

Allison Schulnik Pushes Claymation To Its Psychedelic Limit

Emerson Rosenthal November 22, 2011



Back in 2009, **Allison Schulnik's** music video for Grizzly Bear's "Ready, Able," garnered hundreds of thousands of views in a handful of days (at least half of which probably came from yours truly). This was her second project, a year after her claymation short, *Hobo Clown* (set to Grizzly Bear's "Granny Diner"), was widely received in galleries worldwide. Now, a handful of days after the release of her newest work, *MOUND*, and the opening of an *exquisite* solo show at ZieherSmith gallery in New York (and I really don't say that lightly), we sat down and picked her brain to find out about her inspiration, process and what makes her work feel so, truly, sacred.

The Creators Project: First off, your claymations are totally unlike anything I've ever seen. It might be the way you use the natural texture of the clay to blend your colors and surfaces, or that special something that makes your figures so haunting. Who and what would you cite as influences? I'm definitely sensing a little Jan Svankmeyer...

Allison Schulnik: Yes Svankmeyer indeed. His *Conspirators of Pleasure* is one of my favorites. Also Corny Cole, Jules Engel, Bruce Bickford, Wladyslaw Starewicz, John Hubley, Ub Iwerks, Ray Harryhausen, Yuri Norstein, Adam Beckett, E. Michael Mitchell, Vinton, [...] Disney's *The Old Mill* masterpiece, *Peter and the Wolf*, the recent stop-motion one [if you haven't seen it, watch it NOW], *The Tell-Tale Heart* by UPA, and all the old, beautifully designed UPA shorts.

Do you add colored clay to your white bases? Or do you build your figures with tons of colors already inside them?

I mix clay colors. At times, the characters are really filled with all sorts of colors, so there can be pleasant surprises, or "happy accidents" as Bob Ross would say.

Joyful. How does your process work from beginning to end? Do you start with a few specific figures, the environment or what?

I paint, draw and sculpt. Often the animation comes from that. I will come across a figure in my painting that I really want to see move and breath, so I will make him/her/it of clay. I don't really have a method to rely on, as my approach often changes. Sometimes I have a song that I want to choreograph movement to with clay or sculpture. Then I'll do an animatic to map the narrative, or the non-narrative, abstract movement to that piece of music. Then I build characters and sets, animate, and edit the scenes to the music, or use the movement I already planned and slot in into the edit, etc..

Right now you have a show at ZieherSmith gallery. Can you describe it, as well as the influences and ideas behind it?

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the new video *MOUND*, a celebration of the moving painting. It is a macabre wandering, featuring animation as dance, where its subjects are choreographed in abstract and emotive gesture and movement. The line is blurred between the material elements of painting (texture, color, form) and the physicality and movement of ballet and theater. It is inspired by a series of paintings I made from *The Funeral Party* and the *Performance* series. Although there is a beginning, middle and end, what it retains in traditional material and methods, it avoids in narrative structure. It is an uncertain account of what exists somewhere between tragedy and farce. It is also a celebration of the handmade, and a purist claymation where all effects are done in-camera. I animated thousands of frames entirely by myself, and alone constructed over 100 figural puppets made of clay, fabrics, wire, wood, paint and glue.



***The Funeral Party* (2010)**



***Hobo With Bird* (2009)**

The paintings and sculptures are influenced by people and creatures around me I know and don't know, discarded once-sentimental relics, old books, movies, cartoons, flea markets, music, trash, food, dance, history... These things make their way into my brain and then seem to make a home amongst imagined realities. My brain blender takes these ingredients of earthly fact and blatant fiction and attempts to serve up a stage of tragedy, farce, and raw, ominous beauty.

When I put something in material form, I just hope to be capturing this otherworld buffoonery, or maybe presenting a simple earthly dignified moment. For instance, *Idyllwild* is from a photo of my brother and his dog in Idyllwild, Rhys is a portrait of my friend's cat who died shortly after his portrait was painted after a long and happy life of I think 22 years. *Dempster* was one of my many childhood felines, we found in a dumpster as children. *Yogurt Eater* is a portrait of a man I saw at the airport; *Eric* as well. *Standing Gin #3* is one of many many (20?) portraits I have done of my cat Gin, who is one half of twin Siamese girls I have. She is often the punching bag for her sister, and I have always felt she needed multiple monuments dedicated to her in the forms of canvas and clay. Often the characters are based on photos of myself as well.

But really, painting to me is another form of dance and movement. I tend to mosey about in a crestfallen, lonely kind of world sometimes with my work, but these recent works, like *Flower Mound*, feel kind of theatrical, almost like the figure is nesting together and hunkering down in performative glory and flight, or it is just a big mound of stubborn felines, a sad hobo, and breathing floral orifices, conducting the big lampoon or ridicule, similar to the hundred puppets in *MOUND* (video), and the *Funeral Party* gouache.

You mentioned a “celebration of the moving painting.” How do you feel about the animated GIF? Especially as a new art form? Personally I’m really digging the work of Francoise Gamma lately. It’s so creeeepy...

I tend to be drawn more towards the handmade. I guess I am a purist in that sense. I like to see the thumbprint and all the imperfections that only the human hand can create, but I am pretty open at the same time. Really it’s about if it’s good or not, not about the medium it was made with, for me.



Night Wind (2010)



What Awaits You (2006)

How did you get your start?

Well, I come from a family of artists, so art was kind of the family way. [It's] probably why I started in dance, [to do] something different. Although dance was my first love, I just couldn't not create stuff when I was young. I was always painting and drawing around town, selling my pastels to family friends. At seventeen, I went to CalArts to study Experimental Animation, because I loved animation, and it seemed like this amazing partnership of painting and dance. I left CalArts thinking I would make a stop-motion animation show for Cartoon Network, but, looking back, I think my stuff was a little weird for that. Plus, stop-motion was not a popular medium with the studios at the time. I worked in animation for seven years, never really fit in too well with the system, and sometimes took on menial jobs as well when animation work was scarce, like working at a frame store, selling paint, theater concessions, and maybe the most fun, being a projectionist at the Nuart Theater in LA.

I remember at some point seeing the Laura Owens show at MOCA. I had no idea that you could even show work as a young (female) painter, let alone have work in a museum. So, I sent some books out of what I had been painting over the years, and also actually walked around to galleries trying to show my book—didn't go too well. I didn't know any artists, art teachers or gallery people, only animators, so I had no inside path or tips. Luckily I sent one of my many books to Black Dragon Society, a former gallery that used to be in LA, and Hubert Schmalix called me to show some paintings there. Slowly I continued getting paintings into galleries. Years later, when I was able to quit my job, I decided that eight years was long enough to have not made a film so I made *Hobo Clown*, and now I am able to do both.

And finally, last question—any current projects or endeavors you’re working on as of late? What’s next!?

Well I just finished a bunch of work. I literally just completed the *MOUND* video last week. I am excited to look at some stuff—art, film, music, dance, books. Something I haven't had time to do for a while. And maybe go for a long drive to nowhere. And maybe plant a pineapple.