

Q&A: Lauren Kelley

Interview by Rhiannon E. MacFadyen, July 2012

Rhiannon: What would you say is the overarching theme or purpose to your art practice in recent years?

Lauren: Without making something too didactic, for the past few years I have continued thinking about the malleable nature of an innocent mind, the twisted characteristics of immature adults, and the odd mechanics of a self-sufficient place. I can also say that a love of materials is a major reason for my practice now.



Lauren Kelley

R: Is there a thread that is consistent throughout your body of work?

L: I've been laboring with the intent of creating an access community cable station series. I like the bootleg nature and the DIY hand that accompanies this public communication outlet.

R: What do you hope viewers will take from your artwork?

L: I don't know. Again, as this work progresses, I hope that it makes people see their environment as a place of endless outcomes. The everyday can still become something new. At least, that's when good work makes me excited.

R: How long have you been using animation as your primary medium, and why?

L: I've been working with animation since 2006. Prior to then, my practice vacillated between painting and sculpture. I used to make costumes and show them in 16mm film or still photographs. I think that animation was just a logical next step. I think it would be nice to go back to film some day, as well.

R: What prompted you to use the combination of plastic dolls and clay, rather than one or the other?

L: I use the combination of plastic dolls and clay because it aids the portrayal of natural movement and contributes to the wonky settings staged for the commonplace characters I animate.

R: Is there significance to the specific dolls you use in your animation?

L: The use of the dolls, and catalyst for this work, was a response to a time when physiologists studied the effects of racial prejudice on black American youth. Dolls were the main variables employed in a test conducted with hundreds of children over a ten year period. During the 1940s and 50s these tests measured each subject's self-regard in relationship to their preference for either a blond or brown toy. The data revealed an inferiority complex amongst many tested. When the 'doll test' was performed half a century later, the current results pointing to the same inferiority complex compelled me to incorporate this object in my work.

R: You also work in photography, sculpture, and collage. How do these mediums work with your video works?

L: [For me] there is no linear approach to arriving at an exhibition's outcome. The direction of an animated work will come from figuring out how to frame a photograph. The collage work often leads to the drafting of storyboards, and I make sculptural objects that can be encountered by a viewer with some distance. Sometimes the objects that were the impetus for an entire narrative will inadvertently find their way into a video work for only a split second.

R: Race comes up in your work consistently, but to varying degrees. What strikes me about how you approach the topic is that the more usual and obvious issues don't often come into play. Topics that are more subtle and less talked about seem to be more of your focus—like the uncertainty of experiencing subtle racism (*Prototypical Oppression/Obsession*, 2009) or class and place within the black community (*Upside*, 2010). Why do you broach these subjects in particular?

L: I have fun making work about subjects that are familiar to me—people and places I know or have observed or dreamed up—and many of the people happen to be black. With that said, I'm compelled to repel the creative chorus who (however brilliantly) uphold a tried and true conversation about black people and trauma. I just hope to explore the subject matter that is most familiar to me in a less anticipated fashion.

***Prototypical Oppression/ Obsession* was less about anything racially askew than an ode to plastic and passive-aggressive behavior. I am drawn to ordinary realities, and in this story I wanted to render conflict that occurs when limited space is perceived. Kit's power is her good looks and charm. Penny is the antagonist who's power stems from being consistently composed. I wanted to examine what occurs when women attempt, succeed or fail, at flexing while remaining demure.**

***Upside* is about place while positioning nostalgia in an elastic, Afro-centric frame. This narrative is overtly about a community that is proud to be black. Americana and nostalgic imagery is generically seductive with hues of pink and baby blue. The source materials for this narrative are sepia snap shots of dark people tanning.**

***Upside* was made while commuting between Harlem and my rural, historically black college campus [in Prairie View, Texas] during the Studio Museum in Harlem's residency. The source photos were from the school's century-old archive. Being in both locales at the same time set off a cheesy, sentimental sense of community like I'd never experienced before the residency.**

R: Do you think the perspective of the viewer (i.e. their race or class) alters the reception of the work?

L: Oh totally, in the same way a Russian immigrant visiting Disneyworld for the first time will have a very different perception of the experience from a Floridian child. I hope that people will bring their perspectives—from a subway ride to their upbringing—to viewing my work.

R: I first saw your work at the Artist-in-Residence exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem, where each year three artists are offered 11 months of access to the museum. How was that experience, and did the location and other artists influence your work?

L: The experience was a dream come true. I applied five times over a ten-year period. When I received the acceptance notice, I was simply on autopilot, and it took a minute to even realize what happened. 2009 was the most time I've ever spent in the city and the stimuli was immeasurable. My studio mates were very different from me, and I drew additional energy by just peeking into their studios to see how the program was affecting them.

R: In addition to being an artist, you are the Campus Art Gallery Curator at Prairie View A and M University, in Prairie View, Texas—a town with a population under 5,000. What types of challenges and advantages does that locale present?

L: You and I could have a separate interview based on this question alone. Aside from my paltry budget, the greatest challenge has been operating as a one-person band. But it's been a great education in maximizing human resources. I started working for the university as an Art 101 instructor. This curatorial opportunity allows me to educate in the round—I love that.

My curatorial practice is a continuation of my academic efforts to expel art illiteracy. I try to craft programs and exhibitions that engage an art-shy public. Many of PV's students are artists, but many more haven't been to a museum since kindergarten—if ever. I try to be mindful of that when programming to include a mix of high and low conversations in hope of meeting people where they are and sparking greater curiosity. Houston's art community is my main exhibition resource, and I organize field trips. My practice is a grass roots effort to share what I love with a community that I care about.

R: How do your job and its environment affect your own work?

L: Located 45 minutes west of Houston, Prairie View, like any rural community established around a college, is at times a sovereign planet. PV is a historically black university that was established in 1876 as the first state-supported College in Texas for African-Americans. This bubble environment has profoundly shaped my current studio decisions—from the use of black history, to miniatures and stop motion, to utilizing my access cable TV channel and catering to a populace—all of it. I owe so much of my current studio direction to the fact that I've been functioning in a unique, provincial, de facto black-governed island for the past nine years.

R: What was a defining or significant moment in your life that inspired your becoming an artist, and when did you decide that art would be your main career path?

L: I will say that after being in that specific mode of schooling (magnet arts high school, then pursuing advanced degrees in art) I paused to see what the world outside of studying art would be like. I worked a few office desk jobs and then for a television talk show. The talk show era was exciting but grueling. When the show wrapped I said to myself "I'm supposed to be an artist," and I got back to work in my studio.

R: Who are some of your creative influences and favorite artists?

L: There are many. I will always say that my current work wouldn't be without the clever intervention efforts of the Yes Men and Todd Haynes' *Karen Carpenter Story*.

R: What artwork(s) do you wish you had created?

L: Of course, several things. Off the top of my head, anything by Sister Gertrude Morgan, a deceased folk artist, evangelist, and tambourine player in New Orleans. And it would be so exciting to know that I'm part hornet, because they rig some amazing hive constructions when left alone.

R: What artwork(s) do you wish you owned?

L: This is a fun one too—lots of people. Anything by Lee Frielander. Any images or recording of a Karen Finely performance. The list can go on and on with this one.

R: What non-art passions do you have?

L: Cooking and lip-syncing (in private).

R: If you had not become an artist, what do you think you would be doing right now?

L: I'd be making more money for sure. I always say that, had I gone to a crappy high school, I would have become a hairdresser—gone to a trade school. Had I not attended an art school and attended a traditional liberal arts college, I would have pursued archeology. Under any circumstance I know that I am happiest working with my hands.

R: If you could describe your view of the Art World in one sentence, what would it be?

L: In one word: cornucopia



Lauren Kelley: still from *Upside*, 2009–2010
Single-channel video; 3:31 minutes

Lauren Kelley's videos and photographs have been presented nationally at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; New Museum, New York; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas; Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland; The Kitchen, New York; and most recently she was included in the group exhibition *Twisted Sisters*, an exhibition of works by women artists depicting women as the subjects, at Dodge Gallery, New York, through June 23, 2012 (an exhibit that also included the work of gallery artists Nina Katchadourian and Julie Heffernan). Kelley was awarded the 2011 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, 2011 Visual Artists Grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, 2008 Altoids Award from the New Museum, and fellowships from the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and the Illinois Arts Council. Her work has been reviewed in publications that include *The New Yorker*, *Art in America*, *Artlies*, *Houston Press*, and *The Boston Globe*. Her single-channel video animation *Upside* is on view at Catharine Clark Gallery June 16 – July 14, 2012. Kelley lives and works in Houston, Texas. For more information, visit www.laurenkelleyworld.com.

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