

**Mia Pearlman interviewed by Lance Hewison  
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**You say that the paper sculptures “exist only for the length of an exhibition.” Unless I’m mistaken, this sounds like the work gets destroyed (though I hope I AM mistaken). Do you scrap the work entirely? Or do you reuse the various pieces of each installation for future projects?**

I reuse the cut paper pieces from show to show, and often add new pieces as well. Part of the challenge of my work is finding new ways of using this vocabulary of shapes differently each time. The installations only last for the duration of the exhibition because they are created right on the walls and ceiling of the space. They could not be recreated unless the measurements and lighting of the a different location were exactly the same.

**Having been a printmaker for a number of years (which only seemed to exacerbate a budding fetish for all things paper) I can’t help but to wonder, what sort of paper(s) do you use?**

I use a very basic acid-free drawing paper that comes on a roll, Borden-Riley. It’s nothing special but remarkably durable and cheap.

**In our first correspondence, I noted that I wanted to add more female artist to my roster here at RefractionART. You mentioned to me that although the majority of graduates with an art degree are women, they are under represented in galleries, museums, press, etc. Why do you think the art world, even in 2011, still tends to be a male dominated field?**

This is an important but very difficult question to answer. I do think things are changing for the better, even in the last 10 years there has been a noticeable rise in the number of women being shown, collected, written about, etc. That said, I believe there is still a perception among some collectors that art by women will not appreciate in value as much as art by men. Which may have been true in the past, but is changing---and certainly investing in work by women helps effect this change. Since so many people now treat art as an investment on which they expect a certain return, they tend to invest in the safest product. In the art world, like any other, money is power. Economic parity is a huge issue that often gets lost in this discussion, perhaps because we like to mythologize artists and the art world as being held to a more idealistic standard. Of course for most artists money is not a motivation, or we’d be doing something that actually makes money! Or as I tell students, “It ain’t lucrative so you might as well have fun!”

One thing that makes me optimistic is the huge number of amazing gallery owners, curators, collectors and of course incredible artists who are women, and who *support* other women by showing, collecting and writing about their work. Another is that men of my generation were raised to see women as equals in a way that previous generations were not. Even 25 years ago it was a whole different ballgame for women in American society, including the art world. If you are interested in this topic, I highly recommend reading the art critic Jerry Saltz, who has written passionately about this topic for years. He’s really been instrumental in keeping the issue alive and urgent.

**Your process appears highly energetic and spontaneous, as you install the work on site in a matter of days. Do you envision the project in your head and then chase after this imagined image, or does the work manifest itself in the actual process?**

My process is completely intuitive, and in fact I do everything in my power NOT to visualize the specifics before I make a new installation, though I usually do a site visit or study photos. I want my work to be a spontaneous reaction to the space in the moment. After sitting at a desk cutting paper, creating a new piece feels like dancing. A dance on a ladder with map tacks and paper clips in my mouth for 3-4 days, but dancing nonetheless!

**Are there times, during the process of installing one of your large pieces, where you feel it is not coming together or that you've hit a wall? If so, how do you overcome this?**

Of course! To be an artist is to regularly (if not constantly) feel frustrated, blocked, disappointed, worried, angry and/or nauseous about one's own work. I have never met an artist who didn't periodically think in a moment of panic that he/she still had time to go to law school (or design school, acupuncture school, etc).

My process is all about courage and faith---faith in my process, in my work, in the viewer, in myself. So when I'm feeling stuck, I'll walk around the block or get lunch or whatever---my vision is always cleared by a good break.

**I always ask this question: which artists, visual or otherwise, inspire you most?**

My mother, Mickey Pearlman, quit teaching college English in her 40's to become a writer, which required an incredible amount of bravery and faith. It wasn't easy, especially while raising two kids, but she was very successful at it and as you can imagine, tough as nails. Growing up with her as a role model has been an incredible advantage to me, in too many ways to list. But I certainly knew from my earliest memory that there was nothing more important than freedom and following your passion. One of the biggest gifts was just knowing how HARD it would be to pursue something so inherently difficult, unrewarded and solitary as art (or writing): my eyes were open. Oh, and knowing how to stretch a dollar!

In terms of visual artists, I love reading artist biographies, particularly of artists that worked long into old age, often through periods of obscurity, failure, war, health problems, etc. Louise Bourgeois is one of my major role models. I want to be 88 and still kicking ass in the studio.

**Why do you think you are drawn to creating art that resembles or recreates an approximation of the elements outside? Does it have anything to do with places you've visited, or where you grew up (I dreamily imagine it was a lighthouse set on a rugged coast someplace)?**

Hahaha, I'm from New York---which I suppose is a rugged coast, in its own way---and we do have amazing skies. I'm truthfully not sure why exactly I am so fascinated with the natural world. But every time I look at photos of crazy cloud forms or weird deep sea creatures or odd rock formations, I always think, "Nature is so much cooler than art. I can never win!" Though I'm still trying. . .ha ha ha.

**After looking through the images on your website, I notice the figure is wholly absent from your work. Do these shapes you create and these imagined elements you conjure somehow imply the figure psychologically? Or do you prefer that your work be seen as abstracted elements divorced from any particular association?**

I can say with complete honesty I never think about whether my work is representational or abstract. But I am not interested in making a version of something that already exists, like the Empire State Building out of popsicle sticks, or a realistic oak tree out of pencil erasers, or oil paint or clay. I already know what those things look like, what's the point? I want to make the things that exist in my head.

**It looks like you've just wrapped up an exhibition in the Netherlands. I assume you traveled there to install the work. If so, can you tell me about your experience there?**

I had a wonderful experience in the Netherlands. I was invited by a curator named Inge Pollet to do a residency and exhibition at Plaatsmaken, a print media studio in Arnhem. Because of other commitments I was unable to do the residency aspect, but I had a two person show at their gallery with the Dutch artist Kinke Kooi, who is just terrific. I brought the cut paper in a giant tube with me on the airplane, and made the installation on site. When I got there I chose a spot directly on the front windows of the gallery and got to work. I named the piece PENUMBRA.

**Speaking of exhibitions, I also see you have a new one coming January 8<sup>th</sup>. Congratulations on your many achievements. If you don't mind sharing, what have been a few of your highs and lows of the gallery world, and in participating in the art world at large?**

Thank you! I have been very fortunate.

Without a doubt the biggest high so far was participating in the exhibition "Slash: Paper Under the Knife" at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York last year. It was such an honor working with David McFadden, the chief curator of the museum, who is just incredible: passionate, smart, inquisitive, visionary, discerning and fun. I had the privilege of choosing the space where I would make my installation, and made friends with so many other artists in the show. I also created a limited edition laser cut sculpture called VOLUTA that was sold in the museum store, and did a few artist talks for various groups. The exhibition had over 800,000 visitors and was up from October – April, so it was tremendous exposure for me. And their registrar Elayne Rush has to be one of the most patient, competent, hard working people I have ever met. I wish she could run my whole life.

In terms of lows? Well, let's just say very few people are as organized, professional and experienced as those at MAD.

**A friend of mine pointed out that you've won a Pollock-Krasner Grant. That's wonderful, and I think truly deserved as well. Can you tell me a little more about the award, and how it's helped further your artistic goals?**

Thanks so much. Winning the Pollock Krasner was an incredible honor. The award is a huge affirmation for artists. I applied for the grant in 2008, a year in which I had 8 shows in 3 countries and no money whatsoever. The grant made it possible for me to be a fulltime artist, hire help in the studio and do a residency in Argentina where I created the prototype for VOLUTA, among other things. When the chairman of the foundation called to tell me I burst into tears of relief. It could not have come at a better time or have been more needed or appreciated.

**Random last question: If you don't mind sharing, what is the strangest dream you can remember having?**

I have A LOT of strange dreams. I have had a recurring dream forever in which I am lost in New York, and even though in reality I know every inch of the city, in the dream I can't find where I want to go. It often takes place in the subway, where I'm searching for the C train platform, etc. Clearly my subconscious isn't terribly complex! Happily I can report that when things really started to take off in my work I found where I was going in the dream too. I won't go into detail, but the destination was totally worth the search! Now let's just hope it comes true. . .