ALLISON SCHULNIK

MATRIX 168

FEBRUARY 6 - MAY 4, 2014

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART
“I draw from dance, movies, music, cartoons, once-loved discarded relics, long-loved junk classics, myself and loved ones, strangers and stars, fools and sages. I like to meld earthly fact, blatant fiction and a love for raw material and the hand-made to form a stage of tragedy, farce, and ominous, crude beauty.”

—ALLISON SCHULNIK

Crossing the threshold into Allison Schulnik’s MATRIX exhibition evokes the experience of walking onto the proscenium of a very strange stage, filled with a peculiar and dense assemblage of wildly mismatched pedestals topped with a motley cast of curious creatures and oversized crustaceans. Colored walls, patterned by the artist’s hand, feature several large gooey paintings and small floral gouaches. At the far end of the space, a dramatic crush of red velvet curtains, fringed in gold, offers an entryway into the artist’s interior world, a “black cube cave,” or inner sanctum, where the performative videos Mound (2011) and Eager (2014) are on view.

Schulnik has become known for her old-school, stop-motion, clay animation videos; impossibly-thick impasto paintings; and highly-textured ceramic sculptures. In content and expressionistic style, all three media directly relate to one another. The sculptural figures may be found in the videos, the Claymation characters in the paintings, and painting subjects in the ceramics. Each medium feeds the other in a continual interplay and ever-morphing cycle that is at its most animated in the mesmerizing, moving images of her signature videos.

The artist describes Mound as “a celebration of the moving painting,” in which more than one hundred pallid puppets—clowns, spectres, gnomes, wraiths, and ghouls—writhe, sway, plod, and transform with awkward grace to the mournful musical accompaniment of “It’s Raining Today” (1969) by legendary singer-songwriter Scott Walker (also known as Noel Scott Engel). The opening sequence features an odd community of lost souls. These charming, haunting, and crude figures are reminiscent of those found in the painting Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889 (1888) by Belgian artist James Ensor (who Schulnik names as one of many art historical influences). Mound’s dreamlike, wandering narrative also features several ballet sequences choreographed by the artist. Three (and later five) skull-faced, straw-haired dancers perform against a pale, watercolor background. In addition to fine art, both music and movement play major parts in Schulnik’s Claymation video works. Before focusing on visual art, she trained extensively in dance, and is an active member of the metal/noise band Barfth.
ALLISON SCHULNIK, MOUND, 2011.
VIDEO STILL FROM STOP-MOTION, CLAY
ANIMATION VIDEO WITH SOUND
JAMES ENSOR, CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO BRUSSELS IN 1889, 1888. OIL ON CANVAS; 98 1/2 X 169 1/2 IN. THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES. © 2014 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / SABAM, BRUSSELS

ALLISON SCHULNIK, MOUND, 2011. VIDEO STILL FROM STOP-MOTION, CLAY ANIMATION VIDEO WITH SOUND
ALLISON SCHULNIK, ILLUSTRATION FOR MATRIX GALLERY DESIGN, 2014. PEN AND PAINT ON PAPER. COURTESY THE ARTIST.
DOROTHY ENTERING THE ORNAMENT ROOM
IN *RETURN TO OZ*, 1985. FILM STILL
CREDIT: © 1985 DISNEY

ALLISON SCHULNIK, WHITE FOX, 2010.
GLAZED PORCELAIN

ALLISON SCHULNIK, GOLD BEAR, 2009.
GLAZED CERAMIC

ALLISON SCHULNIK, SHELL #3, 2012.
GLAZED PORCELAIN WITH HOUSE PAINT
In the Experimental Animation Program at the California Institute of the Arts, the artist studied with legendary animator Jules Engel, contributor to Disney classics *Fantasia* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942). He was also founding director of the program, which has famously produced several generations of Disney artists and animators. Schulnik regularly cites him as a mentor and inspiration to her hand-made, purist approach to the medium of stop-motion, clay animation. Her work has also benefited from collaborating with her cinematographer, Helder King Sun. Schulnik states, “All effects are done in camera. I animate thousands of frames entirely myself, and alone construct multiple figural puppets of clay, fabric, wire, wood, paint and epoxies.”

Eager, Schulnik’s latest video, has its museum premiere in her MATRIX exhibition. With a running time of eight and a half minutes, it is her longest video to date, and took thirteen months in the studio to complete. For the first time, she commissioned the musical score, written by Los Angeles composer Aaron M. Olson. She then choreographed the dance for the video to that music, and feels that “Eager is maybe even more of a ballet than *Mound*,” but related, as if the dancers from *Mound* have been unveiled by removing their cloaks. The ensemble of wraiths and a second troupe of spectral blue figures perform dance sequences that range from ancient ritualistic movements, to dramatic modern dance in the style of Martha Graham, to elements that recall a Busby Berkeley production. Other figures, nude and vulnerable, are sliced open and worn like hides. A sad and silly boneless horse trots through a forest garden where anthropomorphic flowers—pansies, poppies, and snapdragons—dance and grow faces. An exploration of animation as dance, the surreal voyage of *Eager* conveys melancholy and bliss.

Outside the darkened video space (or theater), before the elaborate red curtains, the gallery (or proscenium area) is crowded with a community of figurative sculptures on a variety of unusual pedestals, drawn from the Wadsworth Atheneum’s rich inventory. During a site visit to the museum, Schulnik spied the diverse display stands, which inspired the final concept of her MATRIX exhibition. The collection of odd sculpture bases brought to mind the quirky collection of objects decorating the old lobby of the Nuart Theatre in Los Angeles, as well as the Nome King’s spectacular Ornament Room in the film *Return to Oz* (1985), based on an L. Frank Baum book. On Dorothy Gale’s second trip to Oz, her former companions—Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion—have been turned into ornamental objects by the evil king. She has three chances to select the right ornaments from the hundreds on display to return her friends to their former selves. In turn, Schulnik envisioned her own room of ornaments—an eclectic menagerie of wild creatures and objects (sculptures) installed to guard and protect the performers (videos) in the theater (video space). Among the legion, a growling bear, a staring cat, a curious fox, and a gesticulating half-man confront the viewer. Two larger-than-life seashells stand vertically, sexually charged, threatening...
to stab or swallow any intruder. All of the sculpture’s rough textures enhance their menace, while their wide-eyed regard lends them an anthropomorphic quality. Both human and animal characteristics are embodied in all of her creatures.

“The eyes are really the most direct way to say something clearly,” states Schulnik, whose portrait subjects from painting, sculpture, and video all consistently confront the viewer in order to elicit compassion. In Small Gnomes (2011), a thickly-painted canvas adorning the wall of Schulnik’s ornament room, innumerable shifting faces—at once grotesque and beautiful—peer out from the viscous, pastel surface. The composition is punctuated by a pair of large, black eyes belonging to a sympathetic clown, a familiar character from Mound. Likewise, in the monumental painting Hollow (2010), imagery from Mound and Eager appears in a field of mushrooms and flowers. The highly tactile, red- and brown-hued painting (originally inspired by a vintage cookie jar) depicts a tree-house covered in knot holes with three black apertures. Hollow’s shelter provides a safe haven for the community of sculptural creatures in the gallery.

As a self-proclaimed romantic with loner tendencies, a large part of Schulnik inhabits each of her characters. In addition to being biographical, her subjects derive from cartoons, film, and literature, but also encompass family, friends, lovers, neighbors, and even local homeless people. “Always, my hope is to find valor in adversity. My goal is never to exploit deficiencies but to provide a monument for something or someone, or even an emotion like sadness or happiness. I hope to provide understanding of my characters through pictures. To present a single dignified moment. To provide love and refuge.”

PATRICIA HICKSON
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
ALLISON SCHULNIK

EDUCATION

2000  BFA, Experimental Animation, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Valencia, CA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014  Allison Schulnik / MATRIX 168, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT

2013  Expose: Allison Schulnik, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA

2012  Mound, Oklahoma City Museum of Art, OK

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013  COVER UP!, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna

Awakening – Where Are We Standing? – Earth, Memory and Resurrection, Aichi Triennale, Nagoya, Aichi, Japan

Experiments in Animation, Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC

RSA 187, the Annual Exhibition, The Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, Scotland


The Very Large Array: San Diego/Tijuana Artists in the MCA Collection, MCASD Downtown, San Diego, CA

Paint Things: Beyond the Stretcher, DeCordova Sculpture Museum and Park, Lincoln, MA

Kiss Me Deadly: A Group Show of Contemporary Neo-Noir from Los Angeles, Paradise Row, London, England

Group Show, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Israel

2012  Oppenheimer Anniversary Show, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, KS

Kiss Me Deadly, Paradise Row, London, England

Through the Looking Glass: Female Surrealist Cinema, film series, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA

Wandellust: The Art of Claymation, Museen Der Stadt, Dresden, Germany

Spectacle, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH

2009  Allison Schulnik, Unosunove Arte Contemporanea, Rome, Italy

2009  Fairy Tales, Monsters, and the Genetic Imagination, Frist Center for the Visual Arts; traveled to Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba, Canada and the Glenbow Art Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

2011  New York Minute, Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, Russia

Cryptic, St. Louis Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

2010  Reframing America, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA

Elements of Nature, Contemporary Arts Museum, New Orleans, LA

Allison Schulnik: Forest, The Hammer Museum, Flux Screenings, Los Angeles, CA

Allison Schulnik: Recent Videos, The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, HI

Allison Schulnik: Hobo Clown, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS

Artefiera Art First, Unosunove Arte Contemporanea, Rome, Italy

2009  Flux Screening Series, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA

Wild Exaggeration: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art, Haifa Museum of Art, Haifa, Israel

NewNow, Building the Museum Collection, The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS
Born in San Diego, California, 1978
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME
Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA
Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, Canada
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada
Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, KS
Santa Barbara Art Museum, Santa Barbara, CA

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION
Unless otherwise noted, all works courtesy the artist; Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles; and ZieherSmith, New York.

Video
*Mound*, 2011
Stop-motion, clay animation video with sound
Running time: 4:23 minutes
Cinematography by Helder King Sun
Music by Noel Scott Engel

*Eager*, 2014
Stop-motion, clay animation video with sound
Running time: 8:30 minutes
Cinematography by Helder King Sun
Music by Aaron M. Olson

Painting
*Pink Flower #4*, 2008
Oil on canvas
30 x 24 in.
The Mark & Hilary Moore Collection

*Hollow*, 2010
Oil on linen
78 x 58 in.

*Small Gnomes*, 2011
Oil on linen
60 x 72 in.

Sculpture
*Ceramic Gin*, 2007
Glazed ceramic
27 x 9 x 10 in.
The Elizabeth Lahey and Matthew J. Gardocki Collection

*Gold Nipple Man*, 2008
Glazed porcelain and gold paint
9 x 11 x 8 in.

*Gold Bear*, 2009
Glazed ceramic
17 x 11 x 9 in.
The Mark & Hilary Moore Collection

*Purple Possum-Cat*, 2010
Glazed ceramic
22 x 10 x 10 in.
Collection Majudia

*White Fox*, 2010
Glazed porcelain
7 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.

*Shell #3*, 2012
Glazed porcelain with house paint
33 x 15 x 18 1/2 in.

*Shell #5*, 2012
Glazed porcelain with house paint
24 1/2 x 16 x 12 in.

*Flower with Gnome #1*, 2014
Glazed ceramic
23 x 10 x 10 in.

Gouache
*Blood Trappers*, 2013
Gouache on paper
8 1/2 x 12 in.

*Eager Poppies*, 2013
Gouache on paper
12 x 8 1/2 in.

*Three Eager Pansies*, 2013
Gouache on paper
12 x 8 3/4 in.
ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk
Allison Schulnik
Thursday, February 6
6 pm
Schulnik will discuss her MATRIX project in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.

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The MATRIX program is also supported in part by the current and founding members of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art’s Contemporary Coalition.

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Special thanks to Michael Stotts and Aaron Bleck of Hartford Stage for the loan of theater curtains.

1 Email from the artist to the author, 28 January 2013.
2 Email from the artist to the author, 19 December 2013.
3 Ibid.
4 California Institute of the Arts, formerly Chouinard Art Institute, was famously underwritten by Walt Disney.
5 Email from the artist to the author, 19 December 2013.
6 Ibid.
8 Email from the artist to the author, 28 January 2013.