



USABLE PASTS: JULY 15–OCTOBER 24, 2010

**ARTISTS IN
RESIDENCE
E-ROUNDTABLE**

Every summer, Studio includes the voices of our artists in residence. In this issue, we've taken the Q&A format digital, inviting the artists to contribute to a conversation via "reply-all" emails. Get a glimpse into their working styles and approaches as Program Associate and Exhibition Coordinator Thomas J. Lax facilitates a roundtable discussion.

Photos: Ray A. Llanos



“I’m interested in re-creating a fragmentary likeness of something like memory or my own subjectivity. It’s the ‘bits and pieces’ that, for me, have an exactness that is truer to life.”

VALERIE PIRAINO

THOMAS J. LAX

Hi AIRs, Your studio residency program is a central part of the Studio Museum’s mission—it’s where we get our name and it culminates in an annual summer exhibition.

More specific to your individual practices, the studio plays a different and specific role for each of you. Mequitta, as a painter, you perhaps have the most traditional studio practice, although the way you often begin by photographing yourself brings some of the performance that can take place in an artist’s studio into more explicit view. Lauren, you’ve also brought qualities of performativity into your practice by turning your studio into a kind of stage that you subsequently use to shoot Barbies and action figures in stop-motion

animated videos. Valerie, the question of space is always central since you work in installation, and in the show are projecting images you’ve found from your family photo archive, giving them sculptural and social form.

Can the three of you speak to some of the ways the studio and its location in the Museum and in Harlem have shaped your work since you first arrived in the space?

LAUREN KELLEY

Being from Texas, I first was introduced to this location through Harlem Renaissance imagery. To have a more round relationship with this locale is very exciting. I also know that making work under the Studio Museum roof, having access to the resources of the collection and special exhibitions, has been an amazing experience.

MEQUITTA AHUJA

Being at The Studio Museum in Harlem has brought new people into my studio. From the museum curators to the children and adults that came through during our open studios, there have been many interactions that have influenced me. My time in residence has been an ideal introduction to Harlem and to New York.

VALERIE PIRAINO

I think this residency is the perfect balance between being supported and being left alone. It’s really unusual for an artist to produce inside the walls of a museum, especially for such an extended length of time. For me that means I’m afforded the opportunity to create an intuitive space in my own studio, while having Lauren and Mequitta



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MEQUITTA AHUJA

in close proximity, and having the Museum staff generously leaving their doors wide open for both informal and rigorous exchanges, which have really helped me to distill and assert my ideas.

TJL One thing that I'm hearing from all three of you is the way that relationships have played a role in your practice during your residency. Do you often have an audience in mind when you conceptualize a work and begin to produce it? On the flip side, do you think your own sense of self influences how and what you're moved to create?

VP Can you say more about your second question?

TJL I guess I'm asking about ways your subjectivity enters your work, both formally or

through an imbued process. Valerie, how is your identity marked, for example, in works like *With Pen in Hand* (2010)? On the one hand you are using very personal items—photographs your grandfather sent home when he was abroad in the military—but on the other hand the work seems to be less about your family's biography and to be more evasive and open-ended in terms of how you “appear.”

VP Yes, I think the word “imbued” is very apt. There's a quote from the dust jacket Simone de Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay* (1943) that sticks with me. “Built of thousands of little bits and pieces all with the awkward angles of real life but all so solidly fit together.” I'm interested in re-creating a fragmentary likeness of

something like memory or my own subjectivity. It's the “bits and pieces” that, for me, have an exactness that is truer to life.

Having an audience in mind really isn't productive or interesting for me. The closest I come to that is thinking of a specific person when I'm making something, which is a very different thing. It's almost more a private conversation or even a letter. For me, it's important to have a sense of interiority present. This touches on the “being left alone” that I mentioned. That's where my subjectivity enters in. It's both about tapping into personal relationships and using materials with a second-generational quality to give form to an emotive sensibility.

MA Separate from any sense of audience, my interpersonal



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LAUREN KELLEY

relationships are of central importance to me in every aspect of my life. The overlap between audience and personal relationships in my work has brought me into communities with which I have found no other way to build deep connections. The community of The Studio Museum in Harlem is a primary example. As an Indian and African-American woman I've often felt outside the cultural conventions that typically align people of shared ethnicity. Embodying my subjectivity in my work has brought people into my life, initially in the form of audience, in a way that allows for the complexity of our potential bond. This outcome is not something I ever predicted nor do I plan for it in the making of work, however, I do find it intensely fulfilling.

LK Audience is something that I go back and forth with a lot. Like Valerie and Mequitta, the question of audience is not a primary place to start making work, but at this moment in my practice it does play a role in my intentions. Since 2006, I've been building a video series under the aegis of a community-access cable channel with the hopes of speaking to image viewers outside of a fine-art context. The hope is that a channel surfer will have a discourse about real life versus constructed life. I would love for a channel surfer to pit my ideas against what is offered via the television.

TJL What the three of you are saying is really interesting. Valerie, I like the idea of a mode of representation that moves in “bits and pieces”—

this process of scavenging and collating that moves towards exactness through an experience of life that is inexact.

Mequitta, it's fascinating that for you the embodiment of alterity—of inhabiting the position of an outsider—is in fact what brings people into your work. You manage to establish a set of spectatorial relationships in which otherness creates the possibility for different modes of kinship. It seems that the move between the figure's centrality and her utter fragmentation plays a significant role in making this tenable.

Lauren, it's fitting that by mining consumer culture and subsequently inserting what you've culled into the roulette of mass culture, your work returns to its source in a similar way to the approach

of early video artists. In a sense, you are re-circulating the relationship between forms of cultural production and consumption.

The three of you are also speaking to questions of materiality: The ways in which (dis)inherited objects take on a second-generational quality, in your case, Val; the expressive painterly gestures that bracket a set of relations on a canvas for you, Mequitta; and the objects of desire that are the excess and foundation of capitalist culture, Lauren. How did the three of you come to use the materials you're using for the works that will be in your upcoming exhibition?

MA When I was ten, I earned a hundred dollars at a summer opportunity at my middle school. With that money, I bought my first set of oil paints. Oil on canvas has remained my primary medium. My teacher and mentor Kerry James Marshall talks about using one's materials in such a way that the subject or image is formed by one's process of making, as opposed to the artist using the materials to form an image or subject. This is a very important distinction, and one with which I am constantly grappling. I achieve this best in painting. Making large paintings is very physical, and paint is harder to control than drawing materials. The complexity of formal elements that emerge in a large painting allow for a call-and-response between myself and my materials in way that is both planned and

improvisational, deliberate and unpredictable.

VP I've been working with family slides that I inherited; I've been using these materials in a similar way to Mequitta's approach to painting. It involves a lot of experimentation, projecting the slides at different angles and distorting them through different materials, like frames, glass or mirrors. Through that experimentation, my work has emerged as a more conceptual—the subject comes first, albeit a subject that has been somewhat emptied of its meaning. I've also been using a shorthand manual that I inherited, which has taken me down a similar process of experimentation. In this case, I began with drawings, then thinking about this liminal space between image and text that started to happen. Its most recent incarnation is more sculptural.

LK With regards to materials, I have always been a tactile maker and love working with anything that will reveal my thumb print. Through this work I have learned to trust my intuitive, even ungainly, decisions. It is with a clumsy hand that I enthusiastically cobble together objects to buttress my video efforts for this show.

TJL Lauren, can you talk how you go about finding your Barbies?

LK In the beginning, collecting the dolls was the most

exciting part of the process. It allowed me to learn more about the collecting impulse, in general. As a kid my devotion to collecting waffled, but as an adult I have learned to love the thrill of the hunt. Most of my doll collection has come from the Internet, although some of the dolls have come from country road-trip thrift stores.

When scavenging for figures to animate, I'm always looking for toys that have some sort of soul. In order to craft a narrative I need a doll to have more than a factory painted-on grin. In the video *Prototypical Oppression/Obsession* (2009), I use a 1970s *Charlie's Angels* Farrah Fawcett action figure as a lead flight attendant. This action figure's grimace personifies a sense of perfection marred by insecurity.

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