

BEA PARSONS INTERVIEWED BY KEITH MAYERSON

KM: What inspires your work? Do you think of dreams and memories while you are making your images, and if so, what in particular intrigued you to create these amazingly surreal and synaesthetic images?

BP: Last month I dreamt about turtles swimming in the dark between two lovers sleeping. It was amazingly peaceful, slow-paced and whole. If I am lucky, I dream about flying over water. The time and space where dreams unfold is where the images are set.

The images themselves come from fragments of personal drama, eroticism, and energies such as those in our bodies, matter or electromagnetic fields. Flowers, people smoking and waves have been cropping up as symbolic vanitas in my recent work as ongoing cycles of death and rebirth recur. Symbolically smoke still means for me what it did for Dutch still life painters, something fleeting. Smoking is unhealthy, out of fashion, it causes death. I give cigarettes to my figures as a symbol of transgression in plain sight. Process-wise, it is fun to create smoke with the gestural flick of removing ink from the image when inking a plate. When I include a cigarette, I will think about my father smoking in our house when I was growing up. I am a millennial, so smoking seems very dated (even though loads of people still smoke—I started, stopped, started, and stopped, another cycle). It's a little threat towards oneself, into the body, out of the body, little harmful breaths.

Gestural waves and water have become symbolic for the energetic connectors between bodies and communication, as well as another possible threat to our bodies. I see my waves as versions of the invisible wavelengths emitted by 5G networks. What will the impact of 5G have on flora and fauna in the years to come? The flowers I have been depicting come from these curiosities and concerns, I tried to imagine the flowers somewhat electrified. I don't know enough about electrical radiation to fear it, but I know that it's there as an invisible force. The implication of human connection through these powerful networks is something I bring into a metaphysical realm through pictures.

The style I work with is inspired by artists such as James Ensor and William Blake. I think about silent cinema and black and white photography as a way to set my images back in time, building a history around them. Arthur Rimbaud is with me at all times. I listen to music and think about how rock stars dress when I create a figure. Kim Gordon and the lyrics from "Cross the Breeze" influenced a recent print called *Cut-off*.

KM: Why monoprints? What effect and process do they give you that aid the results you want to create? It seems like a somewhat delightful anachronistic medium, to some extent, because some might say in the contemporary art world that prints aren't in fashion.... Monoprints are also kind of ironic in that prints suggest multiples, whilst monoprints are for just one unique image (although I guess you could have ghost prints after the first one?). Do you have any influences in art history for this? Also, your work is so warm, it's interesting to me that making a monoprint has both a hands on—ink on the plate, but hands off ultimate production—the press makes the final image. How does this amplify your aesthetic content?

BP: Monoprinting allows me to combine the slow, gestural shape building of painting with the intellectual and emotional immediacy of drawing. I have a background in atmospheric, symbolist painting and draw using an illustrative style (inspired by Tove Jansson). I was trying to paint how I draw, but it wasn't until I began monoprinting that I was satisfied combining the two modes. I had to take painting and drawing to a different playground in order to make it work.

When I begin a monoprint, I create a 'dark field' that is a technique where the plexiglass plate is covered in black ink with a brayer roller. The term dark field is my metaphorical term for an unknown, deep space to go down for imagery. The images are then created by removing ink with a rag, q-tips, vinegar and alcohol. Tone and lines are added back in order to build up volume and define shape. Sometimes I will cut small circles from newsprint to use as stencils to create sharp little stars in the sky. The dark field and gestural process set my pictures into oneiric space, a narrative glimpse of the subconscious residing in the oil paintings which tend to have an open ended meaning.

Technically speaking, learning about Degas' monoprints influenced my process. His figures and landscapes feel rooted in observation and memory, while having a looseness that allows them to drift towards a place inside the imagination. Tracy Emin's monoprints using text convey fast, gut wrenching messages, but are given a distance once put through the press. I love the idea of taking something charged and pushing it through a heavy piece of steel. The wheel of the press is heavy and I can feel my muscles when I turn it. The physical motion lifts any heavy mental thought energies for a moment. As an artist, this burst followed by an immediate distance is refreshing and sort of brings some closure or clarity to the moment. Running an image through the press seems very finite. It can take me weeks to resolve a painting but I have to pull the print in one session, there's no choice because I can't really leave an inked plate laying around. It's a lot of steel, machinery, and chemicals to create just one print—the humor and futility of painting are there in the same way because of the technical ceremoniousness that goes into making an edition of one.

KM: Bea, I know you are interested in comics, in addition to poetry, fine art, and music. Tove Jansson, creator of the amazing Moomin comic strip from the late 40's, was also a terrific author, artist and poet. And I know you too make comic-like works, and booklets of comic imagery that you also print in multiples for the masses! How does this particular series of prints relate to comics, if it does—together as a narrative what story would you like it to tell? Guston, Peter Saul, and so many others now love the cartoon iconic form to convey stories in their singular works—what does this iconic, cartoon-y language mean to use, and what do you hope to gain from it, both as an artist and for your audience?

BP: The language of comics allows me to use a personal codified language to express personal narratives: flowers are electric bodies, eyes are warnings, cigarettes are fleeting transgressive compulsions, clouds, waves are metres and connectors, but could also drown you. The narratives are cautionary and emblematic about our world from the perspective of an underworld mirroring our own as imagined through me. When did we see the first flowers and what role will technology play in the evolution of consciousness?

The recent prints feature images of faces with large eyes set in the profile, like a rabbit who can quietly see their predators without turning their head. They are quietly warning us about something going on inside the drawing and outside in the world. I relate comics to literary theories of the grotesque, where the mix of comedy and horror are powerful tools in addressing life the fringes (like a gargoyle perched a top a cathedral) or (humour like the Chicken Lady from *Kids in the Hall*, an obnoxious, lost character who is actually quite powerful in her desperate attempts to visit homes she once lived in). I may not include a punch line in my narratives, but for me the humour comes though the mix, the kitsch, and something technical like printmaking.



LORRAINE SIMMS INTERVIEWED BY MEDRIE MACPHEE

MM: How did you come to this work? What was it that got you from the plush paintings and sculptures to these shadow drawings?

LS: I was juxtaposing animal bones and plush toy animals in my trompe l'oeil paintings for several years before I began to focus on the bones. I felt a strong desire to work in a way that could be described as almost the opposite of what I had been doing. While my paintings are brightly coloured and generate strong feelings of materiality and presence, these black and white drawings evoke an indeterminate space and the shapes appear transitory and ephemeral. By focusing solely on cast shadows these drawings allude to both the presence and the absence of the object—in this case, the bones of animals that are deemed vulnerable, endangered or iconic.

MM: Did you know what your process of making would be before you were actually working at the American Museum of Natural History?

LS: I made a number of drawings using the bones in my own collection before I was first given privileged access to the collections in the Mammalogy Department in 2018¹. Once I began working in the museum collections I was able to streamline my process, which is very low-tech. Basically, I trace the cast shadows of bones that are placed directly on my drawing paper and then develop the shading based on my notes and photographs. In the museum I was able to work with the bones and skins of many animals I would not have had access to, including whales, bears, and elephants.

Shadows are surprisingly three-dimensional. They are also luminous. Light penetrates the shaded areas; it reflects, refracts and scatters, phenomena I convey by weaving lines into loose or dense strata. This gradual accretion of lines creates textures that give the transparent shadows an unexpected physicality. I am continuing to develop this haptic quality by working on different textured papers to create a somatic and reflective space where both mind and body can be engaged.

MM: How do you view your content shifting from strong popular culture references to something much less readable?

LS: I love the ambiguity in these works. Conjuring immateriality and disappearance, these drawings bring to light the overlooked, or the unseen, as shadows in natural history display cases often are. We are aware of them but they are not the focus of our gaze and it is for this reason that they appear so abstract.

These drawings maintain an indelible link to the world, although not the world of contemporary material culture as in my paintings. They continue my interest in how animals are presented and represented, and how this in turn expresses our conceptions of nature and the wild. They are indexical records of a specific animal-artifact at a specific time. Similarly, their titles are exact transcriptions of the information on the specimen's tag. I see the drawings as both records and harbingers, calling up the individual animal and its separation from its living, breathing counterparts in the wild. These fleeting shadows demarcate the psychological distance between humans and other animals and between the living and the dead. I believe it is this ambiguity, this in-betweenness, which opens a space for these drawings to speak metaphorically and poetically.

MM: How has the experience of working with long dead animals in the musty, airless, hidden areas of the museum changed you?

LS: There were many aspects of this research that I did not anticipate when I began working in the museum. As you say, the museum collections are stored in vastly differing conditions; some musty and airless, some cold and haunting; but all of these are hidden in far-flung spaces throughout the building. The Mammalogy collections are the oldest and largest in the museum and I was amazed and enchanted by the age of the collections, their scope and their size. Drawers of bones, classified according to species and body part (skulls, feet, hands etc.), stand in for sizeable numbers of individual animals. Paradoxically, the slightest physical variations within these specimen groups prompted me to contemplate the individuality of these once living animals. Like us, animals are born, live and die. Their collected bones remain as mute relics of individual lives. I was not prepared for the feelings of love, sympathy, respect, or awe I experienced when working with individual specimens. These direct encounters brought me into close contact with skulls, teeth, hands, limbs.... Animals I will never view from such close proximity in life became measures of my own body. My own smallness or bigness was amplified, creating a shifting sense of scale (like Alice) that strongly resonated.

MM: Are there artists that now have entered your personal pantheon that weren't there before?

LS: I have a renewed interest in the work of Vija Celmins. Like her, my drawings are bound up with contrasting notions, materiality and illusion, truth and perception, time and duration. In a video interview² Celmins says, "I am re-describing what I see", and I feel engaged in a similar process.

I also became much more aware of Agnes Martin as my drawings contain very faint grids that are drawn in coloured pencil. They have no function within my drawing process, however I wanted to reference scientific reason, systems of measurement and rational thinking, ideas that seem at odds with my shadowy drawn forms. I became very aware of the difficulty of drawing even lines and perfect grids through this process and developed a kind of awe at Martin's ability. Although her works appear uniform, the slight variations in her hand-made lines are perceived on a gut level. Both these artists' works epitomize notions of duration; they embody a Zen-like stillness and reflectiveness, qualities I strive for in my drawings.

I also became aware of a tremendous body of research and writing focused on the animal subject. Writings by Steve Baker, Rachel Poliquin and Giovanni Aloï introduced me to a wide range of artists who consider animals in all kinds of imaginative ways and their thought-provoking reflections continue to inspire me.

NOTES

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2 Vija Celmins, "Desert, Sea and Stars," (Museum Ludwig Cologne, 2011). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgzrdi0NFS8>



CLEMENT VALLA INTERVIEWED BY KYLE HITTMEIER

KH: What is the role of mis-translation of form in your work? Are you facilitator of such? Or a curator of it?

CV: The metaphor that fits best right now is gardening. I work with pre-existing software and systems that have their own processes. I think of them as super simple ecologies when they are combined together. What I do is try and seed these processes with different things and see what happens. Some things grow completely fine on their own and need no intervention from me at all—I'm simply left to discover really interesting forms. Some things need more work in tending to—pruning, pushing in particular directions.

KH: Your current work specifically analyzes organic form through a contemporary, technologically-loaded platform inevitably addressing the quintessential binary of man v. nature. Do you consider this binary as a collision, as a confluence?

CV: I don't think about it is a binary really. Humans are part of nature and technology is humanity's instrument to observe and act on the environment. What has me excited about working along the continuum of man-nature-technology is the possibility of discovering other and different forms of intelligence or creativity. I think we privilege instrumental, 'rational', 'enlightened' forms of classic Western human thought too much and attend to other forms of intelligence too little. By focusing a technological lens on natural forms I'm hoping to catch glimpses of other kinds of intelligence, processes and systems. I'm hoping these glimpses can expand my notions of radical otherness. I guess I'm really influenced by the sci-fi writings of Octavia Butler and Kim Stanley Robinson in that way. I think both authors really get my imagination going as far as picturing new relationships between humans, environments and radical otherness.

KH: Considering the last few years of your work, you consistently explode and flatten 3-D forms and textures, and then work in a way to rebuild them physically. Is there something fulfilling about this process that you would not get from working purely digitally, or purely physically?

CV: This part of my work comes from a very traditional interest in image making. Images have generally been created by translating the world onto a two dimensional surface in all different kinds of ways including cartography, diagrams, traditional perspective drawings, architectural drawings, etc. I'm interested in the specific ways in which contemporary tools, and especially digital and 3-D imaging tools, translate the world into flat pictures.

There's also a way in which the opposite process occurs, in which something might begin as a two dimensional drawing and end up as a three-dimensional form, as in the case of architectural blueprints, or dressmaking patterns. And so my work, even in its sculptural forms, is actually just an exploration of the way in which contemporary media shift back-and-forth between two dimensions and three dimensions. I actually see much of my physical work as a kind of analog or parallel to the way in which digital tools operate.

KH: Do you have trust in technology—do you consider it to be neutral and/or objective? What is at stake?

CV: I'm fascinated by technology, but I never consider it to be objective or neutral. I think technology is in large part a social construct, and it's always really interesting to ask who is making the technology we use, for what purpose, how is the technology planned and thought out.

I think our basic relationship to the world is mediated through technology (language as technology, clothing as technology, housing as technology, etc). The way we structure our technology therefore affects our fundamental interactions with the world. In particular, digital technology is often compared to magic. It seems to seamlessly produce these incredible effects, but there are huge complex layers underneath. And because of the structure of capitalism, and intellectual property, these systems have become dark, and hard to fathom, and extremely complex. And so it becomes harder and harder to trace how our technology operates, who it operates for, and how this might fundamentally affect us.

