



Allison Schulnik: Salty Air
Mark Moore Gallery
May 26 – July 7, 2012

Allison Schulnik, a native of Southern California, was born into a family of artists. She too is an artist who, in addition to painting, earned her degree in animation from Cal Arts, works in clay, has a dance background, and is also a musician. Her work is often noted for its recurring figures such as cats or hobo clowns that run through her thickly textured paintings and clay-based animation.

What's striking about the critical texts written of Schulnik's *Salty Air* is the emphasis on linear narrative and ragtag characters paired with a complete avoidance of the words vulva or vagina. One reviewer opted for a brief mention of the more subtle "genitals." While the show also includes some of Schulnik's signature hobo clowns (in the form of sailors), and some cats, it is her crabs and porcelain shell sculptures -- vaginal forms which are occasionally glazed with menstrual blood -- that are by far the most arresting works in *Salty Air*. Schulnik intuitively taps into the castration anxiety present in the Hans Christian Andersen coming of age story that inspires the show (*The Little Mermaid*), by invoking this kind of agitated vaginal imagery. In that version, the mermaid's tongue is lopped off, and, with her long tail divided in two, she bleeds for the first time. Haunted by the pain of her phantom limb as she walks on land in desperate pursuit of the object of her sexual desire, the story ends with her unrequited obliteration into sea-foam.

Schulnik's post-transformation mermaids present swollen full frontal vulvas, painted in thick, fleshy tones which recur throughout this exhibition. These sweaty, blistering, and barnacled mermaid bodies display their wounded sex and awkward, barely functional toes. They have clownish clumps of makeup reminiscent the hobo-clown-sailors that when paired with the figures' vulnerable, nubile posture, read like masks of teenage acne scars.

The landscape of the main gallery is divided by beautifully sculpted shell-shaped porcelain pieces. These highly decorated, hermaphroditic works have lingam-like silhouettes containing yonis. Blood-pooled wombs are only visible from certain angles, and the forms demand circumnavigation. In a nod to Disney's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*, the character of Sebastian appears, but in a very different aspect. In *Mermaids with Crab*, the crab shows up with a woman's head and a paint-mounded vulva, flanked by two sets of aggravated mermaid nipples. In other works such as *Sebastian* and Schulnik's smaller gouache pieces, the crab appears as an animated, red, hermaphroditic figure resembling maxi-pad Rorschach tests.

This Freudian-style vaginal-wound fear is palpable, all the more so in this kind of impasto paint than on a screen or in printed materials. In spite of the abundance of pinks, whites and sea-foam greens, there is also an element of slapstick gore, and playful provocation. This rebellious spirit also manifests in her music and performances with the Los Angeles-based metal band Barfth. This exhibition is definitely one that must be seen in person, as some of the figures are nearly life-sized, it is impossible not to have a compelling physical reaction to this work when confronted with it face to face.

Danielle McCullough: Could you talk about the totemic vaginas and gorgeous cystic acne clown faces on your mermaids? Also what are your thoughts on the archetype of the lonely sailor?

Allison Schulnik: I love to talk about totemic vaginas! It's funny how vaginas are so scary for people, some women included. It's just a big goopy hole. They are fun to paint. The faces and orifices of the figures I painted in *Salty Air* are just how I see they should be, specific for their personalities. They are imperfect, and kind of thirsty. It's always a matter of trying to match the thought in your head as best you can, trying to capture your brain and hold it hostage for long enough to make a thing in material form. Really, most of my paintings are vague references to people I know or love or don't love or don't know. The *Mermaids* and *Mermaids with Legs* mostly came from *The Little Mermaid* tale (in all its incarnations) which struck a nerve with me; the tragedy of it all. Her fickleness and desperation, are of course an

archetypal female character trait in literature and film. Also, present is her desperation in relation to dance and song, and again probably the idea of [my own] performance seeping in there. just how I see they should be, specific for their personalities. They are imperfect, and kind of thirsty. It's always a matter of trying to match the thought in your head as best you can, trying to capture your brain and hold it hostage for long enough to make a thing in material form. Really, most of my paintings are vague references to people I know or love or don't love or don't know. The Mermaids and Mermaids with Legs mostly came from The Little Mermaid tale (in all its incarnations) which struck a nerve with me; the tragedy of it all. Her fickleness and desperation, are of course an archetypal female character trait in literature and film. Also, present is her desperation in relation to dance and song, and again probably the idea of [my own] performance seeping in there.

They are characters I created that might provide warmth, love and comfort to the sailor. I think of the sailor as being known for his commitment to life off land, where he is free from society and the restraints of life ashore. Apart from society he can live in solitude, and/or yet fall victim to isolation and emptiness. For me, each of the three sailors (there are 3 large ones in the show) seem to have different attitudes towards their salt life, varying from confidence and acceptance to mental instability to isolation and detachment. He is a yearning figure. I also think of the Mermaid as a yearning figure, known from the tales that depict her, for her desire to be on land. She too is a solitary figure. She is also possibly Sailor's alter ego, and/or they are two sides of one person/creature. It seems some of the female-ish characters I paint are boy-ish and vice versa.

McCullough: Is that a human head on Sebastian in the painting Mermaids With Crab and is there a particular wedding portrait, Adam & Eve portrait, or set of such portraits that are the referent for this composition? This image is hauntingly familiar.

Schulnik: I think so. I did some of these paintings with the thought that they could be, in a sense, costume studies for a ballet I would love to make based on Hans' original story with the original ending, or an animated film. So the Sebastian I imagine is like a little man inside a giant, half-chubbed crab costume. The composition doesn't refer to anything specific. But I think the mermaid, or the intertwined mermaids, is a well-traversed motif throughout art/craft/swap meet history. Mermaids intertwined with a crab? I am sure it's been done somewhere, would not be surprised. I just started drawing the mermaids in different formations, considering typical pictorial issues, like color, form, space and movement, and thought they should be holding a crab, like Sebastian. But it is a more feminine Sebastian, somewhat orificial, and maybe cooked. That image just came out of my brain blender, but it is definitely familiar, I agree. The decorative quality of the mermaid's body shape is funny, and it has that typical curly-Q thing seen on many a sea vessel's mast, or Venice Beach shot glass.

McCullough: Could you talk about some of your paint application processes and how you use the material of the paint to convey these vaginal and sea creature slippery surfaces? Do you use any kind of additives, like wax or calcium carbonate to pipe in an underlying structure? I would also like to hear your thoughts on the relationship between this and building the clay forms.

Schulnik: It's all oil paint. I use some thinners in the backgrounds, and the washier parts of my paintings just so they will glide easily. But all the thick parts are oils. The sculptures are glazed porcelain, giant, orificial shells. Some are glazed with gold lustre, some have marbles melted into them, and some have mother of pearl. They are an extension of the paintings, and some people think they look like lady-parts. I wanted to make something that could be like homes for some of the figures I was painting here, so they have massive openings that are like doorways. With the shells and everything in the show, and also the clay forms I work with in animation and sculpture, it's all just a building up of form to make something real. Like flesh and guts, blood and glands -- all that coming together to make a body.

McCullough: What kind of impact, if any, has showing your work in the context of women surrealists had on your work? I see a strong relationship in the way you're working with The Little Mermaid to the way a number of them (esp. Dorothea Tanning) worked with Alice in Wonderland.

Schulnik: I love Dorothea Tanning. Birthday is one of my all-time favorite paintings. Maybe we have the same love/hate relationship to narrative. I definitely had a head-on collision with Surrealism when I was growing as an artist. It's impossible to be a painter and to not have been influenced by all the old great art historical movements. Coming from a family of painters, I was fed a healthy diet of Surrealism, Fauvism, Bauhaus, the French Impressionists, the German Expressionists, the Magical Realists, Les Nabis, etc.

McCullough: What relationship does this incredibly physical reaction have to the narrative, and what relationship if any, does your work performing with Barfth have on painting the figure?

Schulnik: I think it is all intertwined. As Donny Hathaway said, "Everything is everything," and as King Diamond said, "In Room 17, everything is so clean. In Room 17, there is nothing to be seen." All the things I do are a series of gestures and movements to make something whole. Then those things all come together and make a whole person, or at least constantly strive to -- like a shell builds its layers at the bottom of the ocean with minerals, tissues and proteins, to form something majestic. Barfth is an extension of my painting and film work, because it is all performance. However, there's nothing majestic there, just a build-up of crud and shit. Gotta keep it dirty sometimes.