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For Lauren Adams, Female Artists Need to Learn to Trust Themselves

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When she was a teenager, Lauren Adams' father took her to see a show of artist Cindy Sherman's work at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. that would open her eyes and determine her path in life. What Adams came to realize that day at the Hirshhorn was that Sherman and other artists like her were, "Speaking a truth that I very much wanted to be a part of. Prior to that, I had considered myself a fairly good draftsman, in so far as I could paint and draw what I saw really well. But after that trip to the Hirshhorn, I became a truth seeker, which is what art ultimately is all about for me."

Lauren Adams was born in Snow Hill, North Carolina, a rural farming community where, for generations, her family raised pigs. From this community and her family she would develop a strong work ethic and a sense of responsibility. Her work on the farm, for example, would contribute to a heightened political awareness of animal rights and to clarification of the role of the South in any contemporary understanding of the United States as a whole.

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"I am not a Southern apologist," Adams told me, "but when people not from the South talk and think about the South, their ideas often don't quite compute with the South that I know and grew up in. I oftentimes feel the burden to clarify that the South I know, and knew, was and is a very diverse place of African Americans and white southerners. This diversity has only been enriched in recent years by the addition of a rising Hispanic population. Yes, it is true that with the South there is an incredibly important history, fraught with racial conflict that is tied up to how our country came to be, but I oftentimes feel that it is too easy for people not from the South to dismiss the South."



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Adams would attend public high school in North Carolina before making her way as an undergraduate to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she would eventually graduate with a dual major in studio art and art history. As an undergraduate, Adams reports taking amazing classes at UNC, and spending long hours in the University's gorgeous art library. At UNC, Adams would end up studying colonialism and gender and feminist art which would have a long-lasting impact on her work. These interests expressed themselves forcefully in her senior year when the artist along with two other undergraduate students took over and mounted two shows ('Loom' and 'Loom II') at an old abandoned textile factory where they invited artists to make work for the site. This experience would lead Adams to start making site specific and interdisciplinary work, of which her undergraduate thesis exhibition, consisting of a series of self-portraits that would not include any images of herself, is an example.

"I was looking at how female artists used the absence of the body to describe the presence of the self. In my thesis, there were oyster shells on the floor where I was riffing on Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus'. I also had a huge, blue old cabinet that was lit from within when you opened up the doors. There were also mason jars filled with bathwater and pork fat. I was thinking then of the saying in the South that oil and water don't mix, and I guess what I was doing in this work was trying to understand myself as a woman and my place in the South."

What Lauren Adams' undergraduate thesis work underscores is the parallel practices of painting and installation that would become dominant in her work.

Following her graduation from the University of North Carolina, Adams would do a series of odd jobs before she got a grant to go on a three-month trip to Europe. While abroad, she came to understand that European artists seemed more comfortable working in an abstract language while Americans tended to use a more figurative and allegorical language.

Returning to the United States after her time in Europe, Adams enrolled in the MFA Program at Carnegie Mellon University, a three-year-long MFA program which attracted all kinds of artists because of its focus on technology and social practice. At Carnegie Mellon, her practice would become increasingly site specific and community based. Following what she calls a "terrible thesis review" Lauren Adams would go on to mount, via a graph that showed the American GDP level, a show that foreshadowed the 2007-08 economic crash in the United States.

Says the artist, "My MFA thesis work examined the relationship between capitalism and communism by looking at the way both capitalism and communism is propagandized. In effect what I was trying to do was understand the American project. In one of the pieces in my show, for example, I utilized a dry gourd and had a former phone sex worker read from a transcript of conservative radio show host, Rush Limbaugh, to show the intermingling of femininity, popular culture, conservative thinking and the American economy. In my show, someone could pick up this decorative item that can be found in so many homes in the South that was repurposed as a phallic, bulbous and sexual symbol in the same way that I feel that capitalism can still be today. Capitalism is very attached to the body."



Labor and the decorative, as well as interrogating history, remain ongoing investigations in her more recent work where current projects involve Elizabethan colonialism and the legend of the Lost Colony. These preoccupations can also be seen quite strongly in the work she has done with what is popularly called chinoiserie — objects of decoration in Western art that imitate Chinese motifs and techniques. What she aimed to show in this work is how the whole concept of chinoiserie is a Western European concept not based on the reality of the East but aiming to speak for and about the East. In this work, Adams tries to show that Western chinoiserie “is not about Asian anything”. She does this by inserting hand-painted protest signs sourced from women in the textile industry into the chinoiserie wall paper that she is making.

In other works, Adams has critiqued colonialism in the United States by engaging such questions as why Americans speak English; and looking at the ways in which British culture is inherently capitalist. She has also looked at early American myth-making and critiqued specifically the American dream and the ethic of “just pulling one’s self up by your boot straps” that remains part of the American ethos. As such, there is a strong element of appropriation and intervention in her work.

Looking at Lauren Adams’ amazing body of work, a viewer is clearly engaging with an artist at the heights of her intellectual and art-making powers as well as an artist with a sharp critical mind. Her work, at first blush, might appear decorative and decidedly simple, but is conceptually rigorous and resonant. Lauren Adams does not shy away from the difficult questions of how Americans and Western Europeans think of themselves and the faulty logic that can oftentimes be implicated in this thinking.

So, what advice then would Lauren Adams offer to a young woman who is contemplating a career as a visual artist?

“Work really, really hard, yes,” the artist offers, “But make your art your play. Rule breaking is very important. Do not always listen to the advice you are given because no one person will have the right path for you. Your path might very well be circuitous and part of the joy of being a visual artist is figuring out your path yourself. This figuring out is part intuition and part gut so it is important that as an artist you learn to trust yourself!”

Until next time.

PHOTO GALLERY

Art by Lauren F. Adams



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