

Cardstacker

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STANDARD INTERVIEW #1/QUESTION AND ANSWER WITH BRYAN BERG:

1. What were you like as a kid?

I grew up on a farm rural Iowa, USA. Growing up on a farm was very instrumental in my early creativity because I always had the space, plus the odds and ends from farming to create with. On the farm something is always being fixed or built, and it is very powerful for a young person to see that activity all the time.

2. When did you become interested in art?

I've been a creative person all my life. Part of being creative, in my case, has always involved being very observant of so many things. How things are made has always been at the center of these observations.

3. Where did you get the inspiration to use playing cards as your medium?

My grandfather was a bit of a card player, and it was not uncommon for him to build a small house of cards between card games. He was the first person I ever saw build a house of cards, and I was instantly hooked. For me, building with cards was an extension of my early interest in the built environment. Finding a way to build bigger and better houses of cards still requires that I critically observe my constructions to see what works, and why. Eventually I must destroy my work that is only held together by gravity, and I always elect to do this demolition in a way that allows me to watch carefully and learn even more about the strengths and real limits of my structures. This entire process of building up and tearing down houses of cards is something that I refer to as cardstacking.

4. Did you study at an art school?

I received a Bachelor of Architecture from Iowa State University, and a Master of Design Studies from Harvard. My interests in the built environment led me to cardstacking, and cardstacking led me into the pursuit of architecture. Both degrees were a lot of work, and sometimes very difficult. However, being so very interested in the subject matter made it a lot of fun and very fulfilling.

5. When displaying your creations, do you create them on the spot or have them somehow transported?

99.9% of my creations are freestanding, and because of that they have to be created and destroyed on site. Only in the last few years have I been commissioned to actually glue a house of cards together for transport for the first time. There have only been two separate glued commissions I've

worked on in my career. The first glued commission was to create a full-scale replica of the iconic “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign, which I crafted of cards, dice and poker chips. It was built in Santa Fe, and now has a permanent home on the stage at the Rio casino in Las Vegas. The second glued commission was the “Keycard Hotel” which I built last year for Holiday Inn. It was constructed solely out of hotel keycards, and was a complete life-sized furnished hotel room and lobby. It too was constructed here in Santa Fe, then trucked to New York City where it was displayed in a temporary dome on the Seaport, and after that to Washington, DC. It now stands permanently in Nashville. The Keycard Hotel project was very special because people could interact with it: lay in the bed, sit on the toilet, or chat in the lobby. Most people find it interesting that gluing a project together is actually much harder and takes much longer than just building it freestanding. Why? Because in a glued house of cards, each and every card must be precision glued in place to its neighbors by the builder. In a freestanding house of cards, gravity does all the work and makes all the alignments perfect for you.

6. How long does it usually take you to create one of your pieces?

Projects can range from several days to several months. My largest freestanding project to date was built at the Venetian Macao Resort-Hotel in China, the largest casino in the world, during Chinese New Year 2010. It was a replica of the Venetian, Sands, Plaza and other landmarks on the Cotai strip. It took almost two months and 4000 decks of cards to construct. It is my new Guinness Record for the World’s Largest House of Freestanding Playing Cards.

7. Have you ever felt limited or trapped by building with cards or by your style?

Most of my clients request replicas of existing buildings or objects. It would be really fun to construct something simply based on the rules of physics and totally free-form. Everything we see around us in nature is the result of physics, whether it is a tree growing or a mountain crumbling. I think cardstacking could be very beautiful if it were based on fractal geometry, or even an equation.

8. Can you remember the first card building you created and what inspired you to do it?

I was too young to really remember my first serious work. I do remember some of the very early cardstacking projects of my youth and how they were always trying to crumble as I was building them. There was a turning point at about age 17 when I first discovered what I now call the “grid” technique. The grid technique is a very systematic way of assembling the cards into what looks like an array of squares. I quickly learned that this technique was much stronger than the haphazard ways of building, and that the grid could be altered in countless ways to create almost any form imaginable. Having this new set of powerful ideas at my disposal I quickly captured the Guinness World Record for the Tallest House of Freestanding Playing Cards, and cardstacking slowly transformed from a hobby to my profession.

9. Can you tell any interesting stories about specific pieces, subjects, or projects that you’ve worked on?

I was building a huge replica of Cinderella’s Castle in a specially designed tent in front of the real Cinderella’s Castle in Orlando. The castle was complete when a squirrel managed to enter the tent

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and the castle. It appeared that instead of climbing up the outside of my card castle, the squirrel decided to enter the castle via the large main arched entrance. In so doing he managed to severely damage one of the four main columns that supported this most beautiful and delicate part of castle. Disney quickly made provisions for loud music and live traps to try and catch the unwelcome guest but the squirrel was never seen again - thankfully! I was able to repair the damage and the project was a success. It could have been much, much worse.

10. I see that you made it into the GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS. How was the experience for you? Can you take us back to what happened?

The first time I captured a Guinness World Record was 1992 and I was a senior in high school. I had just begun to really master the grid technique I mentioned earlier. This first Guinness Record of mine was 14 feet 6 inches tall, much higher than anything I had ever built before. It is still a very special project to me for that reason. Today, I continue to hold the record and have been commissioned more than a dozen times to break my own record. My current tallest is a much taller tower, at 26 feet. I had no idea when I started, but that first world record was just the beginning of a lifetime of cardstacking.

11. What have been your favorite projects to work on to date? Why?

A few years ago I was commissioned to build the China National Stadium, more commonly known as the Bird's Nest during the Beijing Olympics. The Bird's Nest is an oval, with a screen of columns that slant outward, then curve upward to form a parabolic roof. When I agreed to build it, I was confident I would figure out some way to construct it, but had no idea what that miracle solution would be. To make matters worse, I also had to build the Water Cube and other components of the Olympic Village. I delayed the construction of the Bird's Nest as long as possible by building everything else first so that I would have more time to ponder a solution. Finally I had to start. With crowds of people watching, my first few attempts at the slanted outer screen of columns collapsed like dominoes. Then, finally in desperation, I took a huge risk to use a very fragile technique in a way I had never tried before. There were a few more collapses, but nothing serious. The final result was excellent, and the project was another first because the buildings were illuminated from within by LED lights.

Another favorite project of mine is the Guinness Record for the Tallest House of Freestanding Playing Cards. Each and every time I attempt to break my own Guinness Record, I get to venture out into that area of building that is beyond my expertise and have nothing but guesses to rely on. It's always a little nostalgic because I still get the shakes and jitters when I get clear to the top, like I used to with almost every project. It always helps me to appreciate my limits and how far I've come in my understanding of the material.

12. What are your challenges as an artist?

Beyond the actual logistics and completion of each project, there are always other, sometimes rather amusing elements to the reality of building an installation of this kind in a public space. Because I'm almost always working with playing cards, most people instantly understand what I'm up to. Some think it is the most spectacular thing they have ever seen, some think it amounts to little more than me just playing around. There are the viewers who think I must have hands of steel and a PhD in

structural engineering, and there are those who think I must not have finished high school and live in a van down by the river. I always enjoy watching people watch me work.

13. Do you mind describing the process behind creating one of your card structures?

The grid technique is the most basic of the forms I use. The grid can be built in many different ways to create or support various other forms. It is very possible to build forms that resemble floor slabs, walls and columns, as well as parabolic forms, slopes, angles, solids and voids. From a physics standpoint, the grid supplies the structure based on a repetitive geometry, and the cards themselves, one at a time, begin to accumulate a connected mass - as much as 400 pounds - and can support up to 660 pounds per square foot before they collapse. Mass and geometry combine in my constructions to form what is a bit of an illusion because that many cards, stacked in such an organized way, act more like a brick house and less like a card house. It takes lots of force to knock the largest of projects down, and only the uppermost portions of each structure are fragile because while they have lots of structural geometry, they simply don't have the mass to resist external forces. My techniques are not complicated or secret. At all my public events I conduct workshops for children so they too can exercise their creativity, and experience the thrill of accomplishing something they thought was impossible.

14. Do you feel like your work is evolving?

Each and every project I complete is a learning experience of some kind. Sometimes it's a little discovery, and some times it's a game changer. No matter the scale of the discovery, it's the new ideas and challenges that keep me entertained and help my work move to the next level.

15. What advice would you give a young artist just starting or trying to get started?

Follow your interests, and do what comes naturally. Be yourself. Don't expect instant success. Think positively. Look at the work of others, but realize that sometimes the best ideas might not come from the human element, but are outside in nature or in some totally unrelated realm of data or experience. Have fun, and never be too serious.

16. What can we expect in the future from you?

I'm looking for an opportunity to try and build a project at least 100 feet tall. I know it could be done if I had the space and the time. I'd also like to create some abstract projects. Maybe some real architecture that has some of the mass and structural geometry I use in my card structures. How about a plywood skyscraper? I think it would be a fire hazard and there would be other problems, but it's fun to think about. In terms of travel, through cardstacking I have been able to see amazing cities all over the world in North America, Europe, Asia, and recently for the first time, Africa. Places I have not yet worked are South America, India, or Australia and New Zealand; I'm looking forward to visiting all of them someday.