surveillance, especially post 9/11, has kind of a negative connotation in a lot of ways. There's a lot of fear, and wrapped up in this idea of that we're being watched and cameras are everywhere is sort of this big brother idea. But I think that it's an undeniable part of our culture, and as an artist I'm constantly looking for ways to think about our culture and things that are involved –



Adam Stennett

Fig.9 Artist Survival Shack , interview view © Stennett

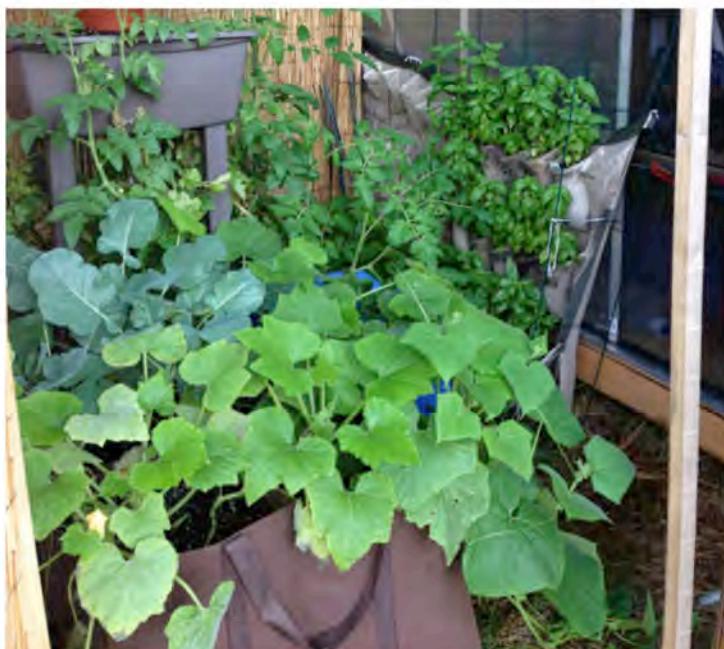
including fear and paranoia and this post 9/11 big brother kind of feeling, and looking for ways where I can turn that around and use that for my advantage as an artist. So using these tools and blogging, or in the case of our *Survival Shack*, we kept the location secret – it was an undisclosed location, but if people were interested in coming to visit they would be guided to the location. Then on the blog I was posting images from my daily experiences in the shack, and keeping a journal so the outside world could experience what I was experiencing in some way, but yet there was still a layer of secrecy surrounding it. And there were other elements that refer to the Cold War, and things like that that I weaved into the “tapestry” of the shack project for that very reason. This idea of surveillance, the seen, the unseen, and how these things are filtered for us in the lenses that we're allowed to see the world through. All of that stuff is very interesting to me (fig. 9).

SM: Okay, we're almost done here, two more questions. You know, we had this conversation a while back when I was in your studio. You were talking about doing something in more-extreme conditions, in particular: winter. Summer in the Hamptons is one thing, not to minimize your undertaking in any way. I saw what it was like to do what you did out there. I mean, you were just really developing the focus on minimal imprint, and there was an aspect of physical survival and commitment. How is this going to change with more extreme weather conditions, or what lead you to think about that?

AS: Well, I wanted to take what I learned from my month living and working in a 6 1/2 foot by 9 1/2 foot shack and raise the stakes a little bit. So, especially through this last winter, I started thinking about a more challenging problem, so I wanted to

ARTIST SURVIVAL SHACK JOURNAL

ON AUGUST 1, 2013, ADAM STENNELL BEGAN A MONTH-LONG INSTALLATION / ENDURANCE PERFORMANCE LIVING AND WORKING IN A 6.5 X 9.5 FOOT, OFF THE GRID ARTIST SURVIVAL SHACK AT AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION ON THE EAST END OF LONG ISLAND. THE SUPPLIES, FOOD AND WATER HE ARRIVED WITH WERE THE ONLY SUPPLIES HE HAD ACCESS TO. HE NOT LEAVE THE AREA FOR THE DURATION OF THE PERFORMANCE (ONE MONTH). THE FOCUS OF HIS STAY WAS TO SURVIVE PHYSICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY AND TO CREATE A NEW BODY OF WORK. THE OFF-SITE PERFORMANCE WAS FOLLOWED BY AN EXHIBITION FEATURING THE SHACK ITSELF, RELATED PAINTINGS AND ARTIFACTS SEPTEMBER 7- OCTOBER 28, 2013 AT GLENN HOROWITZ BOOKSELLER IN EAST HAMPTON, NY.



artist survival shack compact garden after the rain

14TH AUG 2013

JOURNAL

Tuesday, August 13, 2013

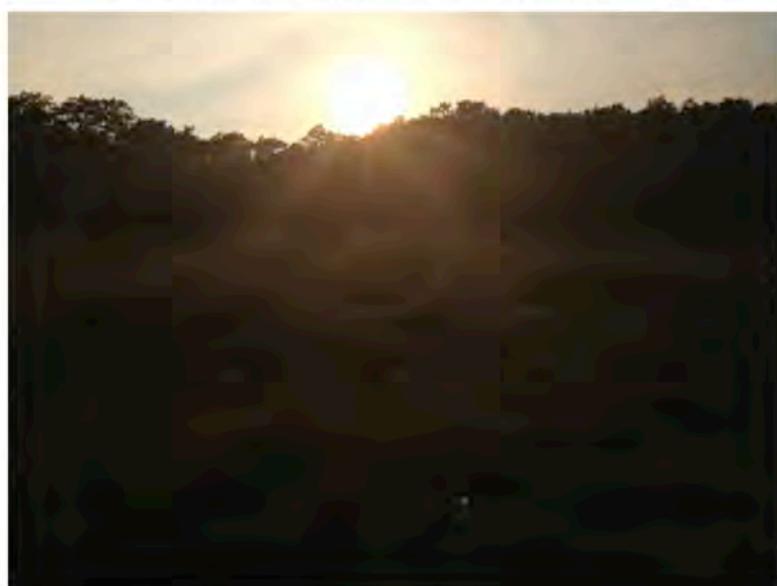
Woke up to crazy rain again. By midday my 55 gallon barrel was overflowing with water funneled from the roof. I scrambled to gather some of my other empty water containers and by 4pm all of those were full as well. I guess I don't have to worry about running out of water. The water collection system has proven to be more than adequate.

No major leaks in the shack other than the ones I have known to watch out for. My compact garden has had a good drenching the past two days. Have noticed it seems to experience an immediate growth spurt after rain- much more than after regular watering. Could be due to chemicals in the tap water I started with.

Tomorrow will be two weeks into the project. That also means I have a little over two weeks left to finish the paintings and other works for the show. It will be a big push to get everything finished that I want to finish but that is usually the way things work before a show. I feel like everything is coming together.

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end of the third week

JOURNAL

Wednesday, August 21, 2013

As of today I have spent three weeks surviving in the shack. If nothing unforeseen happens I feel like I should have enough food and water to make it through the month. I spent the morning drinking coffee and looking at the painting— trying to decide if it needed anything more.

My friends Patrick Paine and Jenny Gill came to visit around 1pm. Jenny is the Director of Communications for Creative Capital. She read some of my early drafts of the artist survival shack proposals and gave me advice that was very helpful in shaping them. Patrick is an artist and teaches at LIU. They are both some of the nicest people you will meet and it was fun to see them.

The afternoon was hot and sunny so I pulled my second folding chair into the shack and the three of us actually sat quite comfortably in the shade and relative cool of the 6.5 x 9.5 foot shack.

After they left I decided the painting was finished and moved on to the next and last painting that will be in the show. I jumped right into it and painted until late. Have been hearing what I think are whippoorwills the past few nights which sets a foreboding mood.

Adam Stennett

Fig. 10 and 11. Artist Survival Shack, journal excerpts 1 and 2 © Stennett

create a new space that was portable, or easily movable – something that can be broken down and reassembled anywhere, and that would be functional under any conditions. Arctic conditions seemed like a good challenge. When you're walking around New York City and its 3 degrees out, it tends to focus your mind on the idea that design flaw could be very serious. If you're living and working in a shack in 3 degree temperatures on a rooftop somewhere or elsewhere, and you can't leave and you don't have any way to escape this space that maybe doesn't work. I think it is interesting for me to raise the stakes and start experimenting with new materials to use as installation, or to capture the sun's energy, or to just live and work in a space. Obviously in the summer you're also outside a lot more, and so I started thinking about the idea that if you're in the winter the space may need to be a little bit bigger because you're not able to use the outside space as much. So, new challenges. I think one of the things as an artist that I'm making artwork – I've said this before – but making artwork for me is about problem solving. And as an artist you come up with problems and some of those problems are more interesting than others, and some of those solutions are more effective than others. But an artwork, to be effective or interesting to me, needs to begin with a good question and then some sort of solution that is interesting (fig. 10-11).

SM: I think the thing I like about what you're doing is the totality of it. It involves global concepts, and it involves all sorts of notions of survival. Then you're actually physically making art within this – an art object. This makes it very rich and complex. There're all these different frames in which to look at art. And another of these frames that's discussed now more and more, is this idea of Sci-Art, which obviously my work is a natural fit to. I guess I am one of the old men of that movement. Arthur Miller and his book *Colliding Worlds* sees science redefining contemporary art to see a third culture. Do you feel any affinity with this – I mean, you're like partly in this realm; does this notion stimulate you, or occupy any of your thoughts in terms of making your own work?

AS: Well, I'm not sure if I would go so as far as to say science is redefining contemporary art in the last century. I think that's kind of his argument in some ways in that book. I think that the intersection of science and art is fertile ground for great artworks to happen. For me, I think artists who I am most interested in are very aware, and very open to possibilities, so seeing things that science brings to the table and using those to your advantage as an artist and making those connections is very interesting. I think it's a little dangerous to get too focused on one angle, and I would argue that your work, for instance, isn't just Sci-Art. You're bringing in a lot of cultural angles, and you're exploring more than just the intersection of science and art, and I think that's hopefully what I am doing as well. I think there is a connection to science and art-- that is important, the connection to nature and art. But hopefully, at least, I am trying to be open as possible to as many influences as possible with my work.

SM: I think that's what makes you so rich.

Adam Stennett creates conceptual works from a post 9/11 perspective, investigating issues that affect our global society and their ramifications on the American psyche. Well known for his exquisite renderings in oil and acrylic, Stennett delved into sculpture and performance with *Artist Survival Shack*, a self-sufficient and off the grid exploration of an artist's necessities eventually installed at Glenn Horowitz in East Hampton. Adam Stennett's work has been featured and discussed in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Frieze*, *Art In America*, *Bomb Magazine*, *BlackBook*, *New York Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Esquire*.
<http://www.adamstennett.com/>

Steve Miller has lived and worked between New York City and Eastern Long Island since 1975. His career trajectory consists of over 40 solo exhibitions at venues such as the National Academy of Sciences, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Rose Art Museum, the Centre International d'Art Visuels CARGO in Marseilles, and the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux. His work has also been included in group exhibitions at the New Museum, the Bronx Museum, The Brooklyn Museum of Art, and The Everson Museum of Art. In 2004 Miller was a New York Foundation for the arts painting fellow. His work or reviews of his work have been published in *Le Monde*, *La Nouvelle République*, *Art Press*, *Beaux Arts Magazine*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *South China Morning Post*, *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Art News* and *Art in America*.