

Allison Schulnik

Whether working in clay, paint or animation, the emerging LA artist devises a memorable, effusive, and affecting, world.

By Carol Cheh

Allison Schulnik is a very popular artist. A Google search turns up dozens of splashy profiles and interviews, in lifestyle magazines as well as art blogs, and her CV includes a long list of exhibition reviews; this spring, she was the subject of a solo show at Laguna Art Museum. This level of attention is unusual for a young artist working in paint, ceramic sculpture, and animated films, who is not considered a "lowbrow" artist. It's even more noteworthy when one considers that Schulnik has only been actively pursuing a full-time artistic career since 2007, seven years after receiving her BFA in experimental animation from California Institute of the Arts.

After graduation, Schulnik tried making a living as a commercial animator for several years, but eventually realized that the corporate life wasn't for her—she yearned for something more. She started shopping her own work around to galleries and got her big break when the cutting-edge Chinatown space Black Dragon Society took notice and put her in a group show. After participating in numerous solo and group shows internationally and being featured in three exhibitions at Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, which now represents her, Schulnik has become well known for her thick, gooey paintings and highly textured ceramic sculptures and clay animation videos.

The works tend toward portraiture and narrative, focusing on an improvised cast of characters, their imagined stories, and the fanciful environments and situations in which they find themselves. To tell their stories, Schulnik employs a seductive combination of unabashed sentiment, pop accessibility, and solid art historical backbone. Her 2012 show at Mark Moore, titled "Salty Air," was a graphic look at *The Little Mermaid* tale, both in its Disney incarnation and its original, more gruesome Hans Christian Andersen version. Conch shells and fish abounded, along with hauntingly lonely portrayals of both sailors and mermaids. Sometimes elements would be conflated, as shells and sea creatures appeared to have human orifices and organs, evoking the all-encompassing environment of life at sea.

Schulnik's recent show at Laguna Art Museum, curated by Grace Kook-Anderson as part of the *ex•pose* contemporary art series (on view from February 24 – April 28, 2013), marked the artist's first major solo exhibition in a museum. She decided to create an entirely new body of paintings and sculptures to show alongside three of her video works. Largely inspired by a visit to Brooklyn's scenic and

historic Green-Wood Cemetery, these works are focused on gentle creatures inhabiting a pastoral setting.

Several instantly familiar figures, developed equally from fantasy and real life, were featured. Cemetery Boo, for example, who appears in two paintings (*Cemetery Boo* and *Cemetery Boo #2*, both 2012), is inspired by Schulnik's real-life partner, artist Eric Yahnker. Modeled after photographs she took of him during their visit to Green-Wood, Cemetery Boo is a relaxed, bucolic figure wearing raggedy clothes and a colorful straw hat. He evokes a farmer, a hobo, a Walt Whitman-type poet, a scarecrow or even a magical woodland creature of some sort. His name puns on both the common term of endearment for one's significant other, and the utterance made by cartoon ghosts.

The animation video *Hobo Clown* (2008) allows us to spend some quality time with a character that Schulnik created after befriending a homeless man who lived on the street outside of her former studio in downtown Los Angeles. Accompanied by a slow, sad soundtrack provided by the band Grizzly Bear, *Hobo Clown* focuses most of its attention on the main character's face, particularly his eyes. By pushing and pulling what seems to be endless wads of multi-colored clay, Schulnik makes the hobo's eyes transform over and over again—blinking, opening, gushing, rolling, expanding—as he looks directly into the camera. Full of expressive pathos, the *Hobo Clown* is reminiscent of exaggerated folk characters like Igor Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, the Russian puppet who comes to life and develops human emotions.

These and other characters inspire an uncanny sense of recognition and empathy from Schulnik's viewers—both because of the humanity that informs their essence, and because of the various unconscious connections they make with cultural sources both recent and historical. When asked about her artistic influences, Schulnik typically gives an enormous, sprawling list that includes alternative music, iconic actors, comic book artists, dancers, Broadway musicals, friends, and so on.

"CEMETERY BOO #2," 2012
OIL ON LINEN, 72" x 60"

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JIMENEZ-COLON COLLECTION
AND THE LAGUNA ART MUSEUM





Looking at her Laguna show in particular, however—which includes still lifes and landscapes in addition to the portraits mentioned above—it is striking how clearly she draws on classical art historical references as well. In particular, she seems to be the logical heir to a painting lineage that includes Hieronymus Bosch, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Francisco Goya, Vincent van Gogh, and Peter Saul, among others.

"History always has its say, whether you think it does or not," Schulnik says, when I point this out. "Especially if you're painting, 40,000 years of history is hard to keep quiet. Having a lot of painters in the family, including my mother, painting was literally what I was reared on, so the history of painting had an impact."

Schulnik grew up in an artistically progressive household; her father is an architect and her mother and aunt were both painters and illustrators. She also trained as a dancer when she was young; this led to a diverse nexus of influences on the young artist. "I'd say I was brought up on mostly 19th- and 20th-century painting, illustration, architecture and dance. When I was a kid, my mom was into David Hockney, Richard Diebenkorn, Edward Hopper,

ABOVE:

VIDEO STILL FROM "FOREST," 2009

CLAY STOP-MOTION ANIMATION, COLOR, SOUND

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, MARK MOORE GALLERY, CULVER CITY

AND THE LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

RIGHT:

"ARIEL," 2012

OIL ON LINEN

72" x 60"

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MARK MOORE GALLERY, CULVER CITY



John Singer Sargent, Georgia O'Keeffe, and most of the Impressionists. Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein were her teachers at the Pratt Institute. My dad's favorite has always been Robert Rauschenberg; he also loved Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Chuck Close, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Otto Dix. I remember he had some great Ernest Trova prints hanging in the house, including an early Mickey Mouse series lithograph. And of course, aside from painting, he's big on RM Schindler, Louis Kahn, Richard Neutra, Ricardo Legorreta, Philip Johnson, and Luis Barragán."

The swirl of cultural influences that inform Schulnik's work can be quite dizzying. What is very plain, however, is the immediate appeal of the materials that the artist uses to create her work—whether it's thick gobs of paint or intensely manipulated clay, it is clear that Schulnik's hands are all over the work, infusing it with passion and caring and literally bringing it to life. Paint swirls restlessly on her canvases, protruding off the surfaces and splashing off the sides. A blank corner can be spotted here and there, as if neatly finishing the rectangle was of no particular concern. The extreme detail found in her ceramic sculptures, such as *Crouching Cemetery Boo* (2013), is captivating: here, an old man's brow is furrowed with deep lines, while atop one of his bony hands, a mouse rests attentively, offering its friendship.

This vivid materiality is something that Kook-Anderson, Laguna Art Museum's Curator of Contemporary Art, made note of when observing audience reactions to the show. "There is definitely a strong sense of accessibility, given the visceral nature of the work and the pleasure that people take in seeing how she paints and sculpts," Kook-Anderson said. "We had to put up a sign in the museum telling people not to touch the artwork, because they get so lost in it that they forget about boundaries. One woman was found grabbing onto chunks of the paint!"

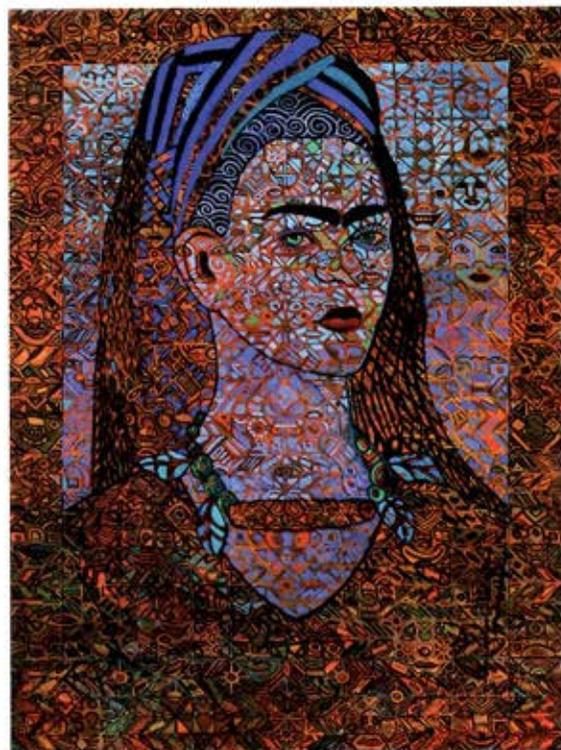
Interestingly, Schulnik has said in interviews that the characters are what she is really trying to get across, and the work simply looks the way it does because she is "sloppy." When pressed on this point and asked if she would rather make work that is more seamlessly realistic, Schulnik responds: "Sloppy is my primary mode. I'm not capable of making work that is seamlessly realistic. I just have no interest in it. Perfection is an unhappy venture. I love all kinds of work. I like things that are done with care and love. But I do love seeing the thumbprint in the clay, and the brush in the paint. It's just a natural way for me to work to best get my characters across. The character is most important. I don't think about medium too much."

After establishing herself in painting and sculpture, Schulnik revisited animation, the medium in which she was trained. She has completed a total of six clay animations to date, three of which were featured at Laguna. In addition to the popular *Hobo Clown*, there was also *Forest* (2010), which doubles as the official music video for Grizzly Bear's "Ready, Able," and *Mound* (2011), which enjoyed some viral attention when it became a Vimeo Staff Pick. Now, Schulnik is setting her painting practice aside for a while to focus on completing a new clay animation film, which she expects will take the next several months. It will be longer than the other videos, which are all less than six minutes long, and will incorporate elements of dance. The finished video will be featured in her next museum show, scheduled to take place at Wadsworth Atheneum in 2014.

Schulnik's re-dedication to animation is a nice development given the fact that she avoided the medium for a while; following some insights she gleaned while working in commercial animation. As she tells the story, "I mostly worked on commercials, including a long stint on the Charmin Bears toilet paper commercials. I did a lot of production assistant and grunt work and never really moved up too far beyond Ink & Paint. I met some great independent animators from all over the world and worked as an assistant to some. They would be brought in, known for some amazing experimentally animated film they had made, and they'd come to the studio in LA and have to make a tapon commercial for cash. Working in studios really helped me to realize what I did not want to do with my life: compromise."

Alfredo Arreguin

Ventanas (Windows)
may 2 - june 1



Blue Mantilla, 2012, oil on canvas, 40" x 30"

Andrea Heimer

Suburban Manias
june 6 - june 29



Mrs Miller Thought She Was Allergic
2012, acrylic on board, 12" x 12"

Daphne Minkoff

A Reconsideration
june 6 - june 29



Structure 14, 2004
collage/foil on canvas, 24.5" x 24.5"

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