

exposure



Diana Gaston in conversation with Stephanie Syjuco & Jo Whaley



Above, Fig 1.: Jo Whaley, *Atomic Tea Party*, from the *Natura Morta* series, c. 1993, Chromogenic photograph, 30" x 24"

Opposite, Fig 2.: Stephanie Syjuco, From the series *The Village* (Small Encampments), *Plowing* (Living Room), 2007, C-print, 18" x 27"

Diana Gaston: Both of you live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area: with Stephanie as a grad of the Art Institute and the MFA program at Stanford, and Jo as a grad of the UC Berkeley MFA program and a visiting faculty member at the San Francisco Art Institute, California College of the Arts, Stanford, and other programs around California: did you two know of one another's work already? Do you share some common ground with some of these Bay Area institutions?

Jo Whaley: Being on the left fringe of the country inspires a liberty to play with tradition and our art institutions have always fostered a rebellious experimentation. Only recently did I become aware of Stephanie Syjuco's work through an exhibit at the Haines gallery in San Francisco. In her freedom to engage in social critique and in her unusual use of materials, I recognize the continuance of the regional art spirit. For example, Pete Voulkos' daring approach to ceramics and the spirited disregard for refinement in the Funk art movement of the '70s, with its mixture of high and low cultural signifiers, are echoed in her approach to art. Stephanie and I come from two different generations, but I can see that the tendency towards the offbeat in the Bay Area art scene still persists.

Collectively, the Bay Area had a significant impact on my development as an artist. In addition to its artists and art institutions, I believe that place itself persuades. By that I mean that location matters and as an artist you will be influenced by your surroundings. Visually, the atmosphere of alternating fog and light and the spectacular natural geography left its mark on me, as did

the intellectual stimulus that comes from the wide ethnic diversity of its population. It has always struck me that the Bay Area, with its Asian influence, is like a contemporary version of fourteenth-century Venice, in that it is a cosmopolitan city on the edge of the sea, poised between the Eastern and the Western state of mind and bathed in an opalescent light. If it sounds magical and exotic, well the Bay Area is.

Stephanie Syjuco: I wasn't aware of Jo's work either, but I see how it makes for a great intersection with mine in that we are both working with manipulating conventions and style to create a contemporary meaning. I do think the "Left Coast" mentality helps to generate a certain freedom, and the local conceptual works from the '70s were a huge early influence on me while I was in school.

I know for me that going to Stanford for grad school was a huge thing—all of a sudden my access to the "academy" was totally opened up and I was always in the library trying to research all the esoteric things that I wanted to cover in my art practice. I felt it was really important to start to try to get more specific about what my ideas were, and especially how they plugged into the larger world of economics, culture, sociology, and history. As fabulous as art school was for me, it took attending the bigger institutions to really help me develop my work because prior to that I felt I was dealing with abstracts instead of realities.

DG: Can you discuss the importance of museum collections and archives in your work and research? I'm thinking here of Jo's reference to still life painting and Stephanie's reference to botanical prints.

JW: Research is an important and very pleasurable aspect of my art practice. Coming to photography through an education in painting, I was naturally exposed to the serious study of art history at UC Berkeley. Between my undergraduate and graduate years

With each of my series, I study the art history as it pertains to that subject. My research goes beyond the visual, however, in that I like to study the subject itself for ideas. For example right now I have returned to an earlier project called "The Theater of Insects," (figs. 10 & 12) which will be published by Chronicle Books in September 2008, and the photographs will be in a traveling exhibit that opens at the same time at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D. C. For this series, I have read extensively on the subject of entomology and have regular conversations with an entomologist, Linda Wiener, who is writing an essay for the book along with Debra Klochko from MOPA, San Diego, where the exhibit will travel. Linda looks at my photographs and comments on them



from an entomologist's point of view and shares her research and musings on the insect world. This in turn leads me to new ideas that I incorporate into photographs. It is fascinating and stimulat-

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I spent six months in Europe with very little money, but thankfully I had an international museum pass. I spent four to six hours a day studying the collections in museums. There is no substitute to seeing art and architecture first hand.

ing. Ironically, I had thought the project complete until I started doing further research.

SS: I had the great fortune to work as a graphics and exhibition designer at a science museum in San Francisco, The Exploratorium, for nearly eight years, during and shortly after my undergraduate



Above, Fig. 3: Stephanie Syjuco, *Detail from Five Days Towards a New Modernism* (After Charlotte Perriand; Beijing), 2007, cardboard, paper, tape, foil, mixed media, 82" x 42" x 22"

Right, Fig. 4: *Installation view of Five Days Towards a New Modernism* (After Charlotte Perriand; Beijing)



Opposite, Fig. 5: Jo Whaley, *After Zurbaran, from the Natura Morta series*, c. 1992, Chromogenic photograph, 24"x30"

schooling. It was a huge influence on me, although it wasn't a traditional museum in the sense of its collecting and displaying tactics—they tried hard to avoid the visuals of a natural history museum world. But I did wind up working mostly with the life sciences department and dealing directly with scientist teams to try to convey complex biological processes in a "friendly" and accessible way to the general public. What resulted was a deep appreciation for historical depiction (since I had to study previous ways of illustration and diagramming), but [it] also gave me the challenge of tweaking and reworking these images for a modern, twenty first-century public.

On a kind of flip side, sometimes not knowing the "right" way to depict something can be a great thing. Like, research can be fabulous, but sometimes I think approximation and estimation can be more interesting—to literally not know if you're depicting a scientific style correctly means you are trying to recall a collective memory about what "scientific" looks like, and that the mistranslations and slippages that happen in making these mistakes is an essential part of the human condition. Here I'm thinking about the sculp-

tures I make based on tiny jpegs downloaded from the Internet ("La Maison Tunisie" and "Five Days Towards a New Modernism" [figs. 3 & 4]). There's not much information there, so you have to improvise and privilege a part of your brain that is more subjective as opposed to specific or "correct."

DG: I'm intrigued by Jo's work with entomologists, and opening up the work to the interpretation of experts outside of the visual arts. Do you find that the way we discuss and interpret and present images is also expanding?

JW: In our times, visual language seems to be very pervasive and persuasive. Images are used extensively in fields outside of art and people today are visually very literate. The collective engagement with the Internet only reinforces the power of images in our culture and makes them instantly available on a global scale, which is very significant. For example, the Abu Ghraib images had a strong immediate impact across the world and were a frightening and sad comment on the war. It is a profound change in visual communication that anyone with a cell phone can take a picture and post it globally.

Stephanie, as someone who uses the Internet for visual research, what do you feel about this issue?

SS: Some of my projects have relied purely on Internet research, and I mostly use it as a space to cull images and deal with it conceptually as a collective collection—a repository of stuff that may or may not all be “true.” While there is no disputing the power of the reported, documentary, or political image, I like the idea that there is an anarchic and chaotic amount of images and information floating around that can seep into people’s sense of collective or shared experience.

The speed in which things can become “out there” or even viral is a double-edged sword, both a positive or negative depending on how [you] utilize the flow. I’m interested in the level of fiction and freeform that is floating around online as much as I am in the “reality” of it.

DG: Both of you demonstrate an element of deliberate artifice in your constructions, a gentle mocking of scientific diagrams and documents, technological advancements, and dubious products. Can you discuss your approach to your constructions?

JW: Art is artifice. Somewhere along the line, I disregarded the fact that photography can be used to record reality. There is the concept that “Theater is the lie that tells the truth.” By being obvious about the fiction, you can engage the viewer in a suspension of disbelief and present ideas that otherwise would be controversial. My approach to photography is to take elements from nature and our urban culture and re-contextualize them on the proscenium stage of the still life. The arrangement of these discordant elements is done by free association and intuition with just a vague notion of an idea. By allowing myself to work loosely and subconsciously, ironies do appear and new questions are posed—questions about the



notion of technological advancement and the environment. I see the results as a form of narrative fiction.

SS: I love thinking that the power of style or image can be turned on its head—that using a convention like historical diagrams or wood grain can be altered in such a way to subvert the viewer’s assumptions of its authority. I hand-make most of my sculptural constructions, and at times when the final work is documented I have to take pains to describe that it was handmade and not prefabricated or mass produced. I really enjoy making “fakes” because I don’t see them as fakes at all (or even *trompe l’oeil*, for that matter), but more like a way to strive for the beauty and imperfection of the handmade within a system that cherishes standardization and order.

DG: Let’s discuss your constructions themselves, which are like elaborate performances in miniature. Can you discuss the process of collecting, building, and assembling your specimens/products?

JW: My process is what I call “the theater of photography,” and I agree with Roland Barthes’ assessment when he said, “Pho-



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Above, Fig. 6: Jo Whaley, *Spheres of Influence*, from the *Natura Morta* series, c. 1992, Chromogenic photograph, 24"x30"

Opposite, Fig. 7: Stephanie Syjuco, *Image selections from The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)* collaborative project, 2006



