

Allison Schulnik Interview

October 31st, 2012 by Arthur Peña



Allison Schulnik in her studio

Arthur Peña: There seems to be a sense of transformation within your work: turning outcasts into monumental figures within your paintings, giving seashells a new way to exist and the clear, constant, ever changing nature of the subjects in your films. All of this comes from the almost overt tactile nature of your work and I find myself asking "I wonder how many times Allison has touched this." Let's take a trip to Bizarro land and imagine that you are waking up on a Tuesday morning, only to look down and realize you have no hands. Tell me what happens next.

Allison Schulnik: No hands, well I would probably dance handless, and start working on that toe dexterity. Arm nubs can be quite agile as well.

AP: You would find a way to continue working?

AS: Yes of course. What else am I going to do with my life?

AP: So, you've got no hands, you're dancing and you're making work. As I'm sure you know, in Bizarro land everything is opposite of what it is in this reality, including the work that you're making. What does the antithesis of your work look like?

AS: Super-realist portraits of myself and loved ones.

AP: Thanks for taking that quick stroll through Bizarro land with me. The place where everything is inside out and you never quite know where you are. A place where the familiar becomes strange. This sense of atmosphere, if you will, is suggested in your work. It is beautifully rendered in your films but also in another place: the performances with your band Barfth.

AS: Yes Barfth lives



BARFTH!

AP: Do you see a difference between how you approach Barfth and your work? Are they the same to you?

AS: I think that they are different and the same. I usually end up obsessing over things equally, so depends on who you ask.

AP: I'm glad you mentioned 'obsessing.' I don't think your work could be made without some idea of obsessiveness behind it. How do you relate to that word/idea/approach?

AS: I am just an obsessive person. So most things I do get obsessed over. Once I focus on something I have trouble letting it leave my mind until it is completed.



Captain (and details), oil on linen, 68" x 84", 2012

AP: Maybe you heard this but as I was listening to radiolab this weekend I heard a story of a woman who would swallow objects such as knives, spoons, even a few radio antennas. She was saying that all that mattered, all she had, was this thought of swallowing objects. Once it was in her mind she had to complete the task. This was the only idea that sustained her in this life.

AS: Maybe that's where I'm heading.



(L) Mermaid with Legs #2, oil on linen, 60" x 48", 2012. (R) Sebastian Trio (#2, #3, & #4), gouaches on paper, 15" x 24", 2012

AP: Do you think that Ariel, from the paintings in Salty Air, contemplates these things?

AS: Like Hans Christian Anderson's Little Mermaid, Ariel's holy grail was legs. With the ultimate goal of love. Despite whatever torturous dagger pangs she might induce from the Witch's spell that granted her those very legs and stole her voice. Seems like obsession to me. Just not with radio antennas per say. Maybe those radio antennas were love for the radiolab woman. Tesla loved a pigeon.

AP: What do you love?

AS: People and things. And places.

AP: I agree. Do you think that your piece Fish Heads speaks to this love of all things or does that painting rest in the context of historical still life?

AS: Probably both. It is also a portrait of Flounder from The Little Mermaid.



Fish Heads, oil on linen, 36" x 48", 2012

AP: Is flounder presented as a meal?

AS: No, just a portrait.

AP: It seems that your work before came from a very private place, invented characters that related to specific people or thoughts in your life. How was it different for you to make work that was derived from a story that is 175 years old and beloved by so many?

AS: It was the same approach actually. The paintings from Salty Air were mostly based on people I know or love. I think it's impossible for me to not work that way. My work is always from a private place. Working long beloved tales into a private place just speaks to the reliability of human nature.

AP: Do you mean the reliability of human nature is to be unsatisfied with what we have? Are we destined to be forever longing?

AS: It seems like a good assumption based on past and present performance.



Still from Schulnik's 2011 video, Mound.

AP: I'm gonna kick myself if I don't ask you this while I have the chance: what did you dream last night?

AS: Last night's dream? Ahhh, that would give too much away. Sorry.