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Talking Mermaids and Bacchanalia with Painter Allison Schulnik

In advance of her upcoming show at the Mark Moore Gallery in Los Angeles, we talked to the down-to-earth artist about being a loner, the craft worker mentality, and the mess of having a body.



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STILL FROM THE FILM "EAGER," 2014. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF ALLISON SCHULNIK

California native Allison Schulnik makes work that's hard to classify. Her videos look like moving paintings, her thick impasto pieces like sculptural reliefs. Watching one of the artist's claymation animations feels like stumbling into a bacchanal, a scene of ritualized and fervent disorder. Pulsating landscapes bloom with mushrooms and phallic flora. The flowers have faces, lips, and teeth. Nothing is free from transformation—figures made in paint and clay stretch, melt, and multiply. Schulnik's work is rich with horror vacui and demonstrates an eye for the grotesque, like something from Hieronymus Bosch. Her work negotiates the space between void and hyper-abundance. Disorder and chaos are explored and shaped until they create their own formal logic.

Schulnik's world is populated with the marginal and maimed: crones, gnomes, and mermaids. The artist celebrates that which is normally cast out, bringing out the life in dead matter. Her signature Hobo Clown meets our gaze with black-ringed eyes, bringing to mind the Shakespearean fool who just might know more than the hero. Schulnik has a strong sense of the theatrical, tipping artfully between tragedy and farce.

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Part of the relish of looking at this stuff is that you get a sense that it was fun (if a hell of a lot of work) to make, the elements familiar from kindergarten crafts: clay, fabric, wood, and glue. You get sticky fingers just watching one of her videos, and Schulnik herself is quick to call animation a "get-your-hands-dirty medium." In advance of her upcoming painting show at the [Mark Moore Gallery](#) in Los Angeles, we talked to the down-to-earth artist about being a loner, mermaids, and the mess of having a body.

STILL FROM THE FILM "EAGER," 2014

BROADLY: I know you grew up in a family of artists. What was that like?

Allison Schulnik: It was nice! Although it's hard to know what it would've been like growing up in a non-artistic family. Being an artist was almost expected—not in a bad way. Art, in all its forms, was just always around. It was a way of life. Who could complain? Even my brother, the black sheep of the family (the one non-artist), benefited from it. He still thinks like an artist despite [having been] a computer boy before I even knew what a computer was.

What made you study animation instead of a "get-your-hands-dirty" medium?

I don't know that animation is not a "get-your-hands-dirty" medium. My hands are always dirty when I animate. I ingested far more toxic chemicals in the experimental animation department than I did in the regular critical art department classes. I feel like my brain got dirtier in animation as well. Since art was what I grew up with, I wanted to learn a technical skill that I could nerd out on. I started in the art department at CalArts, age 17, knowing I wanted to do animation, but I didn't realize you could just apply with still work. I took all film and animation classes. The film school was where you had to go to take a life drawing or color class, for instance. I switched over to the film school.

STILL FROM "HOBO CLOWN," 2008

What's your studio like? Do you need a healthy dose of chaos to be able to work productively?

My studio is a big blob of Allie. I guess I'm like a kitty and have been building up my little bed of cat hair, and skin pieces, and chewed-up nails, until it surrounds me and I feel comfortable. I don't know. My studio is a mess of collections of collections of collections, and I love it.

Looking at your work, I think about the mess of having a body. There's all this fleshiness to contend with, and it's uncontrollable. How are you thinking about the body in your work?

I love that—what a mess it is, too. Honestly, I try not to think too much about what I'm making. The body has a way of barging into everything whether you like it or not, like, "Oh shit, it's *that* guy." I feel like I am trying to control everything while trying not to control it. I love flesh, though.

Do you ever paint stills from your videos, or animate a scene from a painting? How much does the world you create fold into itself?

Yes, everything is incestuous. I draw something that becomes a painting that becomes a sculpture that becomes a film. Or I animate something that becomes a painting that becomes a dance. Everything is everything.

Your paintings are so thick, they're almost like reliefs. What do you like about paint?

I probably like that it's like food or fluids. I can't even begin to know why. It's just necessary to life. Except the toxic part—I use oils. It seems pretty idiotic to like something that is nourishing but also poisonous.

Many critics read allusions to female anatomy in your forms: seashells and flowers, phallic flora. Is this purposeful?

I would say yes! Sometimes! And sometimes not. What does it matter? The body barges in.

"MERMAID WITH LEGS," 2012

You did a show in 2012 working with mermaids. In *Mermaid with Legs*, she's facing the viewer, legs spread. What made you want to give the half-woman her other half?

I like to re-evaluate archetypes, or just make my own version of someone else's world. In both the original Hans Christian Andersen tale "The Little Mermaid" and the Disney movie, which were the basis for the show, the mermaid is given legs and a human soul in exchange for her tail and tongue. Despite feeling daggers pierce her with every human step for eternity, she agrees to suffer for love. In the Disney tale, Ariel gets the prince. In the original tale, after being tortured by oysters, given the choice to straight up get married or die (by dissolving into foam), after living a life without a soul, and with sisters who love to torture sailors, she basically refuses to kill her love to save her own life and commits suicide. It's dark. I just wanted to paint mermaids and give them legs as I [saw] fit.

Eyes are often very vivid in both your paintings and animations. Does that just happen?

I think so, yes. Although I do focus on the eyes, they are sometimes the most fun part, sometimes the hardest part, being windows to the soul and all.

"LADY WITH CAT," 2015

Painting and animation are both very solitary. What are your favorite ways of getting out in the world?

Tops is being with my boo. We're both loners, but I do get lonely since I spend most of my time alone in my cave, working. I have trouble being social. But then there's the dancer side of me that likes to interact. I like people. I like having a community of like-minded dummies who are smarter than me and understand the obsessive craft worker mentality. I like being with animals, eating, dancing, live bands, being sardines in a stinky pit ocean, sweaty karaoke, and rolling around on a cement floor. Usually I can handle that for a few hours. Then I like being in nature with my boo. Then I like being alone and working again.

You really seem to have it all figured out. What are you afraid of?

Too much.

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