

JOHN PATKAU: ARTIST STATEMENT

Metal, steel in particular, may be the centermost emblem and instrument of endurance and utility in the history of human experience. Metals are fundamental material, naturally occurring crystalline structures that fill the majority of the periodic table of elements: our catalog of essential media, the atomic makeup of all found and fabricated things.

While iron is among the most abundant elements in and on the Earth, steel, an alloy of iron, is not elemental. It is the product of centuries of work and refinement, a history that has distinguished aeons. That history, which is a melding of the most basic physical potential of the world and the potential of human intention and curiosity, is inextricable from the presence and significance of metallic forms.

Cut / Drawn is a direct intervention in that history, a disruption, however slight, that acknowledges, challenges and illuminates the integrity of character that abides in one of the most ubiquitous of materials.

Steel is common. But it is so common because it is so extraordinary. Nothing else is as efficient, strong, resilient, lightweight, and affordably produced. Steel is versatile, even stronger in tension than it is in compression, and elastic enough to absorb great stress without fracturing or changing shape. It is tough, even symbolic of toughness. The word steel is used to invoke the girding of oneself in preparation for adversity, and its root lies in the ancient Germanic notion of standing fast. Steel yourself. Hold true. Resist. Even as inner reinforcement, steel is armor. *Cut / Drawn*, however, is like a peek under that armor, a coaxing exposure of the hidden and vulnerable quick.

For all of its strength, we know that the weakness of steel is heat. Steel in the crucible, amorphous and incandescent, may be cast into any shape desired. But the steel with which *Cut / Drawn* begins is already given a particular form: an industrially extruded plate. That form is itself an embodied record of the intentions and uses to which steel is put, without which the medium would not perform as it does. Cutting and drawing describes the intervention we make in its material presence. We cut it from its intended utility and draw out from it an alternative expression of its specific manufacture.

But cutting and drawing is also the radically limited pallet of manipulations that we make to the steel. We cut it precisely and draw it out with enormous tension. That is the sum of our methods.

The process is as delicate and forceful as the results are elaborate and vigorous. It matters how the forms are made because wilfulness and desire are not utterly dominant over the material. It is not beaten into some representation or function. It is not rarified to an abstraction. It is not put to posturing in the service of a concept or comment. It is, however, damaged. It is stressed. It is made to fail and the manner of that failure is the content of the conversation between the artist and the medium. Something is being asked and the only way to get a good answer is by asking a good question.

Our work plumbs the ethos of the steel sheet—its way of being. We subject it to stressful situations wherein its nature is not simply revealed, as it is in the crucible, but is unfurled in response to the challenge. The material does as it must, according to its intrinsic aspect and its conditioned character. As with a person, therein lies its integrity and failing well, as opposed to succeeding beautifully, becomes the proof.

The challenge is mutual. Our work must become harmonic with the integrity of the steel, with its ability to stand fast and its unwillingness to yield gracefully. It tends to hold to the point of utter

failure at its weakest point rather than open up with supple elegance throughout. Minor changes in the pattern of cuts and the application of force have significant impacts on the final results and when we do not fail well it is because of an inadequate understanding of the material. It seems that, because we enter into a dialogue with the material rather than imposing predetermined forms upon it, our process must have an ethos of its own. It must be given to a particular way and hold true to that way, though it is not quite freely chosen. It must be negotiated with elemental levels of material and cultural reality.

Cut / Drawn is a sculptural pursuit. It is a study in form. It is a critical reflection of the fact of materiality and the intentions of design. It is a curious deviation and an open conversation. It is work. It is work in process. It is work in progress.