

Abigail McNamara: Quietly, Paying Attention

I'm here in Portland, Oregon where the sun is an elusive and precious part of the day, and where people care about living well, eating well, and leading a generally soothing existence. I'm starting to paint again at last. It's easy to spend the whole day working since there is no pressure to do much else here, or even much at all. I've been apprehensive about all this ease, unsure if there would be a secret price to pay for things to go so smoothly.

Abigail McNamara is a transplant too; originally from Missoula, Montana, she came to the Northwest for college, and now lives in a cute house in North Portland with bicycles hanging from giant hooks on the front porch and beds of spinach, tomatoes, and squash in the back yard. Her studio sits in the back half of a nice garden shed. It's cool back there on a sun-filled day, and I like the separateness of this detached home studio. Just steps away from the back door, but a distinctly separate, creative space.

Around us are tools, materials, folders and rolls of older work. From the ceiling hangs an even line of cotton strings dipped in different colors of wax; it's a working model for an installation Abigail has on display now until September 5th downtown. Each string represents one minute of the working day at The Portland Building, and the strings are waxed to show the flow of people in and out of the building.

Abigail is interested in patterns, both those that arise in the natural world and patterns that are constructed, the structure of leaves, reactions and interactions of movement, or a repeated craft technique. These observed or constructed patterns show up in her work across a variety of media.

Usually, it's the material where her ideas begin. She has worked with paper, wax, muslin, string, and even gold leaf. She tends to gravitate towards simple malleable materials, fibers and things that can be worked by hand. She manipulates the materials using soothing, repetitive action, often methods based in craft. Part of the explorations are about seeing what a material can do: learning what kind of forms cloth can hold, or in the case with paper: seeing what it could withstand.

She recently finished an installation titled "Place," a low round assemblage of muslin formed from dense shell-like constructions of fabric. Looking at it, I'm pulled in two directions. The simplicity of the beige fabric and the meticulous construction give me the sense of care and precision. At the same time it's kind of uncomfortable, like looking at your own skin under a microscope.

This tension, between the austere and grotesque-organic qualities in her work, is what makes Abigail's work stand out. It's neither trying to shock or soothe. It's not surprising that she views her process as a

kind of meditation the way that it brings into focus serenity without dismissing the more uncomfortable organic arrangements.

Abigail's interest in installation stems from her observations of music and its ability to so strongly affect those listening. In visual art, she found, it's much more difficult to affect people that way. With installation, she is able to control so much more of the experience, and this way have a bigger emotional effect. Limiting the components and the spaces where she installs, she's also able to explore the subtleties of light, shadow, and texture.

I don't learn much about Abigail herself from her work, except maybe her sensitivity to her environment. Although her techniques are laborious, her hand becomes almost invisible in the finished work. It's funny how such intense handiwork is what is needed to create such organic forms. The other aspect though, is her receptivity to her materials and locations, and how she allows them to inform her work. But why exert all this effort to essentially mimic the natural world? Why not just go sit outside in the garden?

I think that her sculptures and drawings offer a new way to enter this open, observational mindset. The simplified forms and austere backdrops give a strangeness and a newness to natural patterns that have become so familiar they are easy to overlook. Her work allows you re-enter that state of wonder when you are first discovering something. It's as if her work is telling me to sit quietly and pay attention. And like the natural world, I want to reach out and touch it, although I'm afraid I'll leave fingerprints.

Abigail McNamara lives and works in Portland, OR. She currently has an installation at the Portland Building Display Space. You can see more of her work at <http://abigailmcnamara.com>.