

THE SUB-MISSION

Interview with Jessica Campbell

BRIA

In *Bria*, you collage cut acrylic carpet scraps. In other works you have incorporated latch hook weaving, comics and comedy performances, is collage a process you have been utilizing recently?

Hm! I guess the carpet work is literally collage, but I haven't thought of it like that exactly. I think of these pieces as a hybrid between sculptural work and drawing, and as (hopefully) obscuring their making somewhat. I've been working with carpet for a while, cutting it and piecing it back together, but this is the first exhibition where it has jumped from the floor to the wall, and the first where imagery has appeared. If one could think about the idea of collage more broadly, like assemblage, then I've used it a lot in the past, but as far as cutting/gluing goes, this is the first time I can think of using it.

You take a tactile approach in your art making. Does this help to process, or meditate on, the imagery that inspires your work?

I often think of my work in terms of speed and labour. I like working in different modes because labour is distributed differently. The wall vinyl in this exhibition is the perfect example of this. There was, of course, some mental labour on my part, of deciding what to include, and the mental anguish of ruminating on my friend's death, and, certainly, her own mental labour constructing the text all those years ago. However, most of the labour involved in that work was the physical labour of adhering it to the walls. That act, transferring the vinyl to the walls, took me a total of... 9 hours, I think? It was considerably longer than I originally had anticipated, but the act of forcefully rubbing each word against the wall ultimately behaved as a meditative process that allowed me to have a material interaction with her words that made them for more real. I will never have another physical interaction with Bria, who was a very physical person (she was a dancer, after all), so the text allowed me this tactile interaction with a piece of her that was unexpected.

In general I like to have some labour-intensive, mindless component to my work so that I keep my hands busy and can feel like I've done an honest day's work when I go to bed. Much of my life (teaching, wage labour working, etc) involves more mental labour and/or just computer time, so physical touch and labour in my work offsets that somewhat.

What type of imagery or materials are you most drawn to in your art making?

There is a central thread of drawing that tends to run throughout all of my work. I have spent many years reading/loving/making comics and working in comics publishing, and that has had an indelible influence on the appearance of my work. More recently, I've been working in black and white, I think in part as a way of relating the comics I make to the larger and more materially diverse studio work that I make.

Otherwise, I am very interested in adolescence, in the agony and discomfort of teen girlhood, and in the idea of stages and, particularly, stand up comedy stages. I think all of these point toward different kinds of vulnerability and obfuscation that feel endlessly generative.

The recent passing of your close childhood friend Bria, has caused you to scrutinize your friendship. How are the scenes in the carpeted collages and ink drawings sourced – from your memory, from stories she shared, or your perceptions of her life?

The three rug pieces are sourced from a combination of those three things. The largest, central piece with the three nude figures is from a memory of us skinny dipping together, the greyscale work is from an incident that happened to both of us, but separately and in separate locations, and the most colourful one is from her time spent in Fribourg, Switzerland, a place I know only from her descriptions of it.

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I constructed a list of anecdotes that I remembered – everything that I remembered, basically – and then picked the ones that I felt most compelled towards, that exemplified something of her spirit or what was remarkable about her. Only afterwards did I realize that all three had aggressive interactions with men, threatening or harassing. This feels appropriate to me, since I feel that men share a lot of the blame for what happened in her life. First, I think her vision of herself was distorted by social pressures on women to appear and behave a certain way, and, second, she had a few key relationships with controlling men that determined some of her significant and bad life decisions. I'm very angry and sad about a lot of it, but these three instances were all ones in which I felt like she/we had agency, even if it was through hiding in the bushes.

THE SUB-MISSION is located in the basement of THE MISSION -- how does your work relate to the site of this exhibition?

Much of my teen life was spent in basements, rec room spaces ancillary to the main living areas of the house, so that fact that these works are a rumination on that time and are appearing in a basement space feels very appropriate. Similarly, the material that I've been using, acrylic rugs that have a latch-hook-y/crafty appearance and feel related to craft objects, existed in the basements/rec rooms that I occupied in my youth.

The white vinyl text, pulled from an email sent to you from Bria, is camouflaged on the white walls of the space. Have you incorporated this (almost) ghostly text in your work previously?

No, this specific manifestation of ghostly text is new. It comes, however, out of an impulse to obfuscate that permeates a lot of my work. Previous works have included illegible (or nearly illegible) texts, covered up or erased drawings and other hidden content.

My friendship with Bria was at its most intense from 2001–2003, our senior high school years, and, while we remained friends after that, geographical differences and our divergent life paths separated us. As soon as I heard that she had died, I immediately turned to email in an attempt to sift through our correspondence. I was looking to feel some kind of connection to her, to hear her voice, possibly to make sense of what had happened in her life and why/where things had gone

wrong, but we were both new to email at that point and little remains documented from our friendship.

The text on the wall is the entirety of one email that she wrote me, dividing by paragraph. Viewers can read it for themselves, but what I like about it is that it's funny and banal and totally fucked up in turn. She was a great writer and this email, the first time she recorded an upsetting incident, is indicative of that ability. I also really appreciate it because I think it normalizes this facet of her life that was traumatic and can otherwise feel alien to me (and I suspect other people) who've been fortunate not to struggle severely with drug addiction or mental illness. While the rest of our correspondence with each other occasionally touches on some of these subjects, much of it is relegated exclusively to our mundane existences – who we were dating, what we were eating or drinking, what music we were listening to, et cetera – and doesn't touch on the severity of the problems that she was grappling with.

Yet even this email is full of misdirects and obfuscation. There is a quote from Mark Twain that I probably read on a coffee mug or something that comes to mind, it is: "What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself." I think this email reveals a very small window into Bria's life but so much is inaccessible, now permanently. I wanted to emulate that idea in the material, which is where the ghost-like text came from.

On a separate note, can you tell me a little bit more about the book you recently published, *Hot or Not: 20th Century Male Artists*?

Yes, the book is an art historical analysis of the attractiveness of male artists of the twentieth century, with illustrations and an introduction from Leslie Barnardiston FitzRoy, Chief Curator at the Museum of Modern & Contemporary Western Art, Rotterdam. It was published by Koyama Press and is meant to read like a tour through the museum. It's tonally very different from the exhibition!