

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



Shelley Spector on Process, Inspiration and Self-Awareness

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Recently I sat down with Shelley Spector and asked her a few questions about her work. We talked about her process, choice of materials, inspiration, self-awareness and social responsibility. I hope you will enjoy reading this interview as much as I enjoyed meeting and talking to Shelley Spector.



Focusing primarily on your show at Bridgette Mayer Gallery, I want to talk a little bit about your process and inspiration and also about how you see your role as an artist. For me, both these issues seem to stand out when I think of your work.

Tell me a little bit about your process. Where does it all start: with choosing the materials, choosing the medium and technique, or with an idea or concept?

Usually a material is what spawns a piece. There is a really interesting way my work usually happens . . . I collect a lot of things that I think at some point I might want to use. I don't know why I might use them, but I am attracted to them for some unconscious reason. So I collect found material. It used to be mostly wood, which was my dominant medium but now I branched out to fabric, paper, metal or whatever else I come across. Wood is still my main medium.

But usually, medium and concept or idea, happen simultaneously. When I start a body of work, the first thing that I do is to clean my studio. That forces me to sort through [the materials], and in the process of doing that, I start pulling things. Usually, I am thinking of something. There is something on

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my mind, an idea that is crystallizing, there is something I see happening in the world. After that, it's organic. They kind of come together.

The beginning of process is very uncomfortable, and it's full of insecurity – because I don't have a plan. I don't sketch. I don't use any of the 'traditional' ways that an artist uses to prepare. But once it kicks in, it kind of just kicks in, and a lot of it is not totally conscious, but rather instinctive. It takes me a long time to figure out what I am doing. I am learning it as I am doing it. For an example, there is one piece in my show at Bridgette Mayer Gallery, "Boxed Time," which came as a whole piece – I had the materials there and I knew exactly how to transform them. I didn't really know what it was about when I was making it, but I knew what it was supposed to look like. I had this old tackle box that I had found at a flea market, and I had some fabric from my grandmother who worked at an upholstery factory, so it has been around my whole life, and I also had this clock, which was actually bought at a flea market for another piece that it did not work out. When I found the fishing tackle box, that was the last part of the piece. In my head, I knew I had to put it with the fabric and the clock. I did not completely know what the piece was about until I was putting it together. Then it became clear to me that it was about trying to slow down time, stop time, hold present still – which obviously you can't do.

You can do that through memory, and the use of the old fabric seems to point to that.

There is definitely that aspect to my work. It's all dealing with time.



Let's talk about "Mariposa." Did this piece come together the same way? Did you find the blanket and think, "I am going to un-weave it," or did you first come up with the idea of unweaving something both as a process and metaphor?

No, I did not have that idea. I don't know if I would have engaged in a project like Mariposa if I knew ahead of time what it would have entailed. I cannot imagine saying, "hey, I am going to sit in my studio for two years with a seam ripper listening to music and making hundreds of spools." . . . I was thinking about unraveling something. And I first tried it with a pair of socks.

Cotton socks?

No . . . they were the kind of socks that I thought that if I pulled the thread, they would start to unravel. But that did not happen at all. That was the first thing I tried to do and it did not work. I wanted to

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unravel because I was thinking about different things in my life and about breaking habits that I was unhappy with. I was looking for a way to feel different, to feel and think different about how I saw myself in the world. And I knew that I had to dig deep. It was not a very conscious process, but I knew that I wanted to dig deep and change something. That is why I wanted to unravel. I wanted to do something with my work that was the same as what I was doing with my personal life. So I tried with the socks and it did not work, it really did not work. So I started hunting around for something that might unravel. And I tried to pull other things apart, and that also did not work. I was looking around my house – sometimes I have to wreck things to make artwork; sometimes I cut up tables just because I need certain things – so I went up and saw there was a blanket on my bed. It was this red wool blanket that I had for a really long time. And I went to check its thread. It was woven, and that is what you really need, because there is no kind of knotting. So I brought it down to my studio and after I unraveled a little bit I realized that this was perfect. I unraveled probably about half an inch of a 70 inch blanket, and I got a lot of wool – and I immediately was immersed in a project. I made a decision that I was going to rewind it on spools. I did not really know what I was doing, but I wanted to save the thread and it made sense to save onto spools. I am a sculptor so I just made spools to roll the thread onto. That was the beginning of the process. Once I started, I could not really stop.

Is that the whole blanket in “Mariposa?”

Yes. There are some little parts left of it because wool is fuzzy and I had to trim bits of it to be able unravel it, but I also saved those things because I might still use them for something.

And how long did this project take?

Actually, I worked on it for two years, both on the unraveling and the making of the spools.

I am sure it took as long to make the spools as it took to unweave the blanket.

Yes, and all the wood from the spools is reclaimed wood. Also, I did not know this when I brought Mariposa into the gallery to be installed, an intern counted all the spools, and there were 805.

I thought it was in the hundreds but I did not expect the number to be so high!

There are some really little ones . . . In my brain the number was somewhere between 500 and 800, but I was really surprised.

Your work is so different and has so many aspects and you use such varied materials.

I don't want to jump so quickly from this part of your work to another, but I am really intrigued by your series Five And A Half By Forty. Are you primarily interested in the image or with the objects? Do the objects make sense as a group, or are they individually important?

This series started about twenty years ago. Now, there are twenty-eight pieces, and I plan to continue. I think of it as a time capsule of objects from my lifetime. But they are not actual objects; they are things that I manipulate heavily in Photoshop. I imagine someone opening up this time capsule with

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these objects in it, and it would tell a different story because of how I manipulated them. It's about documenting my life-time. Obviously I choose objects that kind of fit into the format, or that I can make fit into the format; there is a chess board in there that is normally square but that I am able to manipulate and make it five and a half by forty inches. If I can work it into the format, I do. There are some things that I would like to put in there, but I can't make it work.

Since I have been working on this series for twenty years, it also connects to whatever body of work I am working on. There is a thread and needle in one, and it's the thread and needle of "The Mend," one of the three dimensional pieces in the exhibit. The needle is actually that needle. There are rulers and watches in there which connect to whatever I was doing at the time. There are definitely themes that keep reoccurring in my work, yet some of the pieces are done between bodies of work so they don't really connect to anything. There is a piece of chain in one of the images that was part of a sculpture.

It almost seems that there is this ribbon that connects my work. You commented on my work being different or diverse within material and form. But my work connects over time. There might be a piece in this show that connects strongly with a piece with a show two years ago. So I can make bodies of work that connect over time rather than connect through meaning.



So "Five and a Half by Forty" seems to document your life and your work, and to refer to both what you were seeing and to what you were doing.

Yes. I wouldn't say every single piece connects to every single piece, except in format, but it connects to something, either in my life or in a show.

Are the pieces hung in a particular order, or was the way you displayed them a purely aesthetic decision?

The way I hung it was aesthetic. Some of them sing together very nicely while others don't.

I also found quite intriguing that the sculptures in the front gallery offer a critical commentary about the world. I am thinking in particular about the un-functioning level, about the tiny pencils trapped in a bottle and about the impractical birdcages.

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They all seem to be impossible from a functional point of view. Is that intentional? What is the message?

I am glad to hear you use the word "comment," because that refers to bringing light to something, but not criticizing. My last body of work was very influenced by natural disasters. It was at a time when all this stuff was happening. It made me aware that our lifestyle is part of what is creating these disasters. How we live, our culture, my culture, is very consumer based. In this show, it turned into this thought of all the stuff we have and how all of it is not necessary and some of it does not even work. One of the things I was thinking about making that did not make its way into the show was pants with fake pockets on them.

The level, the ruler, and the bird cages all reference functional objects, but when you go towards them, you are somewhat bewildered by their awkward impracticality . . . they make you uncomfortable.

Yeah, that is the thought. . . I was just talking to a curator, and he said that some of the work is heartbreaking. And that was somewhat of a compliment. But that is how I see it. It is a lot about waste.



That is probably why you use reclaimed material.

I have been doing that for a long time, but now that has taken on a new meaning for me. When I did this last body of work, I started feeling very guilty about making and using a lot of stuff. It would feel weird to go out and buy a lot of stuff to make my work when I comment about having too much stuff. But perhaps I have been using recycled material for this reason all along.

You say in your statement that your work is about "most people's everyday." But it seems like you are drawn to specific subjects about the everyday, such as daily habits of consumerism and its results and impacts. How do you sift through the 'everyday' and pick a particular subject, scenario or event? What are you mostly interested in? What are you drawn to?

I don't talk about everything. Our environment, for example, is part of our everyday.

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Tools of measurement are common themes in my work; e.g., time as part of our everyday. "Mariposa," the idea of wanting to transform one thing into another, is part of our everyday also. You are not the same person the next day. Nature is also a big theme.

My process does not entail reading the paper, having a cup of coffee . . . but rather thinking of the universal everyday experience. It is something that someone at the other side of the world is experiencing too. My experience is very American, very 2012. But there are still sweeping ideas that connect.

Your work, for me, shows that you, as an artist, are always aware of yourself in within the environment, in time, and you are socially conscious. You point to things.

I guess that when an artist makes something that is personal, in a lot of ways, the more personal it is, it becomes more universal. I am really trying, with my work, to pay attention to myself but also to the context that I live in. When you draw really far inward, you are also projecting out.

Since artists have the ability and luxury to communicate openly in a unique way, how important is it to be socially conscious? Is it our responsibility?

This is an interesting question. I am not sure what the answer is, but I can think out loud a little bit.

One of the things that is very important to me is to not be too obtuse, and to be able to make work about a certain idea and for that idea to be able to come across, but at the same time, to be open so that the viewers can put themselves into it.

Do I think it is my responsibility? No. But one of my interests as an artist is to be able to create conversations generated by these ideas that I am having and expressing through my work. I am still trying to figure stuff out.

Thank you, Shelley Spector, for generously giving us a little bit of insight into your work. I look forward to hearing about new projects and hopefully we will see your work "front and center" again soon.

<http://artgrind.wordpress.com/2013/02/28/shelley-spector-on-process-inspiration-and-selfawareness/>