

Artist Spotlight: HEATHER HARVEY

SECOND STREET GALLERY · WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23, 2016

On view March 5-26, 2016, "Periodicities in Chaotic Forcing" showcases the work of Heather Harvey. We're glad to share this short interview with her.

How would you describe your work?

I am always circling around under-noticed, overlooked, or undervalued things that, once given greater attention, change how one understands the world. Partly this is an ethical stance. You have to be able to acknowledge what you don't know and complicate comfortable narratives. But it is also about re-enchantment; taking a second look at the apparently mundane to find a whole world of expansive contradictory meaning behind it.

One strategy I use is to study and incorporate invisible phenomena, or things either so large, or so small, so subtle, shifting, abstract, or indeterminate that they are almost impossible to grasp or get a hold of. The difficulty with working in this way, however, is it can easily read as overwrought signification, sanctimonious mystification, or even theological allusion. I am utterly uninterested in and uncomfortable with that kind of forced spectacle. I am interested in the enigma of what really is, not invented mystery. This is why I continually return to straightforward material fact (such as the found objects in this exhibition), direct processes, and scientific data. These are ways of keeping myself honest. I also focus on contestable, incomplete, or contradictory information that takes us a little beyond what we currently understand or can articulate.

My last exhibition prior to Second Street was based on the life and work of astrophysicist Joan Feynman, so it required that I work with very specific connections and information. I wanted the Second Street exhibition to be more loose and open-ended. I started with a few points of reference and then just let it evolve from there. One thing that emerged was the interplay between order and aggression. I found an electrical wiring chart during my walking practice which I used to structure the layout of *Periodicities in Chaotic Forcing*. It helped that as I was developing the exhibition I had a couple experiences in which people were behaving badly. The details don't matter, but I was alert to an impulse to strike back and meet aggression with aggression. Instead I incorporated the experiences into the work, and used it as a conceptual jumping off point for how human systems of any kind, be they electrical wiring, social programs, city infrastructure, or interpersonal dynamics can create positive, mutually beneficial support structures, or controlling, exploitative, dangerous, or invasive ones. At the same time, the exhibition incorporates banal objects that we populate our days and landfills with. They tell us something of who we are. Each object in this show

was once held, used, and then inadvertently discarded by someone. So the objects possess stories that are lost to us, but we can imagine speculative scenarios.

Your work explores properties of hard sciences including gravity and quantum physics - how do you combine these with human emotions and memoru?

I am interested in scientific phenomena like radio waves or gravity in their own right, but also as tools or investigative mechanisms that can draw out new insights. For example, quantum physics provides incontestable evidence that what seems true and evident is simply not the whole story. This is how I slip from hard objective data into the subjective and personal. Psychoanalytic and cultural theory have commonalities with quantum physics in that they are very dense unresolved investigations with data sets that are as yet too complex and contradictory to make sense of (and probably always will be). Both have to rely on speculation, extrapolation, and triangulation to move beyond current understanding.

I admit I can't quite understand any of these theories, but I can follow enough to recognize some deep and under-discussed truths in them. It's a lot like looking at art. You aren't exactly sure everything the artist was thinking or working with, but you can sense a pattern, a thought process, that feels authentic. That's how I feel about science, psychoanalytic theory, and other influences. I only understand parts, but the parts I do get are profound and puzzling and re-invents what I thought I knew about the world.

So scientific and psychoanalytic/cultural theory become ways for me to locate my particular, incomplete experience (or that of any individual) within a larger matrix of what really is. Acknowledging these individual blind spots has profound implications in any area of study or human experience, whether that is family dynamics, race relations, environmental degradation, or whatever else.

How does the idea of creating site-specific installations compare with the actual process? What goes into making these pieces?

A site-specific installation virtually never goes as planned. There is always something unexpected – the humidity of the room, ambient light, the architectural materials of the space itself – which changes the requirements of my materials/processes. I just have to deal with it on the fly. Which can be part of the fun, and also introduces additional elements of chance and discovery.

What are you working on right now?

I continue to intertwine subjective/speculative versus objective/rational experience, and also internal/solitary versus external/communal experience, because triangulating between these disparate ways of knowing is closest to lived daily experience and is also where new and inventive insights reside.

For example, one current project deals with memory and childhood. I am attempting to repeatedly recreate, as both 2D paintings and 3D sculptures, an object I vaguely remember from my youth. Because my visual memory is so vague and changeable I have to essentially fill in the blanks and invent. Each attempt results in something completely different. To me this is both funny and haunting.

I also just completed a book chapter titled "Outliers, Fringes, Speculation, and Complicity: On making and teaching complex, contradictory art" to be published in *Redefining Creativity: Multi-layered Collaboration in Art & Art Historical Practice* (edited by M. Kathryn Shields and Sunny Spillane)

Where can we see more of your work?

I have an upcoming solo exhibition at Maryland Art Place in 2017, and am in the early planning stages for an exhibition at Academy Art Museum in Easton, MD. That show should

be particularly interesting because most of my found objects are collected in Easton. So whatever other ideas I work with, on one level the exhibition will inherently be a visual biography or expose of the community the museum is situated in. Some of what I collect contains delicate private information: inadvertently dropped letters, evidence of illicit drug use, grocery lists, legal notices, and notes for public speeches, for example. One sheet of paper is a beautifully detailed, evocative handwritten week itinerary. When read carefully it reveals what this person is reading, who their friends and acquaintances are, and the fact that they are currently undergoing chemotherapy treatments. I haven't worked out yet how I will handle the tension between my aesthetic and conceptual obligations up against the right for people to control access to their private lives.

You can also check out a selection of my work at heather-harvey.net

"Periodicities in Chaotic Forcing" **opens Friday March 4 and is on view through March 25. Thank you.**