



Piled-Up: Q&A With Allison Schulnik by New American Paintings

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Stepping out of the ambient bustling of West 20th street into **ZieherSmith** last week, the outside world and its stimuli immediately evaporated. Through the gatherings of weary figures and overripe fauna of **Allison Schulnik's** solo exhibition drifts the melancholy melody of Scott Walker's "It's Raining Today," the source imperceptible from the entrance. Dramatically lit with small spots, and thick with the smell of oil paint, *Mound* (Exhibiting through December 17th), envelopes its viewers in a multi-sensory experience of nostalgia and theatricality. Chunky impastoed canvases depicting flowers, clowns, animals and hobos are displayed along with Schulnik's works in other media. A small gouache painting on paper entitled "Funeral Party" hangs to the side of a small ceramic mammal and a head-shaped vessel.

In the main gallery space, "Mound," a stunning stop-motion video, and the source of the soundtrack, is projected to fill an entire wall. Figures and landscape melt into one another, becoming at points, one large undulating mound. On the adjacent walls, similarly-scaled paintings, "Flower Mound" (100" x 148") and "Idyllwild" (110" x 78") are awesome in their size and craftsmanship. Schulnik moves seamlessly between media, and from large-scale to smaller, more intimate pieces like "White Flower" (ceramic and wood, 37" x 29" x 29") with the same amount of detail and care. This tangible transition from painting to film to object brings us fully into the Schulnik world of comic/tragic ruffians, kittens and puppets. I had the opportunity to ask Allison a few questions about her show and the influences in her work... - *Alex Ebstein, Baltimore Contributor*



Allison Schulnik | Still from Mound, 2011, video, drawing, sculpture, box, 4:33 in length, Courtesy ZieherSmith

Alex Ebstein: *Mound* shares the title of your included film piece – the center piece of the exhibition – do you work on your paintings and films simultaneously? Does your relationship to the hobo and derelict figures change between media? Does one provide you with a greater expressive satisfaction?

Allison Schulnik: No I don't work on my paintings and films simultaneously. I can only focus on one thing at a time. My relationship to the subjects I'm painting never really changes between mediums. I also feel the same way about all the different mediums I work in, because one cannot exist without the other. If I find myself becoming frustrated with one medium, I work through it, but sometimes I don't want to work through it, and then I can move to the another medium. It is a necessary cycle. I get bored easily.



Allison Schulnik, Installation of Mound, 2011, Courtesy ZieherSmith



Allison Schulnik | Flower Mound, 2011, two panels joined together, ships separately as 100 x 74 each, Courtesy ZieherSmith

AE: Do you start a painting with a flat drawing, or are you modeling the features in paint as you go?

AS: I don't really have a specific method that I use all the time. It changes, depending on the piece. Sometimes I work from drawings and gouaches, and have a very specific idea of what the piece will be, and other times I go right in and work, letting the subject change as needed. Neither route proves to always come out good. There are a lot of mistakes in the way I work. Failures are fun to explore sometimes. Sometimes they turn into wonderful moments of new discovery, and other times they break you completely.

AE: As a viewer, there are a lot of childhood references and a nostalgia relating to fiction, songs and storybooks and even Royal Doulton ceramic figures. Where did your initial interest in these dark, comically-tragic figures begin?

AS: I am not sure where it began. It was pointed out to me the other day that I was always working with the subject of the sad or frustrated performer, or outcast, even as a teenager. My first stop-motion film I made when I was 19 was about a sad court jester that was forced to kill himself. Before that I drew a lot of dancers and strange hippys. It just always seemed like a natural subject for me to explore. Maybe it is my background in dance. I've always loved drama.



Allison Schulnik | *Dempster*, 2010, oil on canvas stretched on board, 24 x 30 inches, Courtesy ZieherSmith



Allison Schulnik | *Hobo Cat Family (Mother Cat)*, Oil on Linen, 16" x 20", 2011, Courtesy ZieherSmith



Allison Schulnik | *Hobo Clown with Long Nose*, 2011, ceramic and wood pedestal, 17 x 10 x 10 inches (ceramic), 34 x 10 x 10 inches approx. (pedestal), Courtesy ZieherSmith



Allison Schulnik | *Yogurt Eater*, 2011, oil on linen, 84 x 68 inches, Courtesy ZieherSmith

AE: Do these things still influence your work?

AS: I'm sure they do. I have a lot of influences, dance, musical theater, film, music, cartoons, junk, history, art history, gnomes and made up histories, fantastical realities, discarded once-sentimental relics, day dreams and night frights, dance in cinema, or dance film, collecting and collectors, vikings and performers.

AE: Which artists visual or otherwise do you admire or find inspiring?

AS: This is always an endless list. Bonnard, Hockney, Katz, Neel, Balthus, Ensor, Van Gogh, Dix, Rousseau, Andrew Wyeth, Florine Stettheimer, Peter Saul, Basil Wolverton, Aurthur Szyk, Georgia O'Keefe, Paul McCarthy, Pina Bausch, Bob Fosse, Martha Graham, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Cab Calloway, Michael Jackson, Barbra Streisand, Bruce Dickinson, Ronny James Dio, King Diamond, Peter Grudzien, Scott Walker, Eric Yahnker, Nobuhiko Ohbayashi, Bruce Bickford, Yuri Norstein, Jan Svankmajer, Corny Cole, Mike Mitchell, Jules Engel, Terry Gilliam, John Hubley, Ub Iwerks...

AE: Every piece seems to have a slumped posture, both elegant and exhausted. You mention in the press release that you look at ballet and theater as part of your process, are there specific characters or figures that you emulate or look at for your work?

AS: I take a lot of photos and do a lot of drawings, of people I see, people I love, family, friends, and random strangers. I use those a lot of those photos as reference for the drawings and paintings. Whatever figure I am working with, animal or human-like, they are always built upon a human frame of some kind, whether imagined or experienced.