

## **Allison Smith: Notion Nanny, Berkeley Art Museum**

by Maria Porges (July 2007)

*Along country lanes and urban crossroads, an itinerant apprentice offers ideas and articles of all sorts traditional and revolutionary, abundantly crafted in exchange for skillful demonstrations and sociable company.--Allison Smith, the Notion Nanny Cry*

At the back of the Matrix Gallery's long narrow space, a life-sized china doll dressed in a quaint bonnet and cape proffers a basket full of hand-crafted goods. Additional objects surround her on a simple platform, suggesting that she brings an abundance of useful things to share or sell. A table nearby displays other crafts, as do watercolors on the walls. Many of the things presented or pictured are beautifully made-- examples of traditional skills like lace-making, blacksmithing, slip-trailed pottery, horn-carving and tin-piercing, to name just a few. But these aren't luxury goods. These plates, jugs, spoons and scarves are meant for everyday use.



*Notion Nanny, 2005-7, mixed media, dimensions variable*

Or are they? What, exactly, is our relationship with handmade things, in an age of astonishingly cheap stuff that's produced in factories in vast quantities and shipped around the globe? What does it mean to buy (or trade) an object that took time and skill to put together, decorate or form? And who is the "notion nanny," anyway?

Last things first: during the Victorian era, regular-sized dolls similar to the one in the gallery were popular collectibles. Already, in the mid-nineteenth century, these little figures embodied a nostalgic memory of female peddlers who had once traveled around the English countryside, selling and trading goods as well as carrying news, stories and aesthetic ideas to isolated areas. Artist Allison Smith began her Notion Nanny project by initiating an itinerant apprenticeship in the English countryside, learning various traditional skills from blacksmiths, potters, wood turners, etc. The life-sized figure in the gallery is the result of these studies and collaborations--from its china face and hands, modeled in Smith's likeness, to its clothes and wares. In addition, the exhibition includes a group of exquisite watercolors of some of the many variants of the "Notion Nanny" dolls that were made and collected. These ethereal paintings are based on images Smith found in museums and archives in England.



*Notion Nanny Linens, 2007, printed linen and ironware.*

A series of banners hang on the wall as well, each containing orderly arrangements of watercolor images of various artisan-made goods--baskets, dolls, girl's dresses, tinware, etc. Taken as a whole they suggest a kind of festive manifesto on anti-capitalism: on what Matrix curator Elizabeth Thomas eloquently describes as "the desire to connect in more personal ways with the objects and the experiences that comprise our worlds." Thomas ascribes the current resurgence of interest in "all things grassroots, handmade, bottom up, local and collective" as having to do with a number of forces in our turbulent, fragmented era--from a need for the comfort of the handmade in troubled times to the environmental consequences of reckless consumption. She also reminds us that the kind of social practice that Smith's project represents has become an increasingly important presence in contemporary art over the last decade: the idea that audience participation is part of the work, and that the work itself is a collaborative activity. This sense of our personal/political connection with Smith's undertaking is supported by Smith's embroideries of the phrase "what are you fighting for?" as well as her choice of various incendiary motifs, from the hammer and sickle to the Phrygian caps worn by French revolutionaries.

Since the Notion Nanny's debut, Smith has continued to add to the goods in the figure's basket. She has worked with craftspeople in communities on the east coast of the US--in locations as diverse as Old Sturbridge Village and the Rhode Island School of Design--as well as with makers in the Bay Area while she was in residence here. A public open house on May 20th involved demonstrations and discussions by and with a whole community of local artists and artisans (Smith's website, <http://www.notionnanny.net> which serves as a record of the project as a whole, has detailed accounts of some of the people she met and the projects she engaged in while in California, which included, stained glass, letterpress, and ceramic tiles.)

Considered as a whole, all of these parts create a narrative so complex and rich that it can't be easily summed up as art, craft, radical political statement, social

practice, or community-building, but as a potent mix of all of the above. The Notion Nanny is a generous, intelligent and wickedly witty project, serving as a reminder that making things by hand didn't lose its meaning with the advent of industrialization. Periodic revivals, such as the Arts and Crafts Movement at the turn of the twentieth century; the American Craft Movement that was part of the social revolution of the nineteen sixties and seventies; and the DIY movement today, all demonstrate that craft is neither an anachronism nor an isolated phenomenon. We make things as part of how we make meaning, and we always will. At present, the relationship between traditional craft materials and techniques and contemporary art practice has become tempestuous, complicated, and utterly straightforward, all at the same time, as materials like glass enter into the fine art arena (eg., Josiah MacElhenny) and many younger artists feel free to use whatever material seems appropriate for their idea--whether or not such a material is associated with street fairs or bearded men in Birkenstocks. As George Kubler suggested nearly forty years ago, "... (t)he idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful and poetic things of the world. By this view the universe of man-made things simply coincides with the history of art."

I left the Notion Nanny feeling optimistic--a pleasant and all too rare sensation, in an era beset by illegal wars and environmental degradation. As Smith reminds us, We make our world, and every act counts.

So, what are you fighting for?