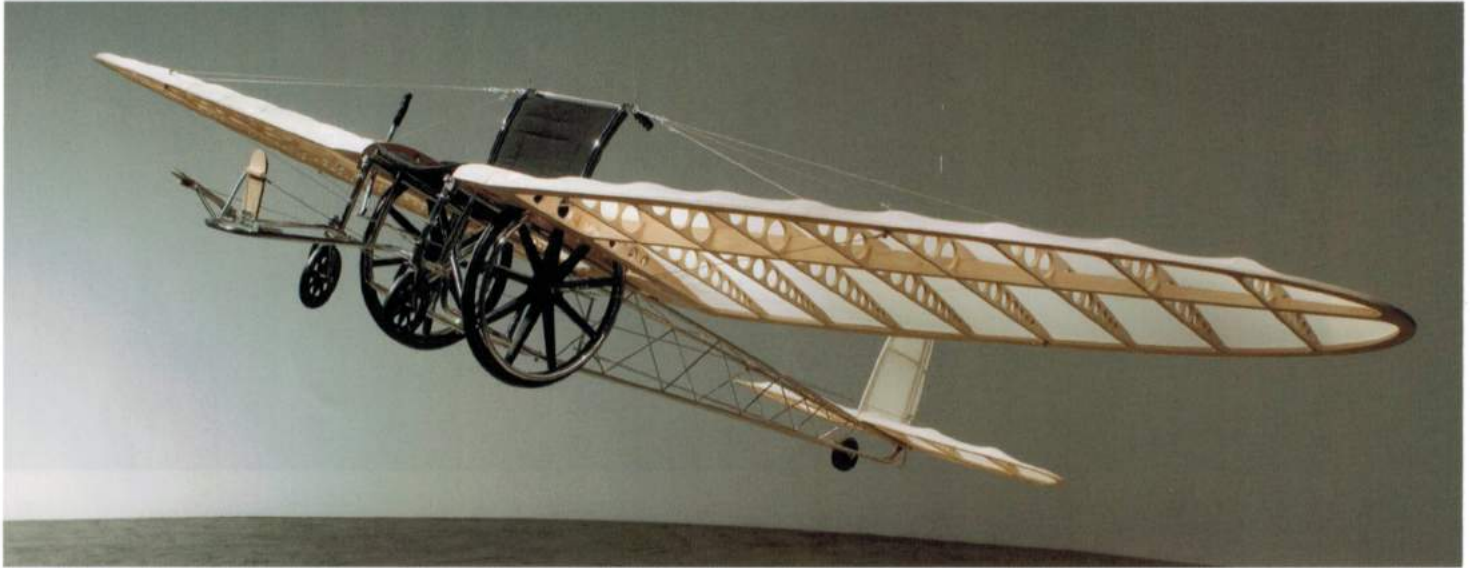


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Seducing Consciousness

A Conversation with **Paul Villinski**

BY ROBERT PREECE

Opposite: *Marfa*, 2013. Found wooden objects and aluminum cans, wire, and soot, 120 x 30 x 84 in. This page: *Air Chair*, 2005. Found wheelchair, steel, aluminum, wood, and rayon, 18.5 x 3 x 11.5 ft.

Birds, butterflies, flying machines, and a sinister, wickedly abstract belt made of empty liquor bottles — Paul Villinski's works are one mechanized step away from chaotic, destructive motion. Though most of his sculptures are made with found materials, in 2014, he turned his process on its head by breeding live butterflies in a New York gallery. This delicate, thoughtful, and poetic installation has since become an example of how art can serve science. Among other influences, witnessing the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on the ground in New Orleans has had a lasting impact on Villinski's work.



Robert Preece: *Why is the idea of flight important to you? What sorts of memories does it evoke, and how do they relate to your work?*

Paul Villinski: I was an “Air Force brat.” I spent my first 14 years on or near USAF bases. I devoured histories of aviation and constantly built—and crashed—flying balsawood models. When I was 12, I bought a \$5 set of plans for a DIY hang glider from the back of *Popular Mechanics*, built it in the garage, and then discovered that I wasn’t strong enough to lift it. My dreams of soaring went on a shelf, and I found my way into the arts instead.

In my late 30s, I began flying paragliders, then high-performance sailplanes and single-engine airplanes. I can’t glance out the window without studying the sky and wishing I were in it. So, much of my work has wings of one sort or another. As I grow older, I find that my ideas are increasingly rooted in my childhood. *Passage*, a skeletal, wooden glider form inhabited by 1,000 black butterflies, is essentially a stick-built model airplane like those I made as a kid, scaled-up to a wingspan of 33 feet.

RP: *Despite your interest in motion as a subject, few of your works are kinetic. Is that because you combine flight with other compositional elements? You’ve also opted to make aesthetically beautiful works. Is that a motivating force?*

PV: I’m moved by the intrinsic logic and visual rhythms found in nature—for instance, in the dynamic patterns created by a murmuration of swallows in flight. I frequently try to conceal my own hand—to compose in a way that looks accidental, but retains an implicit, considered architecture. I’m not sure that I actually “opt” to make the work beautiful, or that I have much of a choice, really. What interests me is a kind of beauty that comes through the struggle to bring things from a place of damage, darkness, and loss into a new life. I like the idea of “seduction”—engaging the

Above: *Passage*, 2011. Salvaged wood, found aluminum cans, steel, soot, and aircraft instruments, 3.167 x 15.33 x 33 ft. Below: *Ghost*, 2014. Found aluminum cans, wire, and acrylic paint, 80 x 80 x 9 in.



viewer through a compelling visual experience, hopefully allowing some of the embedded ideas to percolate into consciousness.

RP: *You began to use found materials in the 1990s. How did this interest develop, and what things have you learned over the years?*

PV: I was still working with oil paint when I began to feel that our lives are choked with too much manmade “stuff.” I had to reconcile my impulse to make things with the resistance I felt toward our culture of materialism and conspicuous consumption. I started to notice things that no one wanted, the detritus littering my grimy industrial neighborhood—crushed cans, shipping pallets, lost gloves. These things had a pathos about them that spoke to me,

TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MORGAN LEHMAN GALLERY, NY / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JONATHAN FERRARA GALLERY, NEW ORLEANS



Above: *Diaspora*, 2010. Vinyl LP records, turntable, record covers, and wire, dimensions variable. Below: *Oculus*, 2012. Wooden chair, found aluminum cans, wire, and soot, dimensions variable.



and I wanted to find out what they were capable of. I think of this work as “simple alchemy,” an attempt to give these “worthless” objects a new identity, to amplify the stories embedded in them, and to find my own story there as well.
 RP: *What brought you to use found gloves?*

PV: A lost glove is a strangely intimate thing—someone’s hand has lived inside it. The hundreds of gloves that I found on the streets of New York became stand-ins for the people who wore them. In 1995, I hand-stitched a blanket, adding one glove at a time as I found them over the course of the winter. *Shroud* (1995) became a kind of “census” and an image of a ragtag community. “Hands” that were left behind, damaged, and alone came together into an object of protection and warmth. *Nightfall* (2015) takes the same idea, bringing the image of hands together into bird-like wings—fingers become feathers—to enable flight.

RP: *To what extent are your flying forms fantasy objects? How do the found objects fit into that idea? Are they part of a recycling statement, or something else?*

PV: I think of these “flying machines” as vehicles for the imagination. They have a fantastical element, but my intent is to blur boundaries, to make them convincing in mechanical and engineering terms, so that the viewer is uncertain if they are “real” and actually capable of flight. This “verisimilitude” is another form of seduction. When found objects enter this matrix, their associations and subsequent transformation allow stories to be told. *Air Chair* (2005) is built around a wheelchair that I found in a dumpster behind a VA hospital. It was a compelling object in its own right, even before it became capable of carrying its occupant aloft.

RP: *Why did you start using found beer cans?*

PV: In the early 1990s, I wanted to address the topics of addiction and recovery. I started to collect discarded beer cans from the street. Every one of them had been raised to someone’s lips, and they had powerful associations for me. They were run-over, flattened, damaged beyond repair—words that might be used to describe an addict. After months of experimentation, I began to cut them into realistically shaped butterflies, a universal symbol of transformation and rebirth.



Above: *Belt*, 2015. Discarded liquor bottles, belts, and rivets, 8 x 324 x 1.5 in. Left: *Emergency Response Studio*, 2008. FEMA-type trailer, sustainable building materials, and solar and wind power systems, 45 x 28 x 18 ft.

RP: You have also manipulated vinyl LPs to create bird forms.

PV: A year after Hurricane Katrina, I did a show in New Orleans. The works consisted of materials that I salvaged from the Lower Ninth Ward, Lakeview, and St. Bernard's Parish. I found a collection of LP records, caked in mud and warped by the sun, on a slab that had been someone's floor. Later, I began to eye my own collection of LPs—the soundtrack of my youth—and these became *Diaspora* (2010). I was thinking about the influence of this music winging its way into the world.

RP: Earlier, for *Prospect.1 New Orleans*, you built a solar-powered, mobile artist's space in a FEMA trailer, *Emergency Response Studio* (2008).

PV: With *Emergency Response Studio*, I tried to use my visceral reaction to the devastation, loss of life, institutional racism, and incompetence—my anger—as an impetus for something positive. *ERS* posed a question: Rather than the depressing, toxic tin cans provided by FEMA as temporary housing, what could an 8-x-27-foot trailer become with enough imagination and the right materials?

The latest butterfly pieces specifically address environmental issues. *Ghost* (2014), which is a wall installation of white butterfly shapes, depicts 30 extinct or endangered butterfly and moth species. The shapes become legible mainly through their cast shadows. That's what we're left with—shadows of creatures that are gone from our world.

RP: *Marfa* (2013), which features butterflies attached to a ladder and small chair, and *Oculus* (2012), which situates butterfly forms in a residential interior, place the butterflies into different formal contexts.

PV: The butterfly pieces function on multiple levels. First, they are formal, abstract compositions. Each aluminum butterfly is a mark of a certain weight and direction. The works are also curious narratives that nod to the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez. *Marfa* is a strange balancing act, with weathered objects poised in impossible equilibrium, assisted by flocks of soot-blackened butterflies. *Oculus* integrates these same blackened butterflies into the dusty attic dormer of a collector's Victorian home. The installation is a kind of secret theater, a slightly creepy lepidopteran ritual dance that we happen upon by chance.

Butterfly Machine, 2014. Electric and hydroponic components, plants, butterflies, and mixed media, 2 views of installation.

The structure proposed an off-the-grid way to allow displaced artists to remain in place and contribute in a post-disaster setting—something completely missing in New Orleans. When the trailer was exhibited in the Lower Ninth Ward, there were still countless families living in FEMA trailers, three years after Katrina. When these folks walked into *ERS* for the first time, they broke into broad smiles and said things like, “Man, this is what these trailers should be! Are you gonna make more of them? Has FEMA called you yet?”

RP: *Are your bottle works a continuation of your formal explorations concerning line, but with different subject matter?*

PV: Perhaps because I’m so close to it, it doesn’t feel like a departure in either form or subject. *Belt* (2015) is a sort of linear calendar, a segmented accumulation of time and booze, bottle after bottle, day after day—the evidence of addiction bound up with a reference to domestic violence.

RP: *What led you to bring live butterflies into *Butterfly Machine* (2014)?*

PV: *Butterfly Machine* was one of those projects that starts small and rapidly gets out of hand. I wanted to make a figure sculpture that would be inhabited by—and gradually exhale—live butterflies, an image of species interdependence. Rather than purchase live butterflies, I began experimenting with captive breeding of native species in the studio, mentored by an octogenarian lepidopterist, Rudi Mattoni. As I learned about butterfly biology and life cycles—the highlight of my research was a Neo-tropical Lepidoptera Field Course in the Peruvian Amazon—the work began to address issues of species loss, habitat destruction, and climate change.

Over several years, we developed a complex, systematized, indoor environment to hydroponically raise host plants and support colonies of butterflies, essentially a manmade substitute for the natural world. It posited a dystopian vision in which the butterflies’ habitats have been destroyed and butterflies occur as a result of breeding programs, viewable only in controlled envi-



ronments—not unlike some existing conservation efforts. The takeaway for me is that efforts to create artificial bio-systems can’t begin to approach what occurs in the natural world. Human interventions—mass-rearing and other conservation efforts—are absurdly poor substitutes for undisturbed natural habitats. It’s impossible to replicate or replace nature.

After exhibiting the project in New York, during which we raised generations of five species in the gallery, I donated *Butterfly Machine* to a lepidoptera biology lab at the University of Nevada, Reno, where researchers are using it to perform “oviposition preference trials.” This was a surprise. Despite never having taken even a high school biology class, I somehow wound up making an artwork that now enables scientific research in a university laboratory.

RP: *Do you consider yourself an environmental artist?*

PV: In many ways, yes, although I try not to think too much about what kind of artist I am. I’m simply trying to make the things I feel compelled to make, and to do it in an authentic way.

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