

## Glitter and Doom: Allison Schulnik + Bradley Rubenstein

Los Angeles, Mar. 2014: **Allison Schulnik's** second New York solo exhibition at ZieherSmith, Eager, included a startling array of painting, sculpture, drawing, and film, creating a beautiful, yet haunting world. Her work is currently on view in a solo exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut. Schulnik talks with Bradley Rubenstein about her new show, her dance background, the difference between working in New York and Los Angeles, and, of course, cats.



Allison Schulnik, Blue Dancer #3, 2013, gouache on paper, 9 x 11 1/2 inches; Courtesy of the artist and ZieherSmith, NY

**Bradley Rubenstein:** I just read that you had originally been a dancer, and after watching the film *Eager* it makes perfect sense. There is a real sense of choreography in it. Can you talk a little about your beginnings as a filmmaker and painter?

**Allison Schulnik:** I have a lot of painters in the family, so I was painting at a young age. I think everyone expected me to be a painter, including myself, so I decided to go to film school instead. I didn't really have an interest in going to school for painting. I wanted to learn to animate.

**BR:** Where are you from originally?

**AS:** I'm from San Diego—been living in LA since I was seventeen. Mostly I was dancing there, and of course painting and drawing. And being a general menace. But really, dance was my first love. Painting led me to film.

**BR:** So painting came before film?

**AS:** I started in the art school at CalArts because I didn't know you could apply for film school without having made a film. They told me painting was dead, which I agreed with at the time. I spent all my time in the animation classes. I transferred the following year to the Experimental Animation program under Jules Engel and loved it. After not painting for a few years, I came back to it after school and fell back in love with it. I was painting portraits mainly for many years. Then on to other stuff. I didn't make a film for eight years after school. I worked about seven years doing grunt jobs in animation studios, and also minimum-wagers when animation jobs were scarce. I tried a little unsuccessfully to get illustration work, but basically my stuff was a little too odd to ever get any commercial work. Meanwhile I painted pretty much every free hour I had. I had no social life except with Eric [Yahner, Allison's boyfriend], who worked even more than I did. Since then it's been a split romance, fickle switching between animation and painting kind of yearly, falling in and out of love every time.

**BR:** I liked your last show, *Mound*, at ZieherSmith a lot. It seems like you have really developed the painterly work, and you've included some large-scale sculptures that support the film. The painting *St. Louis Man* (2013) is quite strong, both as an image as well as a sort of philosophical meditation. I wrote about that piece, and I used this quote from Sartre talking about Giacometti's work, which I think relates to what you were doing: “[His] ambiguous images are disconcerting, for they upset our most cherished visual habits. We have long been accustomed to smooth, mute creatures fashioned for the purpose of curing us of the sickness of having a body; these guardian spirits have watched over the games of our childhood and bear witness to the notion that the world is without risks, that nothing ever happens, and that consequently, the only thing that ever happened to

them was death at birth.” Rereading this now, I think you could apply this piece to Eager as well.

AS: I think you could apply that to Eager. I think it's freeing, not sad, to know that there is only one resolution in life. The body is what we have, to constantly learn, love, and experience all we can, despite its deformity or limitation. It's a beautiful thing.

Mound was my first show at ZieherSmith. I was super excited about the space there. It was the first time I got to fill a wall with a film projection. It really allowed the film to fulfill itself as a true moving painting. I got to create an escape, a whole experience, when it was across from the other figures in the space.

BR: Watching the film I was immediately drawn to the physicality of it—the physicality of making it, more precisely. It reminded me of Stan Brakhage’s film comprised of butterfly wings, each frame handmade. You do all the stop-motion effects yourself, as well as creating all the characters. How scripted are your movies? Is there a lot of post-editing, or is it a really organic development that you leave alone?

AS: The movies are planned out. I used to think I was more free-form with my approach, but I realized I obsess over frames—fractions of seconds. I do pretty rough storyboards but place them in a pretty exact animatic. I want shots to hit on exact musical beats, to the exact frame. The free-form, organic part is the actual animation. I set up the shot, obsessing over tiny little leaves or pieces of dirt in the corner of a frame, meanwhile knowing exactly where it will be edited into the film—where the shot starts and ends in the musical phrase—but then allow the characters to animate however best their form dictates. I animate straightforward, that is, not laid out ahead. Sometimes the animation is planned in my mind, sometimes not. And then in the end I obsess over keeping all the little dirty parts, mistakes and stuff, such as hairs, thumbprints, even a clay tool popping in for one frame by accident. Those are the things that make it special and handmade, not [like a] machine or robot. In that sense, I leave it to its own nature. I rarely shoot a scene twice. I never really edit within a shot. Sometimes I shoot extra frames, but they usually end up getting trimmed off. Mostly, whatever I do first goes in the film. There are always surprises and happy accidents. I also allow myself to change whatever I want, but usually the first thought is always the best.

BR: I went back last week to sit through the film several times to try to really pay attention to the story, but the film itself kept surprising me with really tiny pieces that I hadn't noticed before, such as the stop-motion flower sequence. As I watched, I saw how the film process is extended into the ceramic sculpture. I looked at the piece with the horse differently afterward. There is a Lynda Benglis show of ceramics up now. The horse reminds me of how Benglis mixes functionality and formalism.

AS: I could see that. I like that mix.

BR: Has working in LA given you more freedom to play with such a wide variety of forms? There is also a sense of humor to your work, however dark, that reminds me of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley.

AS: LA probably gives you more freedom to spread out. I guess you can have more space compared to NY, but not compared to the rest of the country. I don't think I could work on one thing all the time no matter where I lived. I always need to be switching between things. You can be a loner and yet still have community here in New York. People understand space here. You can disappear as needed. Most of my friends are in the film and music worlds, which is a big chunk of the city so that's nice. And, of course, working alongside Eric always challenges me to be better and give more to my work, as he does.



Left: Allison Schulnik, *St. Louis Man*, 2012, oil on linen, 110 x 78 inches; Courtesy of the artist and ZieherSmith, NY

Right: Allison Schulnik, *Blue Flower*, 2013, glazed porcelain, 10 x 16 x 14 inches; Courtesy of the artist and ZieherSmith, NY

BR: Are you working on a new film, now that this one is complete, or are you going to take some time off to work on other things?

AS: I don't make that many films. I've made seven since I started making films about seventeen years ago. I probably won't make another for a few years, and then maybe I will work on a feature for a decade. Who knows... But yes, I am working on many other things now and will be for a while, I'm sure. I don't like to talk about works in progress, but I am overflowing with ideas. I'm taking a break from showing work for a while so I can really focus in the studio. I just have so much I need to make right now.

BR: I was talking with Scott Zieher about an interviewer that had done a piece only asking you questions about cats. Scott said you are a huge fan of the creatures. I have a lot of them too. So, I can't resist. What is it about cats?

AS: What is there not to like about cats!?! They are small, furry, warm and make weird noises when you touch them.

—Bradley Rubenstein

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