

BRIDGES

Elisabeth
Higgins
O'Connor



ELISABETH HIGGINS O'CONNOR

Born: Arcadia, CA, 1963
Lives: Sacramento, CA

EDUCATION

M.F.A., University of California, Davis, CA, 2005
B.F.A., California State University, Long Beach, CA, 1995

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2014

Face to Face, Wall to Wall: Portraiture in Contemporary Art, Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, MT

Figurative Association: The Human Form, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN
what a beautiful crash into a dead end street, solo exhibition, CMA Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA

2013

Larger than Life: Exploring Scale in Contemporary Art, Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA

Making Special, Robert F. Agrella Gallery, Santa Rosa College, Santa Rosa, CA

Rag and Bone, solo exhibition, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA

2012

Cautionary Tales, solo exhibition, Transmission Gallery, Oakland, CA

Constructing Fantasy, Beacon Arts Building, Inglewood, CA

Small Loop, Fellows of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA

2011

Art Market, San Francisco, Charlie James Gallery, the Festival Pavilion—Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, CA

Dreadful Sorry Clementine, solo exhibition, Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, CA



dosed

2010

B13, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, CA

Stitches, Pasadena Armory for the Arts, Pasadena, CA

2009

Afterlife, San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, CA

Natural Blunders, De Saissett Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA

No Names, solo exhibition, David Salow Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

SELECTED GRANTS & AWARDS

2014—University of Washington, Seattle, WA

2012—Artist-in-Residency, The Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE

2005—Master of Fine Arts Fellowship, Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York, NY

1998—Arts/Industry Program, The John Michael Kohler Art Center, Kohler, WI

Website: elisabethhigginsconnor.net

This biographical material is selectively compiled and not meant to be exhaustive.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(Measurements are height x width x depth. Measurements are in inches.)

Photos: Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor

besot/beset, 2014

Torn and cut bedsheets, disassembled mattress cover, blankets, packing blankets, found cardboard, wood, paper, paint, rope, twine, glue, drywall screws 96" x 78" x 72"

dosed, 2014

Torn and cut bedsheets, disassembled mattress cover, pillows, blankets, packing blankets, couch cushion, found cardboard, wood, paper, paint, rope, twine, glue, drywall screws 84" x 96" x 60"

fever to tell, 2014

Torn and cut bedsheets, cut blankets, found cardboard, wood, paper, paint, glue, drywall screws 90" x 78" x 114"

wanna do right but not right now, 2014

Knit afghans, doilies, blankets, table cloth, bed sheets, found cardboard, wood, paper, packing straps, paint, glue, drywall screws, twine, thread, studio floor detritus 84" x 78" x 66"



wanna do right,
but not right now
detail

January 23—
August 22, 2015

Society for Contemporary Craft
2100 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222
412 261 7003

www.contemporarycraft.org

Meticulous Turmoil

Doug Jeck

In the 1985 movie *Brazil*, the altruist renegade, Harry Tuttle (Robert De Niro), is whisked away by a sinister, whirling dervish of newspapers and other indistinct, urban flotsam and jetsam, which “dis-configures” him into a neutralized, man-shaped blob. “Oh yes, that’s one of my absolute favorites!” said Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor when I asked if she knew this scene. I proposed it as an analogy for the imaginary forces that seem to gust up into her sculptures. “I can relate to that guy getting sucked up by everything.” she said later. “But, you’re not the guy,” I suggested, “You’re the cyclone!”

In the studio*, she is both—cyclone *and* surgeon. Her resulting mammoth figures display evidence that their origin was both cacophonous and meticulously precise. At what appears to be (and sounds like) stage one in her process, there is profuse, rhythmic, and masterful screwing. The variation of whines, bursts, and stops of the screw gun through cardboard slating and 2x4’s could easily be regarded as a virtuoso performance of a concerto for cordless drill. Lumber is handled as fluidly as charcoal line and facile, contrapposto wood armatures materialize as freely as contour drawings on paper.

The skeletal frames have an intrinsically classical proportion and grace that belies the “beleaguered, bedraggled, distressed and distorted anthropomorphic creatures” (her words) that ultimately swathe and overwhelm them. Exposed portions of lean, bare wood imply a bodily load that’s much heavier than the bundle of seemingly innocuous pretty paper cutouts and abandoned grandma detritus that have

rigidified into a kind of congealed, “confettied” flesh, encasing a hapless, conventionally artful stick figure.

In her earlier works (c.2002-6), the amassed forms (more clearly identifiable as distinct animals) were drenched with a raw clay, matte medium, concrete-like slurry that, in effect, petrified their animas, as if by some gooey (but not volcanic) primeval episode. Recently, the figures’ ponderous stasis doesn’t infer a physical cataclysm. Rather, they’re the wound, bound, stitched, and screwed outcome of the successive accretion of materials by a complex, eccentric sequence of the artist’s actions and contemplations. We’re now more intrigued to ponder the fictitious “who” that conjured these things into being than to interpret “what happened to them?” “What bizarre, ludicrous fable does this character belong to, and who spun it?” we may ask.

We rarely face this intricate dilemma—the compulsion to invent a fictitious “maker’s scenario” as the *primary* response (arguably) to a figure/object. Unlike linear narratives, in which characters unfold through each successive word, page, frame, scene, hour, etc., and are incrementally defined by people, things, and events, the sole figure/object in “real space” demands our innate, Gestalt reckoning. Ostensibly, everything we require to unravel the “trail” of Elisabeth’s character(s) is stitched and baled into deceptively familiar, suspiciously benign, nebulous allegorical hulks (“*wanna do right, but not right now*”) looming above us!

The categories of influence that inform Elisabeth’s work are vast. To attempt to list traceable, visual references that are manifest in her work is pure folly. Although, recently, to address the singular notion of the “Grotesque, she made an extensive list of sources with this proviso:

‘The following disparate ingredients may bear no immediate connection, but for me—when stirred together, geled into a viscosity that is not necessarily appetizing, but compelling—horribly, nonetheless:’

Her ‘recipe’ list includes detailed, fantastic descriptions, not merely of vast orders of things, but fancifully precise recounts of their dense, sensory, physical condition. She also vividly includes the explicitly specific historical, sociological, geographical, and psychological temperament of a diverse range of owners/inhabitants:

‘2½ cups of Saccharine and Bitters; the preciousness and claustrophobia of decoration, the cloying tediousness of the work on Rose Parade Floats once charming, magical, alluring, now read as decadent, pre-apocalyptic excess (to me).

‘1½ cups Entropy—an entire home’s humble contents dis-engorged curbside; a family’s home décor dumped on street post-foreclosure. Their privacy made public. The soft meat of a snail pulled from its shell, left to fry in the sun.’

The crush of sensate information and haptic overload alone that her figures exude demands that we insinuate ourselves not simply into Elisabeth’s physical studio atmosphere, but to assimilate with the laborer/playwright she concocts in her expansive theater of the

absurd. This complex place we imagine and engage seems refreshingly distant from the domain of Art “proper”.

Confronting these entities face-to-face is a multi-layered exercise in human perception for viewers. Initially, we’re physically and instinctually dissociated from these “bodies” as gigantic, visually congested rag beasts, but are then quickly transfixed by the miniscule, wispy fray of an emotive, honeyed eyelash positioned seven feet overhead. It’s then (and there), that the gaudy, oafish, naive colossus suddenly exudes a genuinely sweet Pathos, or at least the promise of such, if spied from just the right spot in the room.

It’s at that “sweet spot,” where the abrupt inversion of our initial emotional posture toward these big “things” allows us to unfold ourselves into them suddenly—as “beings.” It’s at that place, through their scrupulously considered gaze, that she claims that her work “attempts to close the gap between tenderness and the grotesque.”

*Elisabeth was a Visiting Artist Lecturer in 2013 at the University of Washington. Her studio was directly across the hall from my office.

**“*Figurative Association: The Human Form Symposium*.” Panel discussion: “The Grotesque: The Cook The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover” Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN.

Doug Jeck is an artist living in Seattle, Washington. Currently the Chair of 3D4M: Ceramics+Sculpture+Glass at the University of Washington, he has received awards and grants from the Illinois Arts Council, National Endowment for the Arts, and the Virginia A. Groot Foundation. His ceramic sculpture is included in numerous private and public collections including The Los Angeles County Museum, The Smithsonian Renwick Gallery of American Art, and The Gardiner Museum of Art; and his work has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *American Ceramics*, *New Art Examiner* and *Ceramics Art and Perception* among many other publications.

The *Bridge Exhibition Series* is made possible by the Allegheny Regional Asset District, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Elizabeth R. Raphael Fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation, Ted Rowland, BNSF Foundation, Ferrin Contemporary and other generous donors.



ABOVE: *fever to tell*
BELOW LEFT: *wanna do right, but not right now*
BELOW RIGHT: *besot/beset*