
INTERVIEWS: LAUREN ADAMS AND ALLISON SMITH

Washington University's Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts established the Henry L. and Natalie E. Freund Visiting Artist program in fall 2008 as a partnership between the School's College and Graduate School of Art and Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. The Freund Visiting Artist program begins with a call for faculty to nominate visiting artists. The selected artist collaborates in the classroom with the nominating faculty, who then curates an exhibition of the visiting artist's work at the Kemper Art Museum.

The inaugural season of the Freund Visiting Artist program was launched with Lauren Adams, assistant professor in the Sam Fox School's College and Graduate School of Art, in conjunction with contemporary artist Allison Smith, who made periodic visits to campus from San Francisco, where she currently teaches at the California College of the Arts. Their semester-long collaboration included the participation of twelve Sam Fox School BFA and MFA students enrolled in the course "Past Perfect, Present Tense" taught by Adams, as well as Washington University's collaborative print workshop Island Press and the staff at the Kemper Art Museum.

The following questions were posed by the Museum to Lauren Adams and Allison Smith about this program and the culminating exhibition, Allison Smith's Allison Smith Needle Work.

LAUREN ADAMS

What made you want to be involved in the Freund Visiting Artist program? What does this mean for you?

LA: I wanted to be involved in this project because I saw a unique institutional effort to invite collaborative teaching practice into the Sam Fox School's contemporary arts curriculum. As an artist and educator, I was also interested in working as a curator, developing a project locally with a visiting artist, with the help of student input, and addressing historical and political issues. I have curated some in the past, mostly in nontraditional art spaces like a clothing label factory in Pittsboro, North Carolina, and an empty tailor shop in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but I am aware of the subtleties and stipulations in the practice of professional curators, and I do not think of myself as a professionally trained or titled curator. Perhaps this would be more of an issue if I were curating an exhibition of an artist's existing work rather than participating in a work in progress. As it turned out with this project, I found myself in the roles of facilitator, co-teacher, and collaborator as I worked with Allison to help envision and produce her new body of work, and collaborated with students and Island Press.

What inspired you to propose Allison Smith as the visiting artist for this program?

LA: I most recently saw Allison's work at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That project, *Jugs, Pitchers, Bottles, and Crocks, Household Linens and Yardage in Stock* (2008), presented a contemporary response to historical Southern utilitarian objects, combining slogans related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the overall war on terror. I sensed an attention to the details of craft history and a willingness to fuse political concerns with everyday material culture. Other works by Allison, like *Pewter Sporks* (2001) and *Candlelight Bulbs* (1997–2002), also spoke to me. I grew up in the "New South," a place where colonial history collides with strip mall culture, and where global capitalism has almost wholly replaced a sense of regional "Mom-n-Pop" economies. I also identified Allison as a sister-in-arms, a member of a loose network of young artists around the country who are reflecting on American political and social histories and incorporating traditional craft forms into art practices.

I wanted to include Allison in a proposal for an exhibition at the Kemper Art Museum because I felt her concerns include a unique way of looking back at history to comment on the present. I felt this would be particularly appropriate in a Midwestern university museum context. I am

also a big fan of the politics evident in Allison's work, where feminism, colonialism, and American history play parts in a story that asks how we got here, and what is to be done now.

Could you comment more on the relation of Allison Smith's work to your own work as an artist, and to questions about art practices you are also exploring as an educator with your students?

LA: There are several themes in Allison's work that concern my own studio practice and artistic vision. We are both interested in ideas involving historical and contemporary politics, the aesthetics and evolution of ethnic craft histories, domesticity and utilitarian items, and objects made during wartime, either as implements of war or in reaction to the terror of conflict and combat. Allison's work over the past several years has employed elements of display and representation in an installation context, mixing the domestic display tactics of curio cabinets and vernacular architecture with concerns of the marketplace or store. Her strategies encompass performance, activism, documentary photography, and the creation of objects that straddle the line between props and utilitarian items. In many ways, her work positions the gallery or museum as a theatrical stage, borrowing forms found in historical settings such as the military encampment, the town square, the market hall, the craftsman's workshop, and the living history museum.

Like Allison, I see great opportunity in mining the past for evidence of the development of political ideologies, such as French toile and regional American textiles, which historically featured Revolutionary-era and Civil War-era American scenes, and stretched well into the twentieth century, depicting, for instance, scenes from the film *Gone with the Wind* and important moments in Eisenhower's presidential term, to name a few popular examples. For quite some time I have viewed traditional decorative surfaces as intimately related to the history of painting and image-making. Working primarily as a painter, I interpret the evolution of hand crafts to reflect notions of modernity, and this provides a context in which to position a contemporary understanding of political propaganda as images with historical and social import. Allison's sculptural work functions for me as a take on some of the same themes. The artistic attitude of this approach involves a liberal use of the "copy," and a willingness to borrow from historical imagery and objects as a strategy for highlighting discrepancies and collusions between past and present conditions. I wanted to provide Allison's work as a model for the students to use for exploring archival research through object and image copying and performative reenactment.

How do you see the Visiting Artist program complementing or augmenting curricula on campus?

LA: The University's Sam Fox School has a strong tradition as an art school, so the Freund Visiting Artist initiative can be seen as a unique, though not unprecedented, way in which the College and Graduate School of Art reach out to artists from around the country and the world to foster new ideas in the local and regional Midwestern context. With the School's new focus on interdisciplinary studies, Allison's work seemed a particularly appropriate platform for conversations about performance, installation, and archival research, and the residency offers a unique opportunity for a different and multifaceted collaboration. Also, the opportunity to offer a new class, "Past Perfect, Present Tense," was a wonderful way to expand the School's focus on interdisciplinary studies that address vital theory and artistic models present in the contemporary art world, as well as provide a chance to look at how current culture reflects and absorbs historical issues.

The structure of the class followed the course of delving into one topic, or set of topics, and making a series of works related to it. Students in this course were engaging in a model of what you might call "slow art," somewhat different from a typical undergraduate class that asks them to focus on materials (ceramics, paint) and shift their conceptual framework

for each assignment. This course invited students to select a single research topic and create a variety of works in various media connected to that topic. Participants included painters, performance artists, sculptors, photographers, and more; the underlying unity derived from how the students looked at history and collections, using archival research as a lens through which to explore collecting (amassing documentation), making (the physical), and performance (the body and its relationship to studio practice). Accordingly, the class was divided into three sections: "The Visible Collection," "Making Meaning," and "Performativity and Process."

How were students involved in the production and development of *Needle Work*, and, conversely, how did the course "Past Perfect, Present Tense" model the methods and practices of Allison Smith?

LA: Students participated in Allison's project through two venues: either as members of the "Past Perfect, Present Tense" class, or through Island Press as printmaking majors. Both of these student groups were afforded a unique window into Allison's work and the role of the Kemper Art Museum as a university museum. Working toward a museum exhibition created a kind of "learning laboratory" whereby students could witness the growth of a project from its roots in archival research to the resolution of installation, public display, and publication.

Hands-on participation included a sewing bee, where students, using kits that Allison compiled out of found objects, made masks for the mask collection component of *Needle Work*. On another occasion (Halloween, coincidentally), Allison invited students to wear and perform the masks in the studio for the staged photographs that comprise another aspect of the project. Students also participated in the printing of the parachutes at Island Press. Exposure to the entire process profoundly influenced class discussions and provided an important point of reference for students as they worked toward their final projects.

The students' own work began with presentations of their nascent research as a "Visible Collection," a grouping of documents, images, and text relating to their chosen topics, which they formulated at the beginning of the semester. In "Making Meaning," students then looked at ways in which working with their hands—drawing, sewing, ceramics, collage—could influence the conceptual content of their research focus. We looked at the ways in which making copies of existing objects or images becomes a strategy for appropriation, in which artistic attitude defines the relationship between archival original and contemporary response. Allison's work making masks was an influential part of this process. Then, students looked to her performative photographs, as exhibited in *Needle Work*, as a way to explore "Performativity

and Process," which is about engaging the body and historical narrative, and can become an act of artistic ownership during the performative equivalent of the copy: reenactment. Shadowing Allison's studio practice allowed the students to see up close and firsthand the opportunities and challenges of this method as encountered by a professional artist even as they were applying the same strategies to projects of their own.

How do process and content—methodology and subject matter—interface in this particular pedagogical model?

LA: Some of the issues Allison's work explores—such as the very contemporary question of how to conduct research when your subject matter is spread across a vast global diaspora of war memorials and craft museums—became an opportunity to discuss how artistic research is not always a straightforward trajectory. In the case of the gas masks for *Needle Work*, for instance, Allison's research used the elusive provenance of Internet images as the basis for creating an alternative body of work, inspired by and critically investigating the history of craft during times of war. The exploration of this issue then becomes an object lesson for the art student in today's studio classroom, offering ways to consider how artistic creativity can borrow, and sometimes depart from, scientific research strategies. More than just an artistic strategy, this is

also a pedagogical strategy, one that invites students to sustain an investigation over several months, looking for larger patterns and narratives that can open into idiosyncratic, and sometimes conflicting, stories. As a professor, I am interested in how this aspect of art pedagogy can mirror issues faced by professional artists, when in-depth research opens up new worlds, and sustained and focused questioning of one set of topics leads the artist (or student) on a stimulating pursuit of question and answer.

What resulted from the students' own explorations during this course?

LA: Student research topics included the 1904 Olympic Games, held in St. Louis on Washington University's own Francis Field; the history of television and media violence and its presence in contemporary American society; the evolution of electrical technology and human attempts to harness energy power; a personal archive of band flyers and other underground culture ephemera; the role of expressive mark-making and the development of a personal visual language through a lifetime's handwriting as evinced in painting strategies; and Bloody Island, a strip of land in the Mississippi River between St. Louis, Missouri, and East St. Louis, Illinois, which served as a politically neutral site where American politicians from the nineteenth century would meet to duel as a way to settle scores (and also as a place

where African Americans could go to learn reading and writing, when such activities were either frowned upon or outright illegal).

The students' research processes included personal interviews (with Washington University professors and other academic archivists); library research (including archival national newspapers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); and site visits to such places as the Missouri Historical Society (here in St. Louis), the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago, and Pompeii, Italy (to research frescoes). In every case, it was important for the students to reach out to various sources for evidence and alternative perspectives.

Additionally, while the students were observing Allison's process develop toward an exhibition at the Kemper Art Museum, they were also working toward public display of their own work: the course culminates in an exhibition of the students' projects at Washington University's Des Lee Gallery, an off-campus gallery space in downtown St. Louis, bringing together the research, making, performance, and display in a final significant moment.