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WEDNESDAY, MAY 23, 2007

Art Space Talk: Michelle Forsyth



I was introduced to the art of Michelle Forsyth while attending the Bridge Art Fair in Chicago. Born in Vancouver BC in 1972, Michelle Forsyth holds an MFA from Rutgers University and a BFA from the University of Victoria. She currently resides in Pullman, Washington where she teaches

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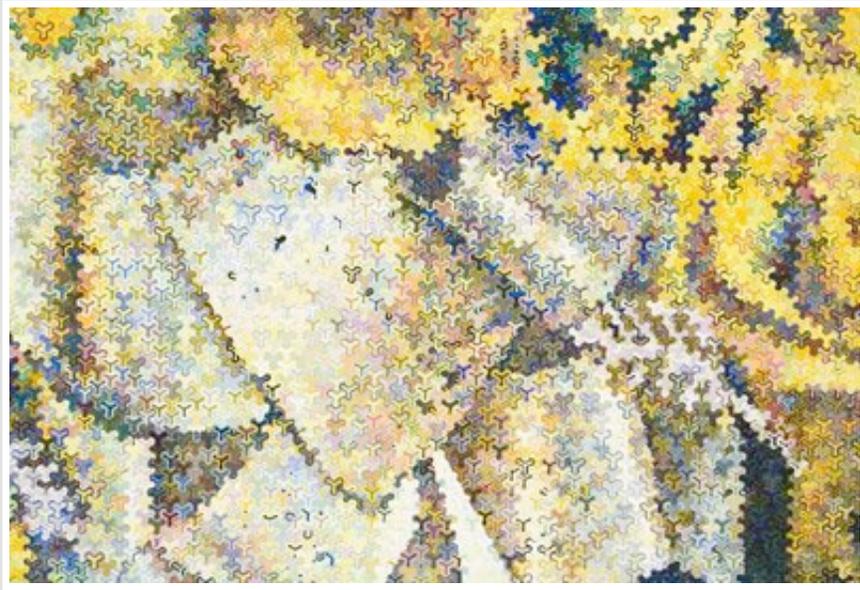
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painting and drawing at Washington State University.

In the studio, she is most concerned with the visceral qualities of the hand-made and the power it holds to counter the potential dehumanization of rapidly transmitted, and publicly consumed images of spectacle.



(Mine Disaster, Cherry, IL, November 13, 1909(Drawing #1 from the 100 Drawings Project)gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2005)

Brian Sherwin: I observed your work at the Bridge Art Fair in Chicago- your work was represented by the Hogar Collection. How did the exhibit go for you? I understand that this is not the first time you have been involved with the Bridge Art Fair.

Michelle Forsyth: The fairs this year have been a great experience for me. In Chicago I included six pieces from a current series of work entitled, One Hundred Drawings. The work has been a real departure for me, overall. I wanted to make something that did not rely on the spectacle to give the work its power, yet still draw from a large archive of images of catastrophe and disaster I had been collecting since the late 90's.

Back in 2005, I took a road trip to the midwest and began documenting what remains at the sites pictured in many of the

photographs I had been collecting. I started the project by going to sites in Chicago, so I was particularly excited about having some of the work included in the recent Bridge Art Fair.

Todd Rosenbaum, the director of Hogar Collection, also took some of my work to the Miami Bridge Art Fair last December. That experience opened up a lot of doors for me and the work reached a wide audience.



BS: I viewed Hope Slide at the Bridge Art Fair. Care to tell our readers more about this piece?

MF: Hope Slide (image above) is the ninth piece in the One Hundred Drawings project. The piece depicts a site just outside of Hope, BC (Canada) where an enormous landslide covered the highway on the morning of Saturday, January 9, 1965, burying four people in two cars. The highway now snakes around the foot of the slide and when you go out there you can still clearly see the swath of earth that slid down the mountain.

Most of the sites I have documented have been places that really bear no trace of the events that have occurred at them, but the Hope Slide was different. I was astonished by how visible the evidence really was.

At the base of the slide is a marker commemorating the lives of the victims of the slide. It also lists the names of six people who perished

in two separate plane crashes that occurred on the same site. My piece documents a wreath placed at the base of this marker.

So far I have documented twenty of the sites and have finished the first twelve works in the series, but I plan to do one hundred of them, eventually.



(Eastland Disaster, Chicago, IL, July 24, 1915(Drawing #2 from the 100 Drawings Project) gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2006)

BS: You have stated that you "use painting, needlepoint and paper-crafts to counter the dehumanization of rapidly transmitted, digital images." Can you go into further detail about that statement?

MF: I consider my work to be a reflection on, and a reaction to, the onslaught of images of suffering in our contemporary world. Peril and demise permeates our daily experience, and viewing dramatic events through the screen of a computer or television can often foster apathetic ways of seeing. I find this deeply disturbing and try to seek out elaborate ways of working in order to slow these kinds of images down.

They do form a starting point for the work, yet I try to build surfaces that are tactile and intimate so that the viewer gets caught up in them a bit. Tedious brush-marks, dramatic stitches of color, barely visible hole-punches, cut-out paper flowers, or diluted layers of watercolor dominate every piece I make in the studio. Sometimes you have to look pretty closely to discover some of the things I have done with them.



(TWA flight 800 crash, East Moriches, Long Island, July 17, 1996(Drawing #3 from the 100 Drawings Project)gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2006)

BS: Michelle, you have instructed art at several institutions including Pratt Institute and Washington State University. Are you inspired by your students? I assume that teaching art on the college level is a give-and-take of information...

MF: I currently teach at Washington State University, which is located in eastern Washington. Living out here is a challenge because I am quite far away from any city. For this reason, I tend to form strong connections with my students and try to share as much information with them as I can. I grew up on Vancouver Island and when I was studying at the University of Victoria I was very involved in the art community there. People were eager to help each other and would work together to put up large exhibitions.

I have been thinking a lot lately about how my studio work intersects with my role as a professor and have been trying to come up with ways

to get the two to come together more. I enjoy round table discussions and feel that craft practices that engage the community to be quite interesting (ie. the Stitch and Bitch). I have been invited to be a mentor at a residency program in Wells, BC this summer, and to be a visiting artist in residence at the University of Southern Maine in the Spring of 2008 and hope to use these opportunities to experiment a bit with this kind of model.



(MGM Hotel Fire, Las Vegas, NV, November 21, 1980(Drawing #5 from the 100 Drawings Project)gouache and glitter on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2006)

BS: You obtained your MFA from Rutgers University. Care to tell us about the art program there? Who did you study under?

MF: Rutgers was a very rewarding experience for me. I worked primarily under Hanneline Røgeberg and Lauren Ewing, both of whom challenged me a lot. I feel that I am just now getting my head around some of the things that they suggested and am finally trying to answer some of the questions they opened up for me. My peers in graduate school were amazing. We had a lot of fun, but we also worked very hard.





(Iroquois Theater Fire, Chicago, Il, December 30, 1903 (Drawing #11 from the 100 Drawings Project) gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2007)

BS: Can you go into further detail about how society has influenced your art?

MF: Threatening visions -- from disaster coverage in the media and television shows that rely on individual suffering for entertainment, to violent video games and websites that display images of death -- surround us.

In response, I hope to expose my grief through a compassionate process of translating the images into thousands of tiny, brightly colored brush-marks and glitter. "To grieve," according to Judith Butler, "and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself."

BS: What has been the toughest point for you as far exhibiting or creating art is concerned?

MF: I have always moved around a lot and I have never really felt the desire to set down permanent roots. Although there are many benefits to this kind of flexibility, it is often a challenge to make long term connections. I am too sporadic about keeping in touch with people.





(Iroquois Theater Fire, Chicago, Il, December 30, 1903 (Drawing #11 from the 100 Drawings Project) gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2007)

BS: Can you explain some of your artistic process? How do you start a piece?

MF: I spend a great deal of time on-line and I guess that is what really sparks the work. Each piece almost always begins on my computer and is usually generated by some image that I have found on the web. I often have several projects going on at the same time and approach them in various ways.

Probably the most elaborate process that I have been working in is one where I translate the images into tiny fragments of cut paper circles and flowers. Entitled Florescence (Flowers for Iraq), these works depict the individual casualties of Iraqi civilians.

The images are quite brutal, yet I have fractured them into tens of thousands of pieces that become memorials to those that have suffered from the brutal realities of war. Each piece of paper is hand cut and layered with felt and beads and is mounted to the end of a sewing pin.

My paintings often begin with a layer of intricate patterning before an underpainting is laid down in watercolor. Together the pattern and watercolor acts as a guide for me to start building up the surface with sinuous lines of gouache. Each work takes several months to complete.





(Second Narrows Bridge Collapse, Vancouver, BC, June 17, 1958
(Drawing #10 from the 100 Drawings Project) gouache on watercolor
paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2007)

BS: Where can we see more of your art?

MF: I will have two upcoming solo exhibitions. One at Hogar Collection in Brooklyn this September and one at Deluge Contemporary Art in Victoria, BC in January 2008. I will also have a cut-paper installation piece at the Jundt Art Museum this August, and you can see my work online at www.michelleforsyth.com.

**BS: Where do you see your direction of work going next?
Care to reveal any of your plans?**

MF: I just received a grant from the Canada Council to continue my work documenting sites in eastern Canada so I am definitely going to continue working on that project, however I am making the newer pieces much larger in scale.

Because I am enamored by complexity and detail, as well as by extremely elaborate methodologies, I also think I may try to make the works more layered or mottled in their surface treatment.





(Railway Wreck, Bayonne, NJ, September 15, 1958(Drawing #7 from the 100 Drawings Project)gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2006)

BS: Finally, is there anything else you would like to say about your art or the 'art world'?

MF: I feel that it is intrinsically American to use horrific stories of death and destruction for entertainment purposes. According to Jean Baudrillard, "the countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy, which clearly attempt to exorcize with images, drowning out the whole thing with special effects." As I find myself confronted by this onslaught, I mourn our tolerance of violence in the media and our inability to express a sense of vulnerability.

I hope that you have enjoyed learning about Michelle Forsyth and her art. Feel free to critique or discuss her work.

Take care, Stay true,

Brian Sherwin

POSTED BY BALHATAIN AT 5:04 AM

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