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Interview with Artist Elizabeth McGrath

By Sarah Elise Abramson

How and why did you start making things?

I'd like to say that it started when I was a child—that I was born with the urge to create—but the truth is, I really don't remember. I think the first things I made that really stood out were articles of clothing I had transformed or altered.

What sparked you to start making your own clothes?

One day there was story on the news about the Sex Pistols, and it was like a light turned on in my head; I found something I could identify with. I didn't feel Catholic; I didn't feel Asian; I didn't feel white; I didn't feel like I fit in anywhere, but finally I fit right in with what they were taking about on the news. I was a punk. That's what led me to start really expressing myself. It started with my appearance, which then led to the things around me, which led to making art, which of course freaked the hell out of my parents!

What inspires you or gets you inspired?

Research. I love going to old public libraries and pouring through stacks of books and photographs, old and new. It

transports me to another world that sets the stage to create. Words, poetry, lectures, audio books, other artists work, museums... everything really, but when it's time for me to get serious on a project I go to the library. I go online and I fill my head with images and stories and build on ideas.

We spoke about fan mail recently, what were some of the cooler/crazier pieces of fan mail you've received?

There's been some pretty cool ones; although I've also received a few from serial killers, locked up in jail, which made me really think, "What am I sending out there that I would get noticed by someone like this?!" After that I tried making more uplifting art for a while. This led to a major creative slump. Yet, then it led me back to the notion of not overthinking the art I was making and just accepting that I make what I make because it keeps me sane and gives me purpose.

One piece of particularly memorable fan mail was an odd shaped, plush, pink pillow that someone had hand embroidered the words, "What, you got some sand in your vagina?"

The other extremely memorable piece of fan mail was from a German man who sent me a replica of one of my sculptures, a two headed monkey, he had made, and it was very well crafted. He wrote a three-page letter, and at the end of it said that he was there because he had suffered "a drug-induced psychotic breakdown" in which he killed some people...of course. It contained a bird feather and some tobacco, which I'm led to believe are very precious items if you are incarcerated.

I also received several animal hides one time. I opened the box and dozens of white moths fluttered out. It was quite magical until they found their way to my wool sweaters!

Where is your studio and how do you think having that space helps you create?

My studio is in downtown Los Angeles. I have lived/worked in downtown for about 17 years. When I first moved in, the street sign said skid row, but about 10 years ago they changed it to gallery row. Having a space in downtown really shaped my art. There were tons of near abandoned buildings, many of which housed sewing factories that had just up and left, leaving behind tons of fabric and notions; it was like a scavengers dream.

The building my studio is in was, and still is, filled with artists or writers or web designers. We would trade each other or work on projects together. The work in my first art show was made almost entirely from scraps I scavenged around downtown. It was a very engaging community. It still is. I've just been kind of agoraphobic since having my child 4 years ago.

Also, the extreme divide between the homeless and the rich, the mentally insane, the way nature gets intertwined with all our trash and how all our trash gets recycled into habitats for animals and people. I see people who push around their shopping carts covered in decorated stuffed animals and homemade talismans that look like rare, antique works of art. They are oblivious to the so-called real world around us. I imagine the rich or the scary or the sad worlds they live in and how they got there. Sometimes they say insightful, magical things to you as if they see through you to a different you in a different time. I want to help them, but I'm not really sure how; also how do I know that



- 1
The Folly of St. Hubertus, mixed media with gold leaf and Swarovski crystals, 23 x 15 x 24"
- 2
Cerebus, mixed media including Swarovski crystals, resin, gold and white gold leaf, oil paint, 20 x 16 x 16"
- 3
Polar Wonder Where, mixed media, 20 x 28"
- 4
Deer House, mixed media, 37 x 20 x 12"

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the world they are in is not better for them than the medicated, institutional world they would have to be in to be “normal.”

Where do the creatures you create come from?

I think everything people make in some way, no matter how small, is a mash-up of what they have seen and experienced beyond just what their personal style or taste may be. Here’s a few things I think have deeply affected me: growing up going

to Catholic churches and dim sum every Sunday in the suburbs of LA through the ’70s, which inspired my love of altar-like shrines and ornate embellishments.

In the ’80s I discovered punk rock and was sent to a Baptist girls’ home for “wayward” girls because of it. Years later the FBI shut it down for being a cult. I think that inspired my angry and vicious creatures. I have lived in downtown LA for the last 20 years in a part that was formerly called skid row. When I first moved there,

most of it was boarded up, and at night when all the office workers left, it was like the whole city was yours, almost as if it was the stage of a science fiction, Wild West Dickens novel. The population of homeless people, mentally disturbed people, drug addicts, dealers, prostitutes and preachers affected me. Heroes and villains fanned their way all over the town singing, dancing, fucking, fighting and praying.

Through this, I was able to see some of the terrible things people do to each other. I saw an ambulance dump a legless man who seemed to not know where he was on the sidewalk, in nothing but a hospital gown. I saw about 50 homeless people get into a giant street fight using broken brooms, stones and pieces of the sidewalk to fight one another, and through the entire thing we repeatedly called 911, but it wasn’t broken up until a man had been stabbed to death with a rusty knife. I saw a fire and a man pull another man out of the flames. I saw people give money and food and clothing. There was a bearded loin-clothed man who had a one-eyed parrot and a pack of dogs. The parrot would command the dogs to sit and roll over and give them treats when they did. There was also a man who had a large albino snake wrapped around one shoulder and a ghetto blaster over the other. Sometimes he made the snake dance. I saw several people selling baby animals—turtles, iguanas, bunnies and parakeets—out of tiny plastic cages all strapped to a dolly with bungee cords. Some of the animals would be dead in their cages from the heat. I’m sure some of these things are where my creatures are coming from.

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Sarah Elise Abramson is a contemporary fine art photographer based in San Pedro, California—a mysterious post-industrial enclave whose offbeat countercultural history and proliferation of unusual sights, sounds and citizens is tailor-made for Abramson’s obsession with everyday surrealism. In both her own photography and in her curatorial and editorial approach to exhibition projects and independent publications, her emphasis is on discovering the eccentric beauty in the things most people overlook. Found objects, hidden messages, secrets of the universe that hide in plain sight—throughout her studies at Parsons The New School for Design and Brooks Institute of Photography, and later at LaChapelle Studios, her work has evolved from finding to intuitively creating original daydreams and shared cosmologies.