

DETROIT INTERVIEW June 9, 2008

1. Ellen, you were born and grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, studied in Massachusetts, lived in New York and New Jersey and now you are mostly in London. Personal, perhaps also collective memories seem to play a significant role in your work. Is Detroit, your biographical connection to this city in any way reflected in your works?

Yes, I think the strongest influence was my trips to the DIA with my father every Sunday. We always looked at the same 5 pieces with his same commentary. At the Diego Riviera murals, he talked about the political dissent and censorship of this work; at Frans Hals "Laughing Boy", he would comment (in Yiddish) that at least he doesn't have a sour face; at Pieter Bruegel the Elder "The Wedding Dance", he was impressed by the depiction of a joyous occasion with such abundant detail; at Rembrandt "The Woman Taken in Adultery," he would say that it is not an interesting subject for me, then he would show me how light described the figures and expressed drama; at the Van Gough painting he would tell me about seeing "Starry Night" at MoMa when he was a child, how the swirling stars made you feel physically dizzy, the way you feel looking up at the sky. Then we would go under the parachute and eat ice cream. Our routine never varied.

Now I realize his tour is the basis for my art making - which is largely political in intent, figurative, highly detailed, dramatic, emotional, and contains adult subject matter. Developing a sense of joy has been more difficult for me. My work is humorous, but also quite disturbing. I have been struggling to create an epiphany-like meditative state, but I think I am only beginning in the last few years to reach this point in my work. I have thought a lot about the art historical relationship to tragedy in Western Culture and have been looking at Eastern Culture for other artistic approaches. Still, it is natural for me to express sorrow and loss. I think this is in part because I grew up the first generation after the Holocaust. There was a strong sense of mourning in the greater Detroit Jewish community. From an early age in religious school and amongst family I heard survivors' horrific eyewitness accounts - memory was considered a duty to history and future survival. Also, our Rabbi, Morris Adler was murdered in front of the congregation. And there was social unrest in Detroit, racism - the race riots. Anti-Semitism was, for all practical purposes institutionalized in Detroit, given Henry Ford's relationship to Hitler, his anti-Semitic treatises and hiring practices, and Father Caughlin's public sermons.

Most of my work is informed by the concerns brought up by these historical circumstances. But I also have the counter-memory of a utopian outlook, the architecture and river, the lakes and natural beauty I grew up with.

2. Do you still have a connection to the city one way or another?

My family still lives in the Detroit area. In England, I am virtually heroized because I am from Detroit - this led me to making the Northern Soul documentary "Whitby Weekender". Many Northern Soulers consider Detroit to be their spiritual homeland, their Jerusalem. Mainly Northerners are working class - historically employed in factories and industries such as mining, steel and shipbuilding. The Northern Soul Movement specifically identified with the Black working class in Detroit. Dancing on the weekends to soul music became something to look forward to, it gave people joy and dignity, and in an extremely rigid macho culture it particularly gave men an emotional outlet. As an act of solidarity, Northern Soul adopted the Black Panther power fist as their logo.

3. Tell me about the works you're showing in Considering Detroit. What considerations went into selecting these works?

So, "Whitby Weekender" is related to Detroit - The Northern Soul movement began in the late sixties when a Northern dj brought back binned soul records that had not become commercially successful in America. He played these songs like an anthem - these singers were like themselves, people who were greatly talented but were kept down by the capitalist system. This led to a massive subculture - people came from all over the North on the weekends to dance to these tracks (beginning Friday night through Sunday evening). This was the first all night dance culture in England. A particular dance style evolved (borrowing from karate, ballet, kung fu, folk dancing), particular drugs (amphetamines), and particular fashion. While the American musicians were unaware that their music was being listened to, in Northern England they had huge followings, they were like superstars.

Surprisingly, forty years later Northern Soul still thrives, but as one can see from the video no one has grown younger. As well as dancing and friendship, aging is one of the themes our video addresses.

4. I read that you started out as a painter, but stopped painting sometime in the Nineties to concentrate mostly on video and drawing. What made you stop painting?

Mainly for space and mobility. I had a 3000 square foot loft in Jersey City - I was painting on a large scale and used up all my storage space by 1993. These paintings grounded me, when I really wanted to travel. Also, at that time, my friends, artists in my generation, were trying to push the limits of formalism. This experimentation was partially due to our personal economics. And we were attempting to address delusions formed by the art market in the 80s such as: the larger the painting is, the more expensive the linen is, the better the stretchers are - the more important, powerful and masterful the work is. The artists I knew were searching for potency through fragile, impermanent means. At AC Project Room Joseph Grigely, an artist who is deaf, began to display the scraps of paper on which people had written conversations with him. At 303 Gallery Karen Kliminick created magical incantations through her "scatter art". At Paula Cooper, Tony Feher exhibited mayonnaise jars filled with colored water. At Fawbush Gallery, Paula Hayes created ephemeral gardens. At 303 Gallery Lauren Szold made massive spill paintings on the floor out of colored pancake batter. At Feigen, Gregory Green constructed bombs from anarchist recipes. I began illustrating my private diary stories on xerox paper, then blowing them up into huge public wall drawings.

5. Your drawings vary dramatically in size and content. Most of the sketchbook-sized drawings I saw depict sexual situations, drawn in a crude cartoonist style with heads sometimes exchanged for bunny heads, and phrases like "We are free" and "I can be joyful" here and there added. On the one hand they reminded me of drawings a bored adolescent student would draw in the back of a notebook during math class, but also of the painfully expressive-visionary drawings of Antonin Artaud. Who are the protagonists in your works on paper?

I think my artworks can really be misconstrued.

These rabbit drawings are from a series "Remember The Fourteen Days and Nights" (1997). The drawings were the central component in a solo exhibition at Bregenz Kunstverein with massive wall drawings, live music, and videos. Also, the 14 drawings, together with a personal letter, quotations by Clarice Lispector, a poetic text by Deborah Drier, and an essay by Simon Maurer, formed a book - a philosophical discourse. The book is part of a series of handmade artist books - in the prior rabbit book "I keep Dreaming the Same Dream Over and Over," 'Alice' chases the rabbit again and again down the hole, it turns into the nursery rhyme about a little girl watching a hunter trying to shoot a rabbit dead, she rescues the rabbit, her soul mate, ending with them making love - in perfect union. Like a school lesson, this work is made on children's paper. Strangely, after my artist talk at Moca, my older cousin told me that after seeing Rabbi Adler murdered, I told her that the "Rabbit" had been shot.

The next story begins with Peter Rabbit trapped in the garden: 14 days and nights are drawn as a karma sutra of love making. It is an experiment - through creating affirmative images can one circumvent misfortune, can an auspicious favorable life cycle be born, retained? So phrases like, "we are free" and "I can be joyful" may seem casual and silly out of context, yet they are the particular construct of this naive utopian desire. They are ironic, but more so, they express sincere hope.

This experimental fiasco is also re-featured in one chapter of "Circus Lives From Hell" (2004-8), the 81 page drawing script that I am currently showing

at Participant Inc. This epic story ends with the question, "Is tragedy a choice?"

In reality, I am painstakingly exacting in my work. It's true it is emotionally charged, but it's not random or quickly executed. Mainly, I am trying to convey certain ideas - philosophical, psychological, spiritual states of being. I spend a lot of time organizing, composing, measuring, changing, shifting, searching, very very slowly developing the work. For me, drawing/editing, is like alchemy or a mathematical equation. At its best, some kind of natural (or unnatural) force is generated.

6. Some of your drawings are small and intimate whereas others are quite large, even mural size, although still depicting personal imagery and text. How do you decide on motifs and scale in your drawings?

Around 1993, I moved from making large-scale paintings to small secret diary stories which I didn't really consider artwork. I showed them to my feminist sexual study group as an example of "my desire". (Beth Jaker, Deborah Drier, Pat Hearn, Marilyn Minter, Jan Avgikos, Amanda Prosser) People strongly related to these intimate experiences and they convinced me to exhibit them. The work was contextualized within the framework of feminism - that the personal is political. But I feared that the work was also feminine in that it was discreet and diminutive. I expanded the stories directly onto the walls and ceiling of my studio, and then into public institutions and galleries. I would hang the smaller works on top of the wall drawings and present the books on pedestals. In this way the scales played off one another. The wall drawings seemed to engulf people, I felt that imaginatively people entered the work (like Alice through the looking glass) - while concurrently in the smaller work people were drawn further into their inner self through its privacy and detail.

Now, I rarely make wall drawings, I like to thoroughly develop the drawings in seclusion, but I scale them for specific exhibitions. Because each gallery is different, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to orchestrate the space.

7. You stated in earlier interviews that you grew up watching a lot of Walt Disney films. You have appropriated fairy tale characters like Bambi and Snow White in your drawings, as well as videos, but often you use these fictional characters in contrast with other rather dark forces either from real life or fiction. Could you talk a bit about the relationship of fiction and life, or popular imagery and personal experience in your work?

Inside a narrative, you suspend disbelief -- fiction and reality become the same. In current "reality," popular culture stands in for personal experience and vice versa.

8. What, if there is, is the relationship between your drawings and videos?

They are the same to me, different tools. But drawing is solitary, sometimes lonely. Video can be more communal.

9. I would like to ask you about your earlier videos, which you started making around 1995. (I must say that I only saw short excerpts of about five shorts together with their summary on the internet 1.) In videos like Madame Bovary's Revenge, Within Heaven and Hell and Remember Me you use footage of idiosyncratic European and American films, which you aggressively edit or, as you have said create relationships of image, sound and text. Could you talk a bit about your relationship with "cinema auteur" in general and what it is that you were looking for in the characters in those films specifically?

Empathy. Representations of myself and specific personal relationships that simultaneously represent wider cultural implications.

For example, Gena Rowland's character in "Woman Under the Influence" (John Cassavetes 1972-4) is sensitive, creative, openhearted and misunderstood. While her husband's violence against her (Peter Falk) is considered normal, her free-spirited exuberance is considered insane. In the film she is institutionalized. I use parts of this remarkable film in "Remember me" and "Be My Baby". In "Bambi's Beastly Buddies", Bambi and skunk embody innocence, vulnerability and love. I lit Bambi on fire to a refrain from Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," on the morning of May 11, 2004, when I read that Nick Berg, an American telecommunications contractor, was beheaded by Islamic militants on live video. I felt Bambi's incineration symbolized the times we live in.

I montage with documentary, Hollywood, art house, and independent cinema ... not cinema auteur per se. While "aggressive" may imply disrespect, actually I edit with reverence, because I have been greatly impacted by the films. Like Gyson and Bourroughs cut-ups, (through editing) I am trying to reflect deeper into unconscious meanings.

But again, I think artwork can be misconstrued, particularly on the Internet. I just looked at that New Media site (which has recently been translated into English) - the plots of my videos are completely mistaken, even invented. Speaking of fiction ... I wondered if the writer had watched the pieces? Had understood English? - I wonder if the erotic charge in my work creates fantasies in peoples' heads that they then translate into subjective fact? i.e. fiction. For example, a recent academic essay on feminist artists states that before I made "Madame Bovary's Revenge" (actually, my first video) I was a porn star starring in my own pornography videos. Sadly, this is false history.

10. You also create videos for which you shoot original footage. Often, you either appear in them yourself or with your voice off-screen. In how far are these characters you create different from the characters you use from existing films?

Usually my positioning (the inclusion of myself) is practical, resulting from force of circumstances - I am available. In the film I am working on now, "Pinochet Porn," I play the maid and my friend Andy plays the mother because we only have one other female "actress" (Lia Gangitano plays the leading role). But I do like to tell stories (and I'm good at it). Often in my writing, video, drawings and performances, I begin with a personal story and end with my own reflection. In this way, my artwork is a private experience. But it is not necessarily autobiographical. It is intended to reach out to the audience - a catalyst to their intimate thoughts and experiences. As an artist I find I am the vehicle for this.

11. In a recent show, ("Lost In Jersey City", FA Projects London, 2003), you collaborated with Joseph Grigely who is known to the Detroit audience through his shows at the now defunct Revolution Gallery. While both of you lived in New Jersey in the early Nineties, your ways crossed often and you started having written conversations (Grigely is deaf), which lead to this show about friendship and romantic wastelands, a description which also relates well to Detroit. Could you describe your relationship to places, or spaces you experience and how they relate to your work?

The videos I have made since I came to England have no explicit sexuality, as this kind of openness is completely antithetical to the culture. In New York, there is an entire developing history and oeuvre for sexually explicit works, a language that speaks to woman's role in society, to the AIDS crisis, to gender evaluations, to love This dialogue mainly does not exist in the UK, except in a few exceptional cases (Brian Chalkley, Dawn Mellor, Wolfgang Tillmans ...) Living in London my work has become more dark, morbid, eventually cynical and hopeless. In "Whitby Weekender," I wanted to create a video that would purify my spirit. I am the interviewer, so the piece is structured by my anthropological viewpoint as an (American) foreigner in England.

"Bambi's Beastly Buddies" was begun in 1999 in Salzburg, home of Mozart, the Sound of Music, the Salzburg Music Festival, and the KZ Salzburg-Maxglan Concentration Camp. I first exhibited "Bambi's Beastly Buddies" in Bregenz, Vorarlberg, which had been the Nazi headquarters. The piece is

about loss of faith and belief, the decline of civilization.

12. Besides the project with Grigely, you often collaborate with other artists. What do you enjoy about it?

Friendship, love, companionship, learning from each others skills - synchronizing into one entity.

Being an artist can be very internal and isolating, it demands a lot of hours alone thinking and working. I spent most of this past winter on a ladder drawing, not going out, hardly answering the phone.

In the end though, I need a lot of feedback to develop my art. All my friends become involved in helping me think about my work. At this point, it becomes a collaborative process again.

13. Your new video Whitby Weekender, which is shown in "Considering Detroit", has a somewhat documentary feel to me. It however continues to use non-verbal language and rhythm, among other characteristics. In light that you do sometimes quite provocative work around your own sexuality, violence and broken dreams (which resulted also in issues of censorship that you had to deal with), this work appears to have a more ironic quality. the characters are now Mr. and Mrs. Normal rather than Cinderella and her Prince. What or who is Whitby?

Whitby is a coastal town in Yorkshire England. Dracula was written there, although this is irrelevant to our film. In July 2005 my friend John Cussans invited me to go to the Whitby Northern Soul Togetherness Weekender. It was John's 40th birthday - some of his friends from London came up, as well as his childhood friends from York who he had been dancing with since he was around twelve years old. I was particularly interested in going, being from Detroit but never having seen a real Northern Soul event.

The piece is a documentary, It contains a dance lesson, candid conversations with John's friends, and an exclusive interview with soul singer Alexander Patton ("A Lil Lovin Sometimes" 1966). There is no ironic intention, the opposite, actually. I find the men I interview are quite natural and open - many of the dancers in the film are extremely masterful, they have been dancing to these tracks since the late sixties. For all this, I find the piece quite uplifting.

14. You have been living in the U.K. for a few years. What as an artist do you find there that is different from the United States?

Everything, It is such a complicated society. I guess I like that England is in part Socialistic.

15. What are you currently working on?

An exhibition at Participant Inc, New York.

In part, (the work in) the exhibition is a meditation on death; I have been overwhelmed this year by the tragic losses of my two closest friends and several artist colleagues whose lives were cut short.

The main piece in the exhibition is an 81 page drawing, which is intended simultaneously to be a film script - a soap opera narrative about 5 young people growing up during the Pinochet regime, sequencing their lives until adulthood. I am beginning to work on the film this summer: shooting the dramatic excerpts which I plan to combine with hand drawn animation and documentation. The piece also relates to my growing up in Detroit (during this time period) - it has a chapter devoted to the Pontiac Unicycle Club.

1(in a cabin in a woods by a window a little girl stood saw a rabbit hopping by knocking at her door help me help me help me said or the hunter shoot me dead come little rabbit come with me happy we shall be)