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GELAH PENN

Artist and Curator

Gelah Penn expands on the language of drawing in sculptural space through site-responsive installations and works on paper. Gelah Penn and Jonathan Rider recently co-curated *PLACE: Monumental Drawings by Dawn Clements, Cynthia Lin, Gelah Penn, Fran Siegel* at Equity Gallery.

Why have you chosen the materials you work with? What are their limitations?

In recent years, I've concentrated on a few specific synthetic materials in the installations: mosquito netting, monofilament, plastic tarps and silicone tubing. Really their only limitation is that because they are so easily manipulable, the installations are difficult to replicate. But that's the quality I love about these materials: I can stretch, torque, crumple and tear them any way I want. And since they're synthetic, I figure they're going to last forever. I'm not an omnivore—I'm not constantly looking for a million new materials. I tend to get obsessed with a particular material, grab onto it and eke out as much as I can for as long as I can. Materials are the way in for me to examine shadow, both actual and metaphorical.

I started out as a painter. I went to the San Francisco Art Institute and then came to New York City, where I painted for several years. But at a certain point, I needed more physicality in the paintings. I found myself putting things on them like wood chips and snippets of my own hair. Gradually, the work became even more sculptural. My earliest foray into 3-D work was prompted by finding a bunch of old hat blocks on lower Broadway, which I worked on for a few years, individually and in groupings.

My first real infatuation was with synthetic hair because of its linear qualities (drawing has always been a primary concern). Initially I was making big, boxy sculptures sheathed with synthetic hair; they were really sculptural paintings. But after a while, I realized that I didn't like constructing stuff—I'm more of a modeler than a builder—so I started using found objects like fan grills and bird cages as armatures. The biggest shift happened in the late '90s when I decided to eliminate the armature completely and work directly on the wall, where I've been ever since.



Double Indemnity, 2015
Mosquito netting, foam rubber, plastic tarp, mylar, lenticular plastic, plastic mesh, silicone tubing, digital prints, acrylic paint, metal staples, Yupo, t-pins
Dimensions variable
At Foley Gallery, NYC

color for years, I realized I didn't really understand color very well and it might actually be detracting from what I was going for. Now I'm insinuating color back into the work, using it more as punctuation.

How and why did you go from sculpture to works on paper that are still very sculptural?

I've always gone back and forth between installation and drawing, so that wasn't really a shift. They're the two primary facets of my practice and I'm constantly trying to bring them in closer proximity to each other. For example, in the drawings, I'm now embedding photographic images of installation details. Materials are equally important in the drawings. Many of the same materials I use in the installations (mosquito netting, monofilament, painted plastic tarps) find their way into the works on paper and the Mylar, plastic garbage bags and optical plastics I use in the drawings are also becoming part of the installations. I think my recent drawing installation, *Big Serial Polyglot Y*, in "Place" at Equity Gallery merged these two bodies of work in what was, for me, a satisfying whole.

How do you create your works? Are there sketchbooks involved?

I do rudimentary sketches for the installations to map out where I want concentrations of activity in the space. If I'm working on a proposal, I like to cut up and collage photographic images of previous installations. But these pieces are truly site-responsive, so I find that if I overthink it in advance, in the end the installations tend not to be as interesting. Much of the decision-making happens on site, which is a risky and anxiety-ridden process, but I need to be surprised by what's happening. It's a bit like taking your studio practice out into the world.

I don't do anything preliminary for individual works on paper. For the drawing installation at Equity, I measured off the space in my studio to determine placement, but even that changed once I was actually in the space.

How does being an artist play into your interests as a curator?

I think a lot of artists are natural curators. We're always putting together images and ideas for our own work. As an artist/curator, I think the idea for a show usually comes from the work one is seeing, and connecting with its processes and materials, rather than proceeding from a theory-driven premise.

The great thing about curating and including your own work in a show is that you can pick your context. For the show at Equity, I chose three artists (Dawn Clements, Cynthia Lin and Fran Siegel) I've known and admired for a long time. We all explore very different notions of territory in our work and I think a really compelling conversation emerged. To hang in the same space with these artists, whose work I respect so much, was a real thrill and a privilege.



The Big Heat, 2011
Mosquito netting, plastic mesh, vinyl tubing & lanyard, rubber tubing, t-pins
Dimensions variable
At Lori Bookstein Fine Art, NYC

I have no idea. I'm sure reactions range from pleasure to irritation to disgust. But I hope they find something that engages them.

If you were to compare your works to any literary form or particular literary work, what would they/it be?

The installation titles come primarily from film noir, because they're so evocative: *The Big Heat*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Clash by Night*. A lot of my source material and interests come from films. I also read a lot of novels, but I'm not sure how my work relates to them as they're mostly 18th- and 19th-century British fiction, like Austen and Trollope. I also like contemporary thrillers and suspense novelists: Ruth Rendell, Frances Fyfield, P.D. James.

I've actually been thinking about doing a drawing installation related to an 18th-century novel, but haven't figured out how that would work yet.

How has the art world changed while you have been a player in it?

It's a much bigger art world than when I started making work. There are many more opportunities and artists are a lot more proactive, getting involved in curating, writing and becoming dealers, which is all great. But it's also very competitive and more professionalized. It's financially tougher now because studio space (and everything else) is so incredibly expensive, especially in New York. A double- or triple-edged sword, I guess.

What improvements do you think still need to occur?

Because of our virtual world, it's easy to think you've actually seen the work if you've looked at images. But there's no replacement for seeing work in the flesh. That's why studio visits are so important. There needs to be a little more time and room for conversation; slowing things down a bit so that it's more about the work.

What does an artist community mean to you?

It's very important. Of course, there are many different kinds of artist communities. There's the informal artists' community of your friends and colleagues. Going to openings and studio visits are a way to connect with and support this community. There are more formal, terrific, institution-based communities like Artists Equity or the New York Foundation for the Arts. They both offer workshops, advice and interaction between artists, curators, writers and other parts of the art world. I think artist residencies are wonderful communities, especially those that aren't just for visual artists, but also include writers and composers.

All of these are great and it's a matter of taste to decide which one is most attractive to you. But it's essential that an artist be part of something...at least, sometimes.

Interviewed by Sarah Cho

Meet more members of our community!



Big Serial Polyglot Y, 2016
Lenticular plastic, plastic garbage bags, digital prints, plastic tarps, acrylic paint, stainless steel choreboy, metal staples on mylar and Yupo
Dimensions variable
At Equity Gallery, NYC

The character of the installations differs depending on the materials I'm involved with at the time. I stopped using synthetic hair at a certain point because people were interpreting the pieces made with it as fetishistic, and that wasn't my intention. I shifted to colored monofilament (fishing line), which comes in a range of weights and gauges and is very versatile. Twisting and knotting it in various configurations allowed me to develop intricate and somewhat expressionistic installations. Later I wanted to make a different kind of mark. So I began using mosquito netting, which I could cut and stretch it into more geometric gestures, truer to the noirish interior landscapes I was trying to achieve.

I also like the mosquito netting because its limited palette (black, grey, white) emphasizes the graphic quality of the installations. And even though I started out as a painter and worked with

color for years, I realized I didn't really understand color very well and it might actually be detracting from what I was going for. Now I'm insinuating color back into the work, using it more as punctuation.



Polyglot Y Rehinged, 2015-16
Lenticular plastic, digital prints, monofilament, acrylic paint, metal staples on mylar
45 x 64 x 5 inches

How does an artist find curators to work with? What can they do if their work isn't up in a show?

Usually curators find you. If you have work up in shows, you hope they make note of it and (ideally!) contact you at some point for a project. Occasionally, I approach a curator myself if I think she might be interested in my work or I admire her exhibitions.

It's often challenging, but there are a number of things you can do if your work isn't as visible as you'd like. You can curate your own shows. You can become part of slide registries. There are institutions, galleries and artist-run spaces that have flat files. Apply for residencies. If you keep seeing shows, meeting artists, making studio visits and going to openings, you'll eventually make some interesting connections.

How do you think the audience interacts with your work?



The Naked Kiss, 2009
Monofilament, plastic mesh, vinyl lanyard, plastic beads, pipe cleaners, Dacron line, t-pins
Dimensions variable
At McKenzie Fine Art, NYC