



Cell Series
NATASHA BOWDOIN
HEX Δ M

7 February - 24 May 2015

Patrick Kelly, the Old Jail Art Center's Curator of Exhibitions, email interview with Natasha Bowdoin. (December 2014 - January 2015)

PK: I want to start out by asking you some questions about how you go about creating works. Can you briefly describe how they are physically created? It appears as a daunting process.

NB: Both the large installations and small works begin as drawings on paper. I start by drawing a pattern, transcribing a text, or sometimes both in pencil, then I often apply color with gouache and ink, and lastly I cut the drawings out. I cut everything by hand with just a simple x-acto blade and scissors. The work only really starts to take shape once these drawn and cut layers accumulate, laying one on top of another, allowing substrata to show through. I work on many pieces at once so that works can cross-pollinate. One drawing intended for a particular piece might be cut down and integrated into another. This allows chance to become a natural part of the process. It's labor intensive no doubt, but I don't usually find it that daunting. I actually think the manual labor is crucial to my process. The cutting starts to feel meditative in a way, allowing me time to make intuitive decisions on what move to make next.

PK: Do you have a preconceived, or general idea, of what the finished work might look like or do you let the intuitive process determine the outcome?

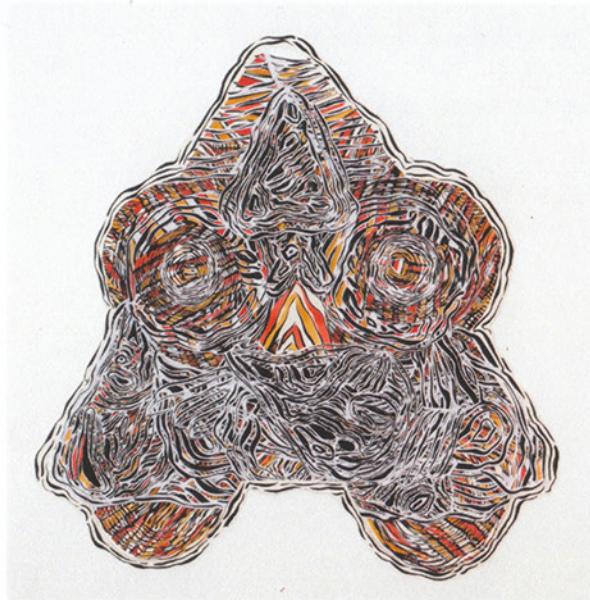
NB: I generally have a very open ended idea of what the work might turn into, but I usually work best if I allow pieces to develop intuitively. Sometimes it's even best if the work shifts dramatically from my original intentions during the making. If I start out with too strict a set of parameters the work often suffers for it. I'm more excited and engaged if unpredictability is incorporated into the process. That's why I find it so important to work in layers. One drawing looks one way on its own but becomes something completely transformed when seen through the layer of another.

For this particular show, I did start out with some forms in mind that loosely guided my drawing process. The letterforms found on the outside of the jail—derived from the various stonemasons' initials—guided some of my compositions. I also surround myself with a lot of visual source material, and those images seep into the work as it comes together. Recently I've been keeping a lot of fabric patterns around—patterns from Southwestern and Mexican textile traditions, and also early 1900s schematic drawings of the moon's surface—in the hopes that they will influence the work.

PK: A sometimes-subtle element of your work is the use of text. Can you discuss how that first became, and continues to be, a part of your work?

NB: I think I first added text as a way to build narrative and inject humor into my work. At the time, I was making a lot of animal drawings and it just seemed natural to start giving them a more direct voice. Depending on the phrase that was attached, the drawings seemed to be speaking to me directly ("hang on to your ego"), or others ("fool me once"), or sometimes both ("I am disappointed in you"). It felt freeing to add words and in a sense I think it made the drawings more playful and confrontational. Originally the text was written in a stream-





of-conscious manner or was plucked from overheard conversations and fragmented song lyrics. I was really interested in the surrealist practice of automatic writing at the time. Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa described this practice as writing "owned by someone else." This notion of the writer/artist as a conduit intrigued me. Over time, the animal imagery took a back seat and I became more interested in the words themselves. I was searching for where the work might go next and I came across an unexpected guide in Robert Smithson, in particu-

lar his writings on language and the idea of "a language to be looked at and/or things to be read." This idea really consumed my thinking for a while and honestly still does to this day. I started to use appropriated text, as opposed to my own diaristic writing, and sought out works that I could re-envision through the act of transcription. I was drawn to authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Lewis Carroll, and Walt Whitman to name a few. I was looking for authors already experimental in method, who crafted different sensations and rhythms of words on the page and ultimately who weren't afraid to defy their readers' expectations. In many ways this is much of the territory I'm still working in today; I'm trying to arrive at an experience of the written word that challenges our expectations. I'm interested in pursuing the possibility of language as a wild, untamable abstraction, and less as a communicative device, searching for the point where a word, or even just a letter, maintains a ghost of its former identity but is on the brink of becoming something else.

PK: It appears at this point that you are using the letters (initials) carved into the museum's 1877 old jail building by the original Scottish masons in some works. Can you talk a little about that choice?

NB: Yes, the stonemasons' initials were really the jumping off point for this show. I wanted to make a body of work that had a sense of place, referencing the old jail itself and its history in some way. I spent a lot of time going back and forth about how to do this. I thought about using different texts in the old jail's archive as source material. Originally, I had ideas of transcribing prisoner correspondence but that ended up feeling potentially invasive. Those early ideas all felt contrived and too restrictive in some form, so I decided to go back to the creators of the jail itself and use their initials as the building blocks for my work. This reference point felt specific in its root but also much more open-ended and made a natural connection to the idea of the "glyph" that

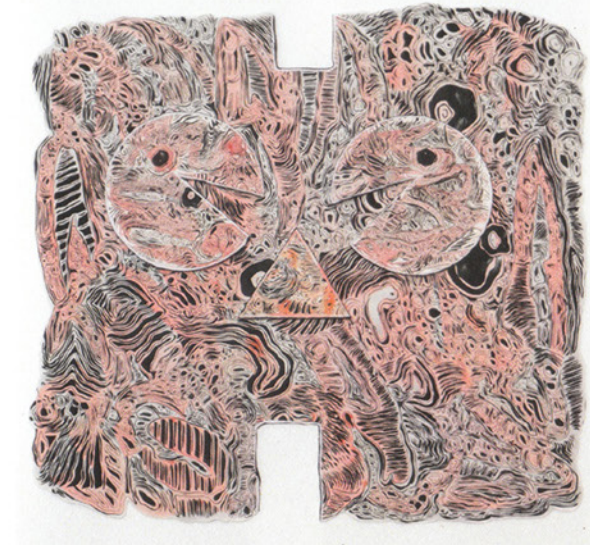
I've been thinking about for a while now. On a personal note, my dad was a stonemason in Maine where I grew up, and so in a way it felt nice to be able to draw attention to the builders and the labor that goes into this work while connecting back to my family.

PK: That's very interesting. I've made reference in my own artwork that artists are not unlike masons—that once the main idea or concept has been conceived the vast majority of physically making a work is intuitive labor.

Do you want viewers of your work to be equally aware of the overall effect of the parts (building) or more aware of the parts that make up the whole (bricks/stones)? Do you want a hierarchy?

NB: That's a good question and a tricky one to answer. I think it really points out the knot that has always been present in my work; that the parts and the whole are forever in competition with one another. The push and pull between something forming and something dissolving really might be the subject of all my work if you strip everything else away. Finishing a piece has

always been difficult for me because it implies a sense of conclusion, that a form now has a fixed identity. I'm more interested in making images that remain in flux, that feel like they've been caught in a moment of pause, but that ultimately will continue to shift into something else. I would say that the hierarchy is always changing.



For this show I chose to experiment with my approach a little bit. The small drawings in one cell might be thought of as components of the larger

piece in the adjoining cell. Separated, the different stages of the process are more obvious. One can see how one might lead to another, but both stages are also given their own space to be recognized.

My hope for viewers is that they might appreciate this sense of transformation and all that comes with it when they look at the work: the excitement, the ambiguity, the messiness, and the unexpected. If I'm a mason laying brick, I hope that the structure I arrive at in the end is one I do not recognize.

The interview, and additional images, can be viewed on the
museum's website www.theoldjailartcenter.org

Past Cell Series artists:

DENNY PICKETT - 2008
JEFFREY BROSK - 2009
RANDY BACON - 2009
JOHN FROST - 2009
NANCY LAMB - 2010
JOHN ROBERT CRAFT - 2010
TERRI THORNTON - 2010
ANNE ALLEN - 2011
WILL HENRY - 2011
ERIC ZIMMERMAN - 2011
BILL DAVENPORT - 2012
JUSTIN BOYD - 2012
CAROL BENSON - 2012
KANA HARADA - 2013
BRAD TUCKER - 2013
ANTHONY SONNENBERG - 2013
CHRIS SAUTER - 2014
CAMP BOSWORTH - 2014
RACHEL HECKER - 2014

Front Image:

Untitled H, 2014, gouache and ink on cut paper, 19 x 14 in. Courtesy the artist.

Inside Images:

Untitled A, 2014, gouache and ink on cut paper, 24 x 24 in. Courtesy the artist.

Untitled H, 2014, gouache and ink on cut paper, 20 x 20 in. Courtesy the artist.

Back Images:

Untitled e, 2014, gouache and ink on cut paper, 10 x 8 in. Courtesy the artist.

Untitled X, 2014, gouache and ink on cut paper, 8.5 x 8.5 in. Courtesy the artist.

This exhibition series is generously supported by
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Juli and Mac McGinnis

