

Open Letters Monthly an Arts and Literature Review

Flexible and Ephemeral

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A Conversation with Megan Heeres –

OL: A number of your pieces (including our cover image, Home Alone) seem to involve paint or ink drip. Is this a relatively recent development? Does it come from an interest in midcentury drip paintings or did it emerge from your own absorption with natural forces and organic forms? And how does a piece like SweetSweet actually operate to produce those odd ropy, bubbly, pooling forms?

Megan: Yes and no – dripping as an *artistic* process emerged within the last few years when I began working with more fluid media (as opposed to the paper, fabric and thread I had been working with just

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prior). However, it comes from a lifetime of summers on Lake Michigan and other bodies of water building drip castles with wet sand and water. The fascinating thing about these structures was their precariousness – they were subject to the forces of nature and time. As a kid, I loved the challenge of trying to build the structures quickly and sturdily enough to withstand these forces. As an adult, working in the studio, I take on the same challenge — pushing materials and processes to the precipice — trying to determine how much they can withstand.

I am a huge fan of Frankenthaler and I appreciate Pollock’s process (not the finished product necessarily) — but my connection to their work came after the fact. My response to “the drip” was the direct physicality and unpredictability of it.

SweetSweet actually operated pretty similarly to the other dripping pieces except that it was done manually – and I was pretty cognizant of what the drips “looked like” – their aesthetic quality. I would set up threads onto which I would then drip things like paint and plaster – the material would roll down the thread and pool onto the floor. It was giving the visual experience – rather than the actual experience – of an accumulation over time. Looking back at a piece like SweetSweet, I regard it as much more painterly. I was setting up a canvas for a specific effect that I wanted to achieve. This isn’t a criticism, but rather an observation of the steps I have taken along the way. Moving away from aesthetic concerns and allowing conceptual concerns to dictate the outcome. In this way I have learned to let go of some of that control and allow the material to behave like it wants to behave. I still very much control the environment as much as I can — but then I allow the material to do what it will. The aesthetic happens of its own accord (within the system I have set up). The bridge between really giving into the materialness/physicality of the dripping work was **Tending Between**. There was a lot of ugliness created with that piece – but I had to leave it be in order to stick with what I had set out to accomplish. That ugliness became a test for me – how much was I allowing beauty (i.e. aesthetic control) to dictate how I made my work?



OL: Could you tell us about *Tending Between*?

Megan: *Tending Between* was my thesis work for my MFA. I had a number of goals for the piece:

1. I wanted to create a moving, growing, ever-changing sculptural experience for viewers and to do it in the pristine environment of the Cranbrook Art Museum. During my time in grad school, I lived in the city of Detroit (I, still live there) and traveled out to the wealthy suburb of Bloomfield Hills just outside of the city. The reality is that parts of Detroit could be described as post-apocalyptic with broken down buildings and plant-life that has taken the place of structures. But Bloomfield Hills is one of the wealthiest communities in the country, with huge lawns, castle-like houses, expensive cars; everything is

intact. Experiencing the vast differences between these two places on a daily basis was a huge influence on my work and my life. I was less interested in catering to the fascination with decay/ruin-porn that is so prevalent in the media, but rather trying to piece together how such disparate communities could exist side-by-side without an influence in either direction. I wanted to create a system in which an unpredictable, chaotic system (Detroit) physically altered the ordered and pristine (Cranbrook museum, wealthy suburb). In terms of political/social commentary it was subtle and extremely personal – but I think it was important for me to create a physical manifestation of what I was experiencing.

2. My second goal was to engage in the role of the “tender” or caretaker. Throughout my life, when encountering a wide range of interactions from giving directions or some change to serious injustice my reaction is to jump in and “do something”. I have taken on the caretaker role many times over in my life – whether that be at home, at work, or towards situations that I would encounter independently. I began to make artwork that required my consistent attention – pieces that needed cleaning, unclogging, refilling, refueling, coaxing – almost like living beings. I was literally thinking of these pieces throughout my day – wondering what their needs might be, and being enthralled by the ways in which they were changing, morphing, growing, breaking down. These works teetered on the delicate cusp between success and failure – pushing materials and mechanisms to their limits. This teetering required my constant attention.

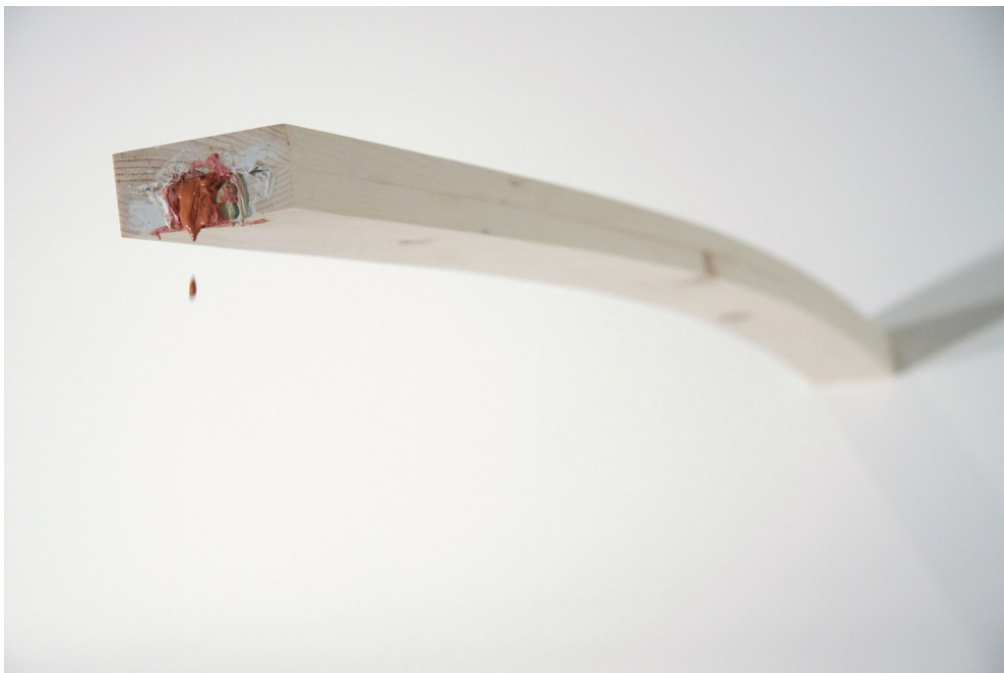
Tending Between became an opportunity at a place like Cranbrook that is insular and accessible (in terms of the museum) to really live with and to tend for a sculpture. I would get up every morning, clean the tubes, pumps, and orifices of the sculpture. I would mix up new material and replenish the reserves. I kept careful track of the sculpture’s well being, troubleshooting all the while. It became a test of my patience, my ability to problem solve, and my commitment to one artwork.



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OL: You're partial to mixing the organic and garishly inorganic — like the juxtaposition of the devil's claw with the mod colors of your spinning *Weird Wars*. As a viewer, I don't find that I'm soothed or reassured by this integration, but rather made uncomfortable; my brow furrows. Are you trying to throw each into relief by way of comparison with the other, or do you have a darker purpose? (I'm thinking also of the seedlings growing out of the astroturf laid down outside your Detroit studio — one isn't exactly made at home by this).

Megan: Good — I am glad you are not soothed — but rather put on edge. Again — I think this is a physical manifestation of my experience as a Detroitier — and all the contradictions of this place (as described before). The world is topsy turvy here — nature is unbridled within the urban environment, the “man-made” structures have failed — it is unsettling. Detroit exists at the cusp — there is a lot of amazing things and people happening in a pretty tenuous place. Things feel hopeful and positive and encouraging — but the overall landscape can feel dire. I make these underlying psychological states evident through sculpture and installation. But at the same time I hope I am also creating in humor and the uncanny. I think this is the nature of comedy: we make light of things that make us uncomfortable in order to process them. There is a lot about the art/museum/gallery world that makes “regular” folks uncomfortable or unwelcome. I make work that using recognizable objects and materials and employ mechanisms that evoke silliness. There is a lot of shit in this world to feel sad and overwhelmed about — and I experience these emotions (like most of us) — when I am in the studio I need to be goofy and lighthearted. I want to make work that allows viewers to feel the same. I want my work to be accessible to those who don't necessarily have an art background — I want them to have a visceral/bodily/human engagement with it.



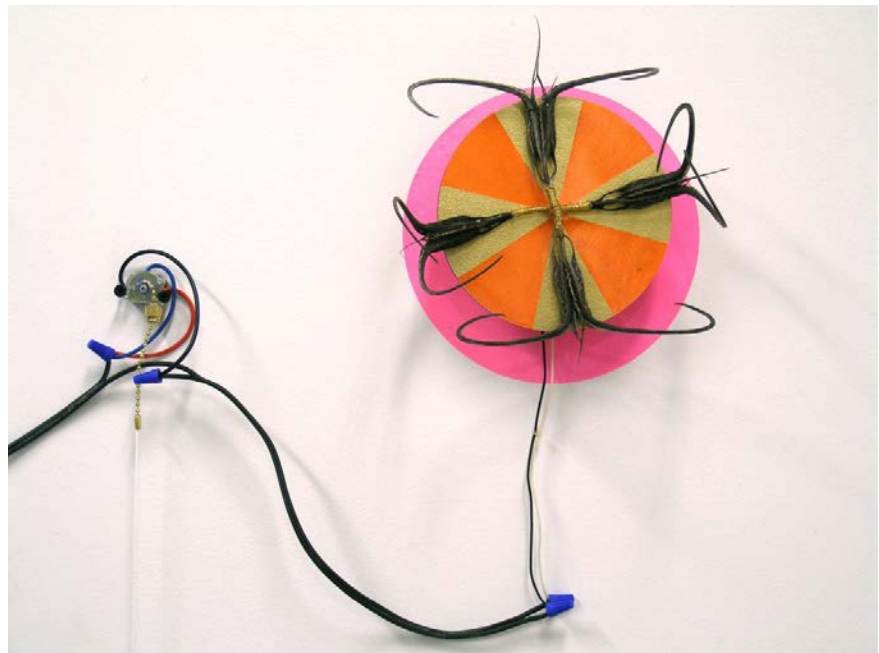
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OL: You're interested in fibers: fabric and paper. In fact you recently went back to school to study Fiber Development. Could you tell us a bit about how the experience changed your practice and what about various fibers drives your fascination?

Megan: I was in fact in the Fiber Department at Cranbrook Academy of Art, however this doesn't necessarily mean that I studied fiber art. In fact, quite the opposite! I stepped away from fiber processes like stitching, paper, cloth and was working with clay, plaster, wood, sand, etc. That being said, I am a fiber artist in the ways in which I approach surface, materials, and building. Like the making of a garment or a quilt – I build my sculptural works incrementally with the accumulation of time and material. While at grad school, I learned way more about contemporary artists creating sculptures, installations, and super conceptual works rather than about artists working within the "fiber arts" or "book arts" worlds. It was refreshing to break out and shake off the pristine perfection of my former work. Stepping away from "fiber" I encountered a bigger vocabulary of materials and processes that allowed me to make messy, rough work.

I think this is why I gravitate towards paper-making as part of my process more recently. Much of paper-making is messy and unpredictable, physical and uncontrolled – but it has the potential to be a very finished, pristine object or form. I love that paper can be 2D and 3D – that it is this super ubiquitous material but it also can be alarmingly elegant. It has religious (holy books, Joss paper) and socio-political (money, contracts), and quotidienne (butcher paper, toilet paper) connotations. I love that I can begin with this somewhat slimy, icky mass of paper pulp and create a considered composition – like those from my embedded collage series.

I still definitely employ many of the processes and skills that I learned studying fiber art, but I feel like my approach to art and to the studio is much broader and more open. I definitely respond to materials and build my work around them – but I also address works from a conceptual standpoint – beginning with a thesis that I attempt to solve or back-up with a physical experience or object.



Megan Heeres hails from Battle Creek, Michigan where she was raised by a city girl (a Detroit native) and a country boy (a Charlevoix local). She attended the Residential College at the University of Michigan and graduated with a BA in “Health Studies and the Arts”. She relocated to Portland, Oregon in 2002 where she studied at the Oregon College of Art and Craft and exhibited her work in many local venues. Megan returned to Michigan in 2007 to pursue her MFA at Cranbrook Academy of Art. She works at Compuware Corporation, a global IT company headquartered in Detroit, as the art curator and community art and garden programs manager. Megan is represented by ReView Contemporary Gallery in Detroit and has her solo show opening in March.