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Far From This Setting: The Art of Meredith James



Meredith James, *Far from this setting in which I now find myself*, 2014, wood and latex paint, approx. 12 x 24 x 12 feet. Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park.

By **THOMAS BUTTER**, NOV. 2014

This interview discusses the work of Meredith James. *"Far from this setting in which I now find myself"* (2014) is a large scale installation at Socrates Park currently on view as part of the Emerging Artists Fellowship Exhibition. The piece is made of wood and elaborately painted.

Meredith James: This piece has a kind of specificity in how you view it. It's both a sculpture and an optical illusion but needs to be viewed through the viewfinder with a camera or phone in order for the illusion to work. The fact that it needs to be viewed from one point has made it harder for people to figure out, but I like that there is one "right place" to look at it from. The piece forces the viewer into a specific position and, from that position, it changes the way people look when they are inside it. People's bodies seem to shrink or grow when they are being looked at. The work is a little bit tyrannical that way.

Thomas Butter: The piece makes demands on people.

M: Yes. It makes both the viewer and the people inside it part of the work in a way I think is interesting. It is a vessel and it is a stage. I went every Sunday in September and October to photograph people in it.

T: You did?

M: Yes. It's great to be there seeing people interact with the piece, but I was editing hundreds of photographs each week and sending them to each person individually. It was a lot of work. I'm going to continue to go out there and photograph people but less frequently- once or twice a month until March. It's good to see the way people play with it, to see it function. To watch other people- "express themselves" isn't quite right- "discover how to use it" is more like it. It is a tool people can use.

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Meredith James, *Far from this setting in which I now find myself*, 2014, wood and latex paint, approx. 12 x 24 x 12 feet. Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park. Photo taken 9/14/2014.

T: Does it take a bit of an introduction for most people, or do they get it pretty quickly? What do you say?

M: I just say that whoever is standing in the background is going to be smaller, and those standing in the front or off the side are going to be bigger. Some people really get into it, they do different scenarios- for example where a “tiny” person is kissing a big person- they look like they are holding hands or talking to each other. Some people understand it intuitively, and some really don’t know how to do that. It has to do with being able to think about yourself from the point of view of a camera- in a way different than smiling or trying to look good.



Meredith James, *Far from this setting in which I now find myself*, 2014, wood and latex paint, approx. 12 x 24 x 12 feet. Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park. Photo taken 9/6/2014.

T: Do you mean as a character?

M: Maybe. As a figure.

T: As a figure? As an object?

M: Yes. It’s a different way of interacting with a camera for the most part, but not entirely. I like being there and being able to talk with people about it. I go there to photograph midday, so the entire piece is lit up evenly. My being there can help create the ideal way to be with the piece.

T: At the opening some people thought the piece was just a way to put themselves in a romantic setting.

M: Yes.

T: So how do you introduce yourself?

M: I ask, “Would you like me to photograph you?” They ask, “Why are you doing this, do I need to pay?” And I say, “No

I'm doing it for fun." This piece is public art, and the question, "How does art make the community better?" or "Make the world better?" is really hard to answer. There isn't a good answer to that. Obviously a soup kitchen can feed people who are hungry. With this the best thing you can say is that it inspires people, to have art here. It gives people another way to think about the world. But that seems sort of lame. Especially for the community looking at the work. The way my piece answers the question, "Why does it exist?" is by answering "It exists so that you can interact with it in a specific way." I hope this frees people to really look at the piece. They're not wondering what it is for.

T: Something gets uncovered which is not usually available? Some dynamic revealing people as entities outside of themselves? The idea of being an object of character is definitely a step outside of oneself.

M: Yes and then you become part of the work. I think when there are two people inside of the piece and someone is photographing it, it becomes a system that you can interact with by playing specific roles within that system. People get really excited about being inside of it and getting photographed, and then they talk with me about it, they tell me what they think about it. It opens a dialogue.



Meredith James, *Far from this setting in which I now find myself*, 2014, wood and latex paint, approx. 12 x 24 x 12 feet. Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park. Photo taken 10/25/2014.

T: But that interaction automatically involves 3 people. The photographer plus two others. There is something here about the social dynamic. You are figuring it out together, or improvising together something different from most art objects, even public art objects.

M: That's true. But it makes sense for Socrates Sculpture Park. People usually are in groups, or with their dog. You don't have the individual art viewer the way you do in a museum. A lot of people want me to take their picture when they are just in there alone and I will say that you can really see the illusion when there are two people. They want to be photographed when they are in the center, like they are in this garden.

T: Right, like they are in a romantic setting, a foreign setting.

M: If they are alone, they interact with the set the most, looking out into the distance for example. It is not devoid of interest for a single individual. But different. There are a few different things happening in this piece. One is that it is a fantasy formal garden imposed onto a city park with the industrial feel of a public space built on a landfill. Socrates is a great park, it has a democratic feeling. But the park within my sculpture has a feeling of carefully designed opulence.

T: Socrates Park is flat, very few parks are flat really.

M: Yes the landscaping there doesn't coming together in the way that a formal or romantic garden does, it's not associated with the same set of feelings.

T: So part of your intent was to add romance to the place, possibly?

M: I think the romance of the image I used makes sense with the idea of projecting yourself into a fantasy space. A lot of people think it is Versailles, which it isn't, but it is as if you were looking out from a castle, you can have a childlike association, imagining yourself living in a castle, living in the past. Things that have a distance that is evocative. I did another Ames Room with a mountain landscape and people were less able to put themselves in that one. You might love the mountains but the room I made with mountains must have seemed like a random background, people didn't interact with that setting as much.



Meredith James, Ames Landscape: Ames Landscape, 2012, wood, acrylic paint, fabric, and plants, 8 x 16 x 11 feet. The two men inside demonstrate the illusion.

T: There is something about the garden related to urban space because it has passageways that are laid out, but it isn't a landscape, instead there are ways to connect. Coming off the street, then entering Socrates Park, and then entering your piece presents 3 layers of urban space.

M: Yes it's a grid still, related to the city. You can look at the image and see how you would walk through it. There are paths laid out, it isn't a forest.

T: Or a mountain. You don't think about scaling it, there would be no way to get in.

M: Yes. The real park pictured here was also a set for a movie- "Last Year at Marienbad". I developed the piece thinking about the garden in that movie because the movie is all about the confusion of memory with fantasy. There is a lot of slippage throughout. So the idea of this sculpture is that you are in the garden, but never in it, you are projecting yourself into it. The other thing with the movie is that it overlays several grand resort hotels seamlessly- and this garden of mine is overlaid on Socrates.

T: Yours actually represents a real garden, no?

M: Yes it is the Nymphenburg Park, a garden outside of Munich.

T: It still exists?

M: Yes.

T: Was it used because it would have been too elaborate for Alain Resnais to make a set that big? People are wandering around in there in the film.

M: I'm not sure. Resnais photographed the iconic image from the film- the overview of the garden- on a cloudy day and then painting the shadows of the people in afterwards, so that only the people are casting shadows. I decided to make the reference obvious, if you want it, because that is in line with the way I was thinking about the piece. More interesting than being a garden in Versailles or tied to a real castle. It is more recognizable from the film than from the world, which makes sense to me.

T: Speaking of film, you built another kind of set using distorted interior spaces for a film you made with Julia Jarcho, what is the title?

M: "Delmar."



Meredith James, Delmar Scene 1: *Delmar*, video by Meredith James, play by Julia Jarcho, 2014, 3-channel video installation, video: 44 minutes, screen: 7 x 12 feet. Installation at Jack Hanley, NY.

T: How did it feel to move to the infinite space of the sky above you at Socrates?

M: It was easier than trying to make space in the studio. For *Delmar* I had to make sets of interiors but also exteriors of buildings. It was really hard to make convincing exterior space. I had to be really thorough to make it not look like a studio. I ended up going into it with After Effects and cutting out all of the painted skies and replacing them with real sky. This really helped to open it up. It's subtle but comparing the two you see that the painted sky made it seem like it was all onstage.



Delmar, video by Meredith James, play by Julia Jarcho, 2014, 3-channel video installation, video: 44 minutes. Video still from Scene 6.

T: More of a set.

M: Having those holes changed to real sky makes the space a little less clearly recognizable. Being totally outside at *Socrates* was much easier. The fact this piece wasn't contained and that it included elements from the world- the sky, the sun and the way it lights it, makes it much less like a capsule in the park that you enter. It still is the park, and I like that. It takes elements from *Socrates* and funnels them into a different world. I think that was much more successful than some of the other sets I have done that are contained. But it was difficult to be working outside, not on your own time. You are always aware of the weather, and you have to accept there will be a lot of degradation over time.. It is house paint but it is going to get damaged.

T: Do you know for sure that the weathering is going to be a problem?

M: Rain is fine, it washes it. But we'll see what happens. With snow for example. There is something nice about the way you can't account for the weather. In a gallery there is this emphasis on making a space where everything is accounted for. This just isn't possible outside.

T: You also had a chance to see one of your rooms in a gallery (Abrons Art Center) where you weren't using it to make a film.

M: Yes.

T: So, you have been able to build an index and see the way your work functions in different spaces?

M: Yes. At Abrons I used part of a set, not even a complete one, a big fragment of a set as a sculpture. People couldn't get into it.

T: I saw it as being somewhat of a painting but also a three-dimensional fragment. It had a very interesting balance between the two.

M: Thank you. It was fortuitous that the shape of the gallery corresponded to the flatness of the fragment. It stopped being a room. It was both a bit like a room and the image of a room.

T: It almost felt like a diorama.

M: Yes. I was very happy with the piece there. A lot of people ask me where my art lies- I make videos, but I also make the sets. The sets will also be sculptures sometimes. But the sets aren't usually sculptures- it is a different process. The piece at Socrates probably won't become a video in its own right.

T: But you might make a video of it being used, right?

M: Yes, but not as a set the way I use other sets, to achieve a certain "shot". I don't want to make sets for other people. I collaborated with a playwright, Julia Jarcho, to do my last video, but that was more than the sets. I edited it. We directed it together. I was involved with every part of the process, except the writing and the acting and the way the actors said the lines. The project was to make the words of the play, and they space in which the play takes place, fit together, and move in tandem. I never thought I was making sets for her play. Actually, when I approached her about the project, I had already made a couple of the sets.

T: In an earlier gallery show you did in Chelsea you use a pane of glass that's painted on and that we can also look through. There is a room-sized space behind it, it is very deep. It seems related to the way the picture plane and the space interact. The physical room behind the glass, and the image on the glass work together.



Meredith James, A stand of roadside cholla against which small birds had been driven by the storm and there impaled, 2010, lamp, light bulb, grow light, wood, sand, cacti, magic sculpt, crow wings, crow skull, plastic, acrylic paint, glass, oil paint, rocks, mirror, cacti: 79 x 20 x 25.5 inches, window: 48 x 40 x 12 inches. Looking through the peep hole in the painting, the viewer sees a crow caught in a cactus. The crow's eye is a mirror which reflects the viewer's eye.

M: It's a painting on glass of a desert landscape with a light behind it. You look through a hole in the glass and see a crow caught in a cactus, situated in the big space behind the wall. The crow's eye is a mirror which reflects your eye as you look through the peep hole, so it looks as if the crow is animated. People thought there was a video in the crow's eye, they didn't recognize it was their own eye. It is interesting you say it's about the room behind, because I always thought of the piece as the experience of wide open landscape. When you are in the desert, you see either the wide open space, the whole landscape, or you see a tiny detail on the ground, like an ant. But there is no "medium space". There was a deficit of "human-sized" things in the desert. It was either the sweeping, or the micro. So I made a landscape, and then you look into the landscape you see a detail. But it is also the picture plane and the room, which is the inverse. The crow is the figure, and the eye is the way the viewer gets themselves into the work, behind the glass. So its like you are looking at yourself looking at a painting. It is a bit similar to this piece at Socrates.



Meredith James, Delmar Fragment. 2014, wood, latex paint, and insulation foam, 7 x 5 x 11 feet. Installation at Abrons Art Center, NY.

M: Yes.

T: I can feel there are things in there that overlap, beside the obvious things like landscape and figure. There is something about our position moving around the figures and the space which is really engaging. In Socrates we can't get past a certain place. But in that one, we get inside it.

M: Yes. I hope I can do that again!

T: The pieces really are related. Now I'm thinking about the piece with the van and the security guard, and how in that piece space transforms and moves, without us knowing quite how it does that.

M: That video installation, "Day Shift", is about a thought: if you film a room you are literally making a room somewhere, you are doubling it.



Meredith James, 2009, video installation, room: 6 x 6 x 7.5 feet, video: 3 minutes 12 seconds. Installation at Marc Jancou Contemporary, NY.

T: A room which was a police station office ends up in the back of a van.

M: Yes, it's a kind of loop. That piece has been shown several times but the part where I walk from the office to the car is always reshot. That part is site-specific.



Meredith James, *Day Shift*, 2009, video installation, video: 3 minutes 12 seconds. The security guard walks through Marc Jancou Contemporary, NY.

T: Because you want it to be the same walk we take as viewers leaving the gallery of space it is being shown in.

M: Exactly. I want it to be a walk that is right where the viewer is, so the viewer looks right at what I filmed.

T: It is very surreal- in the sense that it is very dislocating. Like melting watches. I remember part of it, not everything. It is the only time I can think of where you put yourself in the spaces that you built.



Day Shift, 2009, video: 3 minutes 12 seconds.

M: My earlier videos all have me in spaces.

T: Oh.

M: The second video I made, very simple, is probably where that police video started. It is just me walking around my house. I got a lot of criticism early on about being in my own work, and whether it was about my own identity. I waded through that territory. I didn't mind talking about how it related to me, but it started to seem like that was getting in the way.

T: *Your own persona as being part of the content.*

M: Yes, people really wanting to read something autobiographical into it. That interpretation wasn't incorrect, it just wasn't interesting to me and so I moved away from it. But I would still be in my own work if I was a better actress! I don't mind being in my own work but maybe the artist isn't the best "everyman" to be shown over and over again.

T: *Can we try to think about your interest in space and its representation? This is a very general statement, but in your work you have particular ways of doing that. The pieces are matter-of-fact, but also seem to have a very specific "sliver" or angle of view, or selected takes on spatial dynamics. I would like to pull together a coherent vision of what you are doing. I know you had an interest and did a lot of research on places made in buildings to hide religious minorities who were out of favor. For example to hide Catholics priests in England in the 16th century.*

M: Yes "priest holes"

T: *So is there a psychological source for your work, or a particular mental space you are drawing on for your work?*

M: What interests me about the priest holes is the way you think you know the limits of your house- the floor plan, where the walls are, and then this thing happens: you can open a door and an entrance to something appears, something which is not part of the way you understand the house. This breaks down the familiar, and the limits of the familiar. I think that is really appealing.

T: *What is interesting about that example is that you are implying both- people who own the house know these spaces exist, but the space is at the same time unfamiliar, even to them! It isn't something you always use, or something you never use.*

M: Yes, and in the case of priest holes, those spaces had political resonance. I became personally obsessed with these hiding places because the dissent they represented went all the way from the home to the state in a direct line. There are other examples of this, the Underground Railroad is one and the Anne Frank house is another. The struggle during the Protestant reformation to hide priests in Catholic homes was an early example of women having political power. Often it came down to the lady of the house to deal with police when they came, and to hide the priest. But in this case, because England and (Catholic) Spain were at war, having this hiding place became an expression of power, and could be seen as an act of treason. The church of England was new, and being aligned with that church was like aligning yourself with the Queen. If you didn't then, you might still be Catholic.

T: *I see.*

M: I wish my own work had that kind of line: from the personal domestic to the political. I wish there was that kind of response. But space is a good place to put a lot of fear, I guess, and that is hard to articulate in either an object or a person. Houses and rooms seem like a great place to develop and locate fear.

T: *Being confronted by something unfamiliar?*

M: In horror movies the unknown is always appearing in the house. But the scariest thing in the movie might be the house itself. Like in "The Shining", just seeing the hallway. More than the woman with her skin falling off in the bathtub, which people don't really remember. Well, they do, but its not as iconic as the hallway.

T: Right.

M: Something that appears safe becomes something that feels dangerous. I'm reading this book, "Death 24 Times a Second" by Laura Mulvey. She makes a link between optical illusions and film- that film arose out of the tradition of optical illusions and visual deception. It clicked for me, because I am making video and I work with all these optical illusions. There is something about making the unreal, real.

T: "24 frames" refers to the film camera is a mechanized system for representing or depicting space...

M: Because of this film is just a million still photographs that give the illusion of life.

T: Yes. Illusions are threatening. Right? This is the death part.

M: I find them threatening. My work is pretty lighthearted in general but there is something that interests me that is scary. I know what you mean about wanting to get to the larger point of that the work is, but I am not completely sure what that is.

T: We are moving towards it, I think. It isn't as simple as saying "space that's threatening". But there is something about space that evokes things which aren't controllable or that appear as surprises. There is something about unpredictability running throughout the work.

M: I don't usually make that connection, but it is the way the whole world is- it seems very fragile right now. If NYC ends up underwater we will be living very differently. Current conditions seems stable, but that is an illusion! We are all operating within these systems that we know aren't stable. But we continue on, even though things could all change in a second. Rooms and their space seem stable, but the way you can destabilize them is really disturbing. I was photographing some friends in my sculpture at Socrates recently. They came over and looked at the pictures and they were really surprised. They know my work and had even seen photos of other people in piece. But they were more surprised and shocked than they were prepared for. They kept saying, "It's weird how much you have changed me! I'm different!"

T: Right!

M: Yes, that is possible with my work. That can happen.

T: Destabilization is a great word.

M: Yes. But I'm not quite satisfied with that, it may not be at the heart of my work.

T: I think you are circling around it. Within your set of issues, there is a very wide shift in the spectrum from one piece to the next. It isn't unreasonable to think about the pieces together, because the spatial questions are so forceful in the work. We haven't talked about the one you showed a Interstate Projects in Bushwick, for example, which involves a stairwell. The pieces we have been talking about are all built social spaces that are destabilized.



Hallway Door, 2013, hollow core doors, wood, and acrylic paint, 36 x 80 x 28 inches. Shot of installation at Interstate Projects, Brooklyn. After descending the stairs (left image), the viewer entered the gallery and saw a door with a slit cut into it straight ahead. Upon opening the door, the viewer saw a relief sculpture of the stairwell leading down to the gallery in a wedge between two hollow core doors.

M: Yes. This piece, titled "Hallway Door" was exhibited in "Where the Sun Don't Shine" at Interstate Projects.

T: The piece at Socrates is up until...?

M: March 2015. They post the dates and times when I am out there on their website. I really like the aspect of being there. You rarely get a chance to be so involved with the way people are looking at a piece. More than any other piece there is a continuity with the viewers. There are people who walk by it every day.

T: Really?

M: Yes. Those people have a kind of stewardship of the park. At a gallery the work is less “for the public”. This situation is unique for me.

I was talking with a friend and I thought it would be amazing for me to build it right into the landscape- you know, with topiary. I would need a much bigger budget. Maybe someday!



Far from this setting in which I now find myself, 2014, wood and latex paint, approx. 12 x 24 x 12 feet. Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park. Photo taken 10/5/2014.



Thomas Butter has been living in NYC since 1977, and showing since 1981. He is currently on the Adjunct Faculty in the Fine Arts Department at Parsons the New School for Design, and has taught at many colleges and universities on the east coast, including RISD, Harvard, Yale, Tyler, MICA, University of the Arts, and many others. thom.butter@gmail.com website: www.tombutter.com

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