

ALLISON SCHULNIK
MATRIX 168

FEBRUARY 6 – MAY 4, 2014

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART



MACABRE WANDERINGS

*"I draw from dance, movies, music, cartoons, once-loved discarded relics, long-loved junk classics, myself and loved ones, strangers and stars, fools and sages. I like to meld earthly fact, blatant fiction and a love for raw material and the hand-made to form a stage of tragedy, farce, and ominous, crude beauty."*¹

—ALLISON SCHULNIK

Crossing the threshold into Allison Schulnik's MATRIX exhibition evokes the experience of walking onto the proscenium of a very strange stage, filled with a peculiar and dense assemblage of wildly mismatched pedestals topped with a motley cast of curious creatures and oversized crustaceans. Colored walls, patterned by the artist's hand, feature several large gooey paintings and small floral gouaches. At the far end of the space, a dramatic crush of red velvet curtains, fringed in gold, offers an entryway into the artist's interior world, a "black cube cave,"² or inner sanctum, where the performative videos *Mound* (2011) and *Eager* (2014) are on view.

Schulnik has become known for her old-school, stop-motion, clay animation videos; impossibly-thick impasto paintings; and highly-textured ceramic sculptures. In content and expressionistic style, all three media directly relate to one another. The sculptural figures may be found in the videos, the Claymation characters in the paintings, and painting subjects in the ceramics. Each medium feeds the other in a continual interplay and ever-morphing cycle that is at its most animated in the mesmerizing, moving images of her signature videos.

The artist describes *Mound* as "a celebration of the moving painting,"³ in which more than one hundred pallid puppets—clowns, spectres, gnomes, wraiths, and ghouls—writhe, sway, plod, and transform with awkward grace to the mournful musical accompaniment of "It's Raining Today" (1969) by legendary singer-songwriter Scott Walker (also known as Noel Scott Engel). The opening sequence features an odd community of lost souls. These charming, haunting, and crude figures are reminiscent of those found in the painting *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888) by Belgian artist James Ensor (who Schulnik names as one of many art historical influences). *Mound's* dreamlike, wandering narrative also features several ballet sequences choreographed by the artist. Three (and later five) skull-faced, straw-haired dancers perform against a pale, watercolor background. In addition to fine art, both music and movement play major parts in Schulnik's Claymation video works. Before focusing on visual art, she trained extensively in dance, and is an active member of the metal/noise band Barfth.

ALLISON SCHULNIK, *MOUND*, 2011.
VIDEO STILL FROM STOP-MOTION, CLAY
ANIMATION VIDEO WITH SOUND





JAMES ENSOR, *CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO BRUSSELS IN 1889*, 1888. OIL ON CANVAS; 99 1/2 X 169 1/2 IN. THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES. © 2014 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / SABAM, BRUSSELS



ALLISON SCHULNIK, *MOUND*, 2011.
VIDEO STILL FROM STOP-MOTION, CLAY
ANIMATION VIDEO WITH SOUND

DOROTHY ENTERING THE ORNAMENT ROOM
IN *RETURN TO OZ*, 1985. FILM STILL
CREDIT: © 1985 DISNEY



ALLISON SCHULNIK, *WHITE FOX*, 2010.
GLAZED PORCELAIN

ALLISON SCHULNIK, *GOLD BEAR*, 2009.
GLAZED CERAMIC



ALLISON SCHULNIK, *SHELL #3*, 2012.
GLAZED PORCELAIN WITH HOUSE PAINT

In the Experimental Animation Program at the California Institute of the Arts, the artist studied with legendary animator Jules Engel, contributor to Disney classics *Fantasia* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942). He was also founding director of the program, which has famously produced several generations of Disney artists and animators.⁴ Schulnik regularly cites him as a mentor and inspiration to her hand-made, purist approach to the medium of stop-motion, clay animation. Her work has also benefited from collaborating with her cinematographer, Helder King Sun. Schulnik states, “All effects are done in camera. I animate thousands of frames entirely myself, and alone construct multiple figural puppets of clay, fabric, wire, wood, paint and epoxies.”⁵

Eager, Schulnik’s latest video, has its museum premiere in her MATRIX exhibition. With a running time of eight and a half minutes, it is her longest video to date, and took thirteen months in the studio to complete. For the first time, she commissioned the musical score, written by Los Angeles composer Aaron M. Olson. She then choreographed the dance for the video to that music, and feels that “*Eager* is maybe even more of a ballet than *Mound*,”⁶ but related, as if the dancers from *Mound* have been unveiled by removing their cloaks. The ensemble of wraiths and a second troupe of spectral blue figures perform dance sequences that range from ancient ritualistic movements, to dramatic modern dance in the style of Martha Graham, to elements that recall a Busby Berkeley production. Other figures, nude and vulnerable, are sliced open and worn like hides. A sad and silly boneless horse trots through a forest garden where anthropomorphic flowers—pansies, poppies, and snapdragons—dance and grow faces. An exploration of animation as dance, the surreal voyage of *Eager* conveys melancholy and bliss.

Outside the darkened video space (or theater), before the elaborate red curtains, the gallery (or proscenium area) is crowded with a community of figurative sculptures on a variety of unusual pedestals, drawn from the Wadsworth Atheneum’s rich inventory. During a site visit to the museum, Schulnik spied the diverse display stands, which inspired the final concept of her MATRIX exhibition. The collection of odd sculpture bases brought to mind the quirky collection of objects decorating the old lobby of the Nuart Theatre in Los Angeles, as well as the Nome King’s spectacular Ornament Room in the film *Return to Oz* (1985), based on an L. Frank Baum book. On Dorothy Gale’s second trip to Oz, her former companions—Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion—have been turned into ornamental objects by the evil king. She has three chances to select the right ornaments from the hundreds on display to return her friends to their former selves. In turn, Schulnik envisioned her own room of ornaments—an eclectic menagerie of wild creatures and objects (sculptures) installed to guard and protect the performers (videos) in the theater (video space). Among the legion, a growling bear, a staring cat, a curious fox, and a gesticulating half-man confront the viewer. Two larger-than-life seashells stand vertically, sexually charged, threatening



to stab or swallow any intruder. All of the sculpture's rough textures enhance their menace, while their wide-eyed regard lends them an anthropomorphic quality. Both human and animal characteristics are embodied in all of her creatures.

"The eyes are really the most direct way to say something clearly,"⁷ states Schulnik, whose portrait subjects from painting, sculpture, and video all consistently confront the viewer in order to elicit compassion. In *Small Gnomes* (2011), a thickly-painted canvas adorning the wall of Schulnik's ornament room, innumerable shifting faces—at once grotesque and beautiful—peer out from the viscous, pastel surface. The composition is punctuated by a pair of large, black eyes belonging to a sympathetic clown, a familiar character from *Mound*. Likewise, in the monumental painting *Hollow* (2010), imagery from *Mound* and *Eager* appears in a field of mushrooms and flowers. The highly tactile, red- and brown-hued painting (originally inspired by a vintage cookie jar) depicts a tree-house covered in knot holes with three black apertures. *Hollow's* shelter provides a safe haven for the community of sculptural creatures in the gallery.

As a self-proclaimed romantic with loner tendencies, a large part of Schulnik inhabits each of her characters. In addition to being biographical, her subjects derive from cartoons, film, and literature, but also encompass family, friends, lovers, neighbors, and even local homeless people. "Always, my hope is to find valor in adversity. My goal is never to exploit deficiencies but to provide a monument for something or someone, or even an emotion like sadness or happiness. I hope to provide understanding of my characters through pictures. To present a single dignified moment. To provide love and refuge."⁸

PATRICIA HICKSON

Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

ALLISON SCHULNIK

EDUCATION

- 2000 BFA, Experimental Animation, California
Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Valencia, CA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Allison Schulnik / MATRIX 168*, Wadsworth
Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
- 2013 *Expose: Allison Schulnik*, Laguna Art
Museum, Laguna Beach, CA
- 2012 *Mound*, Oklahoma City Museum of Art, OK
Mound, Nerman Museum of Contemporary
Art, Overland Park, KS

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *COVER UPI*, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna
*Awakening - Where Are We Standing? -
Earth, Memory and Resurrection*, Aichi
Triennale, Nagoya, Aichi, Japan
Experiments in Animation, Asheville Art
Museum, Asheville, NC
RSA 187, the Annual Exhibition, The Royal
Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, Scotland
Spectacle: The Music Video, Museum of the
Moving Image, New York
*The Very Large Array: San Diego/Tijuana
Artists in the MCA Collection*, MCASD
Downtown, San Diego, CA
Paint Things: Beyond the Stretcher,
DeCordova Sculpture Museum and Park,
Lincoln, MA
*Kiss Me Deadly: A Group Show of
Contemporary Neo-Noir from Los Angeles*,
Paradise Row, London, England
Group Show, Herzliya Museum of
Contemporary Art, Israel
- 2012 *Oppenheimer Anniversary Show*, Nerman
Museum of Contemporary Art, KS
Kiss Me Deadly, Paradise Row, London,
England
*Through the Looking Glass: Female
Surrealist Cinema*, film series, Los Angeles
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Wandellust: The Art of Claymation, Museen
Der Stadt, Dresden, Germany
Spectacle, Contemporary Arts Center,
Cincinnati, OH
- 2009 *Allison Schulnik*, Unosunove Arte
Contemporanea, Rome, Italy
- 2011 *Fairy Tales, Monsters, and the Genetic
Imagination*, Frist Center for the Visual
Arts; traveled to Winnipeg Art Gallery,
Manitoba, Canada and the Glenbow Art
Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- 2011 *New York Minute*, Garage Center for
Contemporary Culture, Moscow, Russia
Cryptic, St. Louis Contemporary Art
Museum, St. Louis, MO
- 2010 *Reframing America*, Santa Barbara Museum
of Art, Santa Barbara, CA
Elements of Nature, Contemporary Arts
Museum, New Orleans, LA
Allison Schulnik: Forest, The Hammer
Museum, Flux Screenings, Los Angeles, CA
Allison Schulnik: Recent Videos, The
Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, HI
Allison Schulnik: Hobo Clown, Nerman
Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland
Park, KS
Artefiera Art First, Unosunove Arte
Contemporanea, Rome, Italy
- 2009 *Flux Screening Series*, Hammer Museum,
Los Angeles, CA
*Wild Exaggeration: The Grotesque Body in
Contemporary Art*, Haifa Museum of Art,
Haifa, Israel
NewNow, Building the Museum Collection,
The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art,
Overland Park, KS

Born in San Diego, California, 1978
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME
Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA
Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, Canada

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada
Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, KS
Santa Barbara Art Museum, Santa Barbara, CA

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, all works courtesy the artist; Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles; and ZieherSmith, New York.

Video

Mound, 2011
Stop-motion, clay animation video with sound
Running time: 4:23 minutes
Cinematography by Helder King Sun
Music by Noel Scott Engel

Eager, 2014
Stop-motion, clay animation video with sound
Running time: 8:30 minutes
Cinematography by Helder King Sun
Music by Aaron M. Olson

Painting

Pink Flower #4, 2008
Oil on canvas
30 x 24 in.
The Mark & Hilary Moore Collection

Hollow, 2010
Oil on linen
78 x 98 in.

Small Gnomes, 2011
Oil on linen
60 x 72 in.

Sculpture

Ceramic Gin, 2007
Glazed ceramic
27 x 9 x 10 in.
The Elizabeth Lahey and Matthew J. Gardocki Collection

Gold Nipple Man, 2008
Glazed porcelain and gold paint
9 x 11 x 8 in.

Gold Bear, 2009
Glazed ceramic
17 x 11 x 9 in.
The Mark & Hilary Moore Collection

Purple Possum-Cat, 2010
Glazed ceramic
22 x 10 x 10 in.
Collection Majudia

White Fox, 2010
Glazed porcelain
7 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.

Shell #3, 2012
Glazed porcelain with house paint
33 x 15 x 18 1/2 in.

Shell #5, 2012
Glazed porcelain with house paint
24 1/2 x 16 x 12 in.

Flower with Gnome #1, 2014
Glazed ceramic
23 x 10 x 10 in.

Gouache

Blood Trappers, 2013
Gouache on paper
8 1/2 x 12 in.

Eager Poppies, 2013
Gouache on paper
12 x 8 1/2 in.

Three Eager Pansies, 2013
Gouache on paper
12 x 8 3/4 in.

ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk
Allison Schulnik
Thursday, February 6
6 pm

Schulnik will discuss her MATRIX project in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.

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The MATRIX program is also supported in part by the current and founding members of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art's Contemporary Coalition.

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Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art

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¹ Email from the artist to the author, 28 January 2013.

² Email from the artist to the author, 19 December 2013.

³ Ibid.

⁴ California Institute of the Arts, formerly Chouinard Art Institute, was famously underwritten by Walt Disney.

⁵ Email from the artist to the author, 19 December 2013.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Allison Schulnik in "Allison Schulnik Q&A," interviewed by Lauren Licata, *Allison Schulnik: Statements* (Los Angeles: Mark Moore Gallery, 2013), p. 5.

⁸ Email from the artist to the author, 28 January 2013.