

Interview

Susanne Luhmann talks with Allyson Mitchell

Allyson Mitchell is a maximalist artist living in Toronto Canada. She creates large scale sculpture and installation with fun fur, reclaimed textile and abandoned crafts. Mitchell melds feminism and pop culture to critique and play with contemporary ideas about sexuality, autobiography and the body. Recently, her work has exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, the Textile Museum of Canada and Syracuse University. Mitchell has produced 22 films, published writing and music and performed extensively with the group Pretty Porky and Pissed Off. She recently completed her PhD in Women's Studies at York University where she also teaches.

Introduction

The following interview with the Toronto based artist, filmmaker, scholar and fat-activist Allyson Mitchell was conducted via email. A few months earlier Susanne had the privilege of spending a fun-filled evening with Allyson in her studio at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto. Allyson was wielding a glue-gun as she put the fur on her giant Lady Sasquatch sculpture, which a few days later would journey to the Harvey Levine Gallery in Los Angeles, California. That night the idea of asking Allyson for an image for this special issue was born. We are delighted that Allyson agreed to lend "Shebacca" to the cover.

Susanne

Allyson, who or what is Shebacca?

Allyson

Shebacca is a pop culture interruption. She is a gigantic sasquatch lady who is grooming her pubic hairs in a reclined position. She rests on a big purple shag rug from the 70s and her body is made of fun fur and other found textiles. Her nose is a plastic taxidermy nose for bears and her fangs are made of felt.

Susanne

Can you talk a bit about the process of creating her?

Allyson

The original image that Shebacca is based on comes from a Playboy centerfold from the 1970s. What I do is create an original drawing based on the photograph. Then I blow up the image so that the woman would be in proportion to reported measurements of sasquatches. So, if Shebacca were standing she would be around 9 feet tall. I use the drawing as a pattern that I pin to fabrics. Then I cut the fabric segments and apply them to their shag background with hot glue. I like to call this re-rendering of the female nude a "reverse airbrushing effect." That is, rather than taking hair away from the image (as is commonly done with computer programs like PhotoShop), I pile it on in order to

create a distinct furry monstrous beast-woman. I like this assertion of hair and women. I am trying to trouble the conflation of femininity and hairlessness.

Susanne

What are some themes you see running through your current body of work? How do they relate to your earlier work?

Allyson

Currently, I am interested in playing with ambivalence. I like to explore the pendulum swing between sexy and scary, pretty and ugly, lust and revulsion, soothing and monstrous as well as good old joy and pain. I have been finding that some of the ways I have been able to represent this mix is with animal/human hybrids. I also have an affinity to working with abandoned craft projects of others like granny square afghans, macramé and ceramics. Most recently I created a 10 foot tall vagina dentata sculpture called "Hungry Purse" from found women's crafts.

Since I began making art I have been preoccupied with trying to find (for lack of a better word) "alternative" representations of grotesque female beauty. A lot of the times this happens through manipulations of images of women from popular culture (hence the Playboy). Ironically, Playboy has been one of the only places where I have been able to find images of female corpulence and sexuality. The outlets for this kind of explorations have led me to various kinds of cultural production, be it performance (with the fat activist group "Pretty Porky and Pissed Off" in particular) or film (see more of my film work at CFMDC.org) and visual art (see more of this at my website www.allysonmitchell.com).

Susanne

What are your top five influences?

Allyson

I can't do these kinds of lists. They are too emotional and as you can see from my bio, I am a maximalist artist. I take from everywhere. I am voracious and cannot be expected to create a hierarchy of influences. It hurts too much!!

Susanne

Allyson, you are an artist, an activist and just completed your doctorate in Women's Studies — congratulations Dr. Mitchell! How do these different areas and aspects shape your art?

Allyson

They are completely intertwined. I like to say that I first began making art as a procrastination method to avoid some of the essays that I was supposed to be writing for my Women's Studies undergraduate degree. In hindsight, I now know that this work was not merely avoidance but an attempt to articulate some of the ideas and concepts I was learning (that were simultaneously blowing my mind and changing my world) in a different form than writing. I was so excited about the ideas that I was encountering that I wanted to find ways to bust them out of the academy and share them with larger groups of people - make them "differently relevant." I explored a lot of the ideas I was learning about feminist theory through my work with "Pretty Porky and Pissed Off" and my visual art work. As well, I found ways to incorporate art into my academic work. My Master's thesis was about lesbian graffiti and urban disruption and my PhD thesis includes analysis of fat activism and performance work.

Susanne

Do you think, as the title of this special issue of Atlantis suggests, that feminism is sexy?

Allyson

Yes, I think that feminism is sexy. I also think that it absolutely must be sexy in order to maintain its relevance. But sexy doesn't necessarily mean dancing scantily clad ladies or even fucking in any way. Sexy is subjective and there are a myriad of flavours that sexy can be articulated, enjoyed or troubled. The problem is when there are too few possibilities for sexiness. To some, dense theoretical texts are hot hot hot. At other times, it can be cheeky turns of pop cultural phrases; or it can be a display of adamant resistance (in various forms). And other times, it's a big fat hairy surprise of a thing that you never ever thought could be sexy to you. To me this is the sexy part of feminism - when things are political, practical and surprising.