

The New York Times

Phish's Art Director Calls Four Shipping Containers Home

By PENELOPE GREEN

8/24/2016



Lars Fisk: An Artist in Red Hook

Credit: Matthew Johnson for The New York Times

Lars Fisk has weathered two hurricanes in the four shipping containers he calls home. Once planted on the edge of the Costco parking lot that abuts the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens, the containers were moved last year to a slim, weedy lot in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

To prepare for the next hurricane, Mr. Fisk, 45, a cunning sculptor who has been making public art for two decades — and has been an art director for Phish, the whimsical Vermont jam band, designing their elaborate Bread & Puppet Theater-like spectacles for nearly as long — is considering pontoons.

Stacked two by two, Lego-like, the containers make a modest low-slung one-bedroom dwelling that Mr. Fisk has decorated with homespun touches like a leather Eames lounge chair, a tchotchke shelf over the narrow staircase, folk art on the plywood-clad walls, a rag rug, skylights and hanging plants in macramé slings. A jib crane cantilevers out through steel double doors on the second floor, to hoist furniture and art.

With the doors shut, you would never know the containers had an inner domestic life, which suits the resourceful and thrifty Mr. Fisk, who said he's "fixed up" electricity and water to the site and pays a modest rent for the lot. Most of his house is made from scraps, he added, "though I did spring a bit for some fancy reclaimed flooring from a Pennsylvania farmhouse."

When you make public art, as Mr. Fisk does, you learn to be economical.

"There's always a way to keep suppressing your lifestyle and your overhead and your expectations," he said.

One recent afternoon, Mr. Fisk served lemonade in Mason jars to Max Levai, 28, and Pascal Spengemann, 45, directors at Marlborough Chelsea, the Marlborough Gallery's more youthful outpost on West 25th Street.

They sat in Mr. Fisk's backyard amid Hobbit-ish rounded garden beds that were edged in bricks and tufted with moss and shade plants; clay pots, jauntily askew, were tucked in at odd angles. In the vacant lot behind, weeds had blanketed the rubble underneath into a soft, green berm.

Next month, Mr. Fisk, a sculptor who turns familiar brands and objects — a Con Ed truck, say, or a tree— into plump spherical versions of themselves and deploys them on streets in Boston, New York and Amsterdam, among other cities, is exhibiting inside for a change, with a solo show, called "Mr. Softee," opening Sept. 8 at Mr. Levai and Mr. Spengemann's gallery.

The other day, most of the pieces had been delivered to Chelsea, though an ottoman-size subway ball, gorgeously tiled with the figures 23 (for the 23rd Street Station), was still being worked on in Mr. Fisk's studio, a former garage down the block from his home. Eyeing the piece, Meghan McKee, 42, one of his assistants, said, "Tiles on a round thing, it's not going to be perfect."

The show is New York-centric and distills Mr. Fisk's interests in architecture, construction and signage, consumption, storage and waste. A nickel-plated steel trash-can ball is cherubic, with handles like little wings. A cobblestone ball as big as a side chair has a manhole cover hat. Pea-size pencil balls are like pencil pills, made as meticulously as all the spheres are, by deconstructing and refashioning the object they are appropriating. Mr. Fisk used tiny tools to do so.

"I try to reproduce the thing in every possible way except form," Mr. Fisk said.

The "Mr. Softee" ball, which gives the show its name, is adorable and anthropomorphic, like Thomas the Tank Engine, and comes with soft-serve spigots. "Lot Ball," however, is menacing, a 15-foot-high black asphalt sphere with protruding lozenge-shape curbs inspired by the Costco parking lot that was once Mr. Fisk's backyard.

For seven years, Mr. Fisk was studio and facilities manager at the Socrates Sculpture Park, a former landfill turned arts space, museum and public park, camping out in the donated containers the park uses for storage and work space.

On weekends, he was both horrified and entranced by the Costco scene beyond his kitchen window. He was struck by the contrast between the Socrates campus, an area that still felt, as he said, "rugged, lawless and overgrown," and the big-box store's lot, "this vast, perfectly immaculate stretch of asphalt all chopped up with graphics, the grid of the parking lines, and the hordes of people flowing in and out."



Mr. Fisk's shipping-container home in Red Hook, Brooklyn.
Credit Matthew Johnson for The New York Times

Mr. Fisk did shop there once or twice, for cat food. At Socrates, three feral cats found his containers so comfortable that they moved in. When he trucked the household to Red Hook last year, the cats came, too.

The move was easy: two trucks, one forklift and a day's work to deliver and snap the containers in place. As lovely as it is, the house isn't nearly as elaborate as it had been in Queens, where it had a solarium and a porch. They didn't fit on the truck, "so I edited them out," Mr. Fisk said.

"He had the best view in New York City," Mr. Levai said.

"Everyone has their fancies," Mr. Fisk said. "But it was made out of what was available. The containers were there, the plywood was there."

Mr. Spengemann broke in, concerned that Mr. Fisk was downplaying his domestic chops. "I don't want you to miss the fact that there were some nice touches," he said. "The solarium was filled with rugs and music. I want to stress the aesthetic component. Lars was always like, 'That's a nice couch.' I've been to an artist's loft where there's only an old army cot and no lights and it's all about deprivation. But Lars, he's more like 'Queer Eye' for the junkyard."

Mr. Spengemann and Mr. Fisk have been friends since they attended middle school together in Hanover, N.H. "Lars was the first person I knew who was a peer who said he was going to be an artist," Mr. Spengemann said.

In the 1990s, after graduating from the University of Vermont, Mr. Fisk was living in his studio in Burlington, Vt. Mr. Spengemann lived there, too, camped on a futon in a closet; across the street were the offices of Phish's management company.

One thing led to another and Mr. Fisk, Mr. Spengemann and Rachel Comey, the artist and fashion designer, among others, found themselves performing and building for a Phish concert, at which point Mr. Fisk, for one, tumbled right down the Phish rabbit hole, often with Mr. Spengemann's help.

He went on to design acres of installations: entire cities with giant puppets and arch signage. One installation, "The Garden of Infinite Pleasantries," turned portable toilets into Japanese pagodas in a Teletubby-ish landscape. Another was an enormous clothesline strung from telephone poles and hung with Brobdingnagian clothes that ringed the stage.

In an email, Trey Anastasio, Phish's frontman, wrote that from the get-go, Mr. Fisk had an appreciation for the absurd that fit the band's ethos.

"More recently, at our Superball IX Festival in 2011," he said, "Lars built a large center sculpture out of these storage units. He had been traveling around the country and noticing that there were more and more storage spaces popping up on the landscape. People keep collecting so much junk that they need more and more storage spaces to store it all, until the storage spaces themselves are becoming a new form of junk. We ended up playing a late-night secret set inside of the sculpture."

After 10 years in Burlington, Mr. Fisk moved to New York City to attend Columbia University's M.F.A. program, after which he made a pilgrimage to Joshua Tree, Calif., to work with Andrea Zittel, the artist, on her desert homestead experiment there, gussying up a shipping container or two.

In 2008, the Socrates Sculpture Park, where Mr. Fisk had been an emerging artist fellow and an exhibitor, offered him a job — and a shipping container. It was in irresistible combination, he said.

The first year, he made the container his field office. He rigged up an outdoor solar shower and an outdoor kitchen. "It was pretty crude," he said.

By Year 5, he had added three containers, along with the solarium and a second-floor porch. He now has a waterless toilet (called an Incinolet, it is electric and burns waste into ash) and a claw foot tub. A mosquito net hangs over his handmade bed. When it's hot, he opens the double doors.

Container living isn't ideal, he said, just cheap. Leaks are a constant problem (though Mr. Fisk likes the sound of the rain on steel). So is condensation in winter. "When you're socked with extreme cold on the outside and you get this wallop of a temperature difference," he said, "the walls sweat like hell."

Mr. Fisk has also learned that hot water is a luxury he can't do without, and 30 inches is the minimum width his body can fit comfortably through, be it a stairwell or a doorway. Furthermore, the dimensions of a standard container, roughly 20 by 8 by 8½ feet, are too mingy on their own, which is why he has arranged his two-story house to be two containers wide.

Mr. Fisk is handy by nurture: his father, a retired schoolteacher, built and designed the series of Vermont-style houses the family lived in; his mother worked for Stave, the handmade wooden jigsaw puzzle company in Norwich, Vt., where she began as a puzzle-cutter.

His inspiration, too, he said, was the design build movement of the 1970s. "They talk about, like, 'Hang out on your site in a tent for six months and watch the sun rise every day,'" he said. "It's true that there is much to be learned from just feeling your way in the space."

Later, Mr. Spengemann said, "Lars's lifestyle is sort of predicated on a kind of 'keep it lean and mean' ideal. He wants to avoid the preciousness of the Brooklyn homesteaders. It's not demonstrative. He takes some pride in being resourceful, and it sets him apart."

In 1996, the year the two men met the Phish folk, Mr. Fisk made his first sphere. "Streetball" is a gray concrete ball encircled by a broken yellow line. It is a precursor of sorts to "Lot Ball," the idea of "pavement as world," as Mr. Fisk put it. It's what got him interested in ideas about confounding perspective and playing with familiar American tropes.

Some years ago, one of Mr. Fisk's UPS spheres was living on the lawn of its owner, Chris Sharp, a sculptor and friend of Mr. Fisk's from Shelburne, Vt.

Like all his work, the piece is instantly recognizable; made from riveted metal, it's a deep UPS brown, and sports a yellow UPS logo. One day, Mr. Sharp was surprised by a UPS driver who knocked on Mr. Sharp's door and offered to remove the ball.

As Mr. Fisk recalled: “He was very apologetic, saying that he was sorry that this had ended up on his property, that it must have fallen off the truck or something, and that he would send someone by to retrieve it. Chris tried to explain that, no, this wasn’t the case, that it was an artwork that belonged there. But the driver just couldn’t quite grasp that notion and insisted that it wasn’t a problem for them to remedy the situation.”

Mr. Fisk is still tickled by this encounter. He likes for his spheres to behave not so much like works of art, but more like oddities, as he put it, “that are somehow familiar and at the same time nonsensical.”

A version of this article appears in print on August 25, 2016, on page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: Artful Life in Four Containers.