

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Allison Mitchell

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Toronto, Canada

Conducted by Sonya Topolnisky on April 7, 2009, while Allyson Mitchell was in
Toronto, Canada, and Sonya Topolnisky was in Brooklyn, New York

Allyson Mitchell is a Canadian artist and academic whose work blends theory and practice, nature and artifice. She holds a PhD in Women's Studies from York University, Toronto, where she is now an Assistant Professor. Mitchell's works have exhibited in galleries and festivals across Canada, the US and Europe, including Tate Modern, the Textile Museum of Canada, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, the Andy Warhol Museum, Walker Art Center, The British Film Institute, Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Her engagement with craft and fiber art is not the product of artistic training but the result of experimentation with the type of media often relegated to second hand thrift shops and yard sales. She reworks discarded hobby crafts, others' handiwork, into Lady Sasquatches and other creations using taxidermy techniques, trial and error, and hot glue. Mitchell's Lady Sasquatches inhabit fanciful "natural" landscapes constructed from the same unnatural fibers. Her work does not fall neatly into established categories of craft or fiber arts, challenging conventions so that viewers can think through the imagery and engage with familiar materials in radically new contexts. Craft is one channel Mitchell pursues to engage new audiences with scholarly feminist concepts; she also works in film and performance and runs FAG, the Feminist Art Gallery in Toronto with Dierdre Logue. All of her work contributes to Deep Lez, an ongoing political and aesthetic project arguing for greater awareness of the history and a return to the activism of radical feminism.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This transcript is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: Oral history interview with Allison Mitchell, conducted by Sonya Topolnisky on April 7, 2009, Bard Graduate Center Craft, Art and Design Oral History Project.

[This interview was conducted by telephone while Allyson Mitchell was in Toronto, Canada, and Sonya Topolnisky was in Brooklyn, New York]

Allyson Mitchell (AM): Hi how are you?

Sonya Topolnisky (ST): Good, I'm glad I got a hold of you. I'm not sure what I put in my e-mail, but I need to record oral history for a class I'm doing called "Craft and Design in the USA, 1940-Present" where we've been looking at professional craft, studio craft and DIY craft hobbies.

AM: Which sounds like such a great course.

ST: It is, it's really good, we do a lot of social history, cultural history.

AM: Who's your professor?

ST: Her name is Catherine Whalen, she's been at the Bard Graduate Center for a few years.

AM: Cool.

[...]

ST: I'll just start with my questions. I'm really just hoping to get some specifics about your materials and process, and particularly about re-fashioned crafts and found objects, and how they help you say what you're trying to say. And I've done some reading up on your work and read some other interviews, so I hope I'm not repeating too much.

AM: Okay great, I'm glad you've done the reading cause it helps if you know a little about background stuff.

ST: Is your show still at McMaster [Museum of Art] currently?

AM: No it just came down last week and it's going up at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Winnipeg Manitoba, on the 29th of May.

ST: That's exciting, so it will be up all summer I guess?

AM: Yeah for the whole summer. Which is good because they've got a big sasquatch following there there's lots of woods and there are lots of, not sasquatch hunters, but enthusiasts.

ST: Oh that's really cool.

AM: And they've got a big Native population and I mean that's an interesting crossover to talk to people from aboriginal cultures because that's where sasquatch mythology originated, you know.

ST: Oh, yeah I never thought of it that way. I'm from Alberta originally, from Edmonton.

AM: Oh, okay, I thought you were American.

ST: Oh no, I'm just going to school in New York, I'm from Alberta, and I was in Montreal for a bit, that's where I got connected with *Worn Journal*, now I'm here.

AM: I see I see.

ST: But I've never been to Winnipeg, I know some people who worked at the art gallery, but I've never seen it myself. Are you going down there for the installation?

AM: Yeah I'm gonna go for the installation in a couple weeks, well, a month.

ST: That's cool. Just looking—and I've only seen through magazines and the Internet—but the sasquatches are huge, do you have people helping you put them together, or do you do it mostly yourself?

AM: Yes, yeah I've had different people along the way to help me construct them. And over the past for the last three that I made before this new installation I had a lot of helpers. I had one young woman, her name is Catherine Hodgson, and she is a fine arts student at Guelph and as part of her kinda like an internship she was working with me and was very helpful and totally great and she kinda brought on two other young women on board who I paid to help me and they were really good at what they did.

ST: Cool.

AM: I can send you a catalog of the *Sasquatch* show.

ST: Oh, that would be so great.

AM: E-mail me your mailing address and I'll pop one in the mail to you.

ST: Thank you so much.

ST: From your bio, you're a professor of women's studies and fine art at McMaster in Toronto?

AM: No, I'm at York University in Toronto and I teach in the women's studies department right now, I used to be in the fine arts department but currently I'm just in women's studies. I try to weave art and activism in the courses.

ST: Do you think there's a big difference between students who approach feminist concerns in an academic way from those who do it through art practice?

AM: A difference?

ST: Yeah.

AM: Well, generally in an academic sense it's reaching an academic audience, but with art it's more open to reach a broader or different audiences.

ST: Mhm. Because in your work they seem to go together very organically, so when you were starting out did you have any role models or mentors who served as models for how you work?

AM: Yeah totally. Women who I know who are working in and around Toronto I really admire their politics in working with people and alone. Definitely I had a few role models, but not tons.

ST: I read your Deep Lez statement online, and you have this great quote that calls it a "macraméd conceptual tangle for people to work through how they live their lives and continue to get fired up about ideas." That line really jumped out at me.

AM: Yeah, that's why I use things like "macraméd conceptual tangle" to seduce you and draw you into them [laughs].

ST: [Laughs.]

AM: It's meant to be a creative visual, rather than being like, didactic. There's lots of ways you could say that right.

ST: For sure. How would you say it works as a metaphor?

AM: Well, firstly it works as a metaphor because it attracts you, it gives you something to think about, to imagine that aren't words on a page that are academic jargon, and uh, which is what a lot of my work is about, trying to give a visual for a lot of academic theory that I think about or

have thought about or have informed me, trying to sort-of bring those things to life in a different way, and a conceptual tangle works because its about process and thinking through things and methodically kind-of, on the one hand putting together sort of an object whether its an essay or a piece of art that comes out of sort of a messy ball of material, theories, ideas, materials, coming together to create something that makes sense.

ST: Hmm.

AM: I dunno, does that make sense to you? I've been talking a lot maybe I'm rambling a little bit.

ST: No, I like it. The statement just really stuck me, and you had the story about how you found the macramé owl at the thrift store.

AM: Yeah, partly why I think that I used this macramé thing is that macramé is something that, its kinda like a craft that people, even if they diss it or make fun of it they have some kind of connection. They can hold onto it and they can own it in a way that people, unless they come from a particular class background can't own an academic essay.

ST: Mhm. I guess I keep picking on it, I should explain, because in my class we had this thing, this statement that came up: "macramé moment," like if people are studying craft, looking at it academically and everything's okay, but then there's a moment when it's like "oh, but I can't take that macramé stuff!" Everyone's got these taste boundaries that pop up.

AM: Yeah. So you refer to it as a macramé moment when they come to their threshold of what they can take [laughs], interesting. And I would want to take the reverse of that right—cause I think that people tend to diss that kind of craft the way they like to wholesalely dismiss a lot of ideas from feminism, and I think that's too easy, its too easy of a scapegoat.

ST: Right. When you were getting your fine arts education did that include any training in craft techniques?

AM: No I don't have any fine arts education. None.

ST: So how did you learn to build them?

AM: From doing it. Kinda fearlessly plunging in. And I worked with a woman named Susan McGreggor and she helped me think about the frames and put them together, but she doesn't have a fine arts background either, she has a theater background.

ST: Oh, okay that's interesting.

AM: So yeah, I didn't learn that at any arts school. It was really through kind of, hit and miss through process and crafting the fun fur and how to glue it and how to work with it that way just comes from years of working with it as a material and I learned how to manipulate it sculpturally and know my way around the hot glue gun, know how much can mold it, my limitations and what I can do with it and I've also built up a lot of calluses in my hands so I don't get burned by it that easily so I can easily do, I can be kinda brave with it in getting my hands into the hot glue.

ST: When I'm looking at the sasquatches in particular there's all these parallels between women's bodies and nature and natural versus artificial constructions of body image and sexuality and I'm wondering if any of the fur on the sasquatches is real, or whether that makes a difference.

AM: No, none of it is real. It's all artificial.

ST: Is it all recycled?

AM: Let me think for a second of a percentage between what is bought and what is new, maybe 60%, no maybe 40% purchased and 60% is found. Either fake fur van seat cover, bedspreads, bathmats pillows and things like that. Sometimes its just gotta, the way that their bodies are, it's like "okay, this needs like a little really special big piece of store-bought fun fur."

ST: You're probably gonna do really well at the thrift stores in Winnipeg.

AM: I know, yes. I've done some thrifting across the prairies and have had some good times. Actually one time a friend and were driving to Banff to do a residency and we were in a station wagon and we bought so much stuff thrifting on the way that when we were in Winnipeg we had to stop and ship stuff ahead.

ST: [Laughs.]

AM: So we could fill up the car the rest of the way.

ST: That's impressive.

AM: [Laughs] Yeah to somebody who gets it, somebody else is like "what is wrong with you."

ST: No, I mean, I buy clothes and stuff a little bit, but those materials must pile up.

AM: Yeah they do, it requires a lot of storage. And a lot of the stuff, you know the pelts on the sasquatches its stuff that I've been collecting for like ten years or picked up little bits here and there like a weird orange crushed velvet table cloth I picked up and just sorta sat on it for like, five or six years, put it in a Tupperware bin and I didn't know exactly what I needed it for, but when the time came I have this inventory, its like a palette right. I think of all the material that I gather as sort of like a palette of paints, it's something I can go to. Unfortunately it's very material based and takes up a lot of space. But I've never—knock on wood—ever had a problem with moths or anything like that so far.

ST: Oh, yeah that's a scary thought.

AM: Yeah.

ST: It's interesting cause I know of so many designers who have an idea board about whatever they are working with, but that's all in two dimensions, maybe the same amount of material but it doesn't assume as much space.

AM: Yeah, so I end up storing it in Tupperware bins in my parent's basement. Then when I'm working on a big project, tagging it and organizing it is how I kinda remember what I've got. 'Cause when its in bins and you can't see it you forget what you bought six years ago. When I send you the catalog you'll se this one image, a two page spread of my bulletin board in my studio. You might think it's kinda interesting to see the thought process, and you'll also see the construction of the sasquatches.

ST: Yeah I'm really curious about that. And it's interesting that you mention set design because in the installations that I've seen there's backdrops, the environment just seems really nicely thought out.

AM: Mmhm, I'm trying to create and environment for sure. So in a sense it gives the creatures a kind of context. So when I was installing at the Gladstone Hotel, I create more on the walls because sometimes when there's only been two, and I wanted it to be more than two I wanted it to look like a community, and it couldn't be read as a couple, I wanted it to be more girls so I'd tack cut-outs on the walls so there'd be more of them, but I didn't have time to actually make more before the show opened. They take a really long time.

ST: Yeah, that was actually the next thing I was going to ask you about. Is that still up at the Gladstone Hotel? That's permanent?

AM: I did have some sasquatches installed there, but I did design a room that's permanently there at the Gladstone. I don't know if that's what you're referring to?

ST: Yeah

AM: It has a great big wall mural thing in a bedroom with a TV and stuff?

ST: Yeah, I saw that on their website, but I didn't know you had a separate installation there too. That's cool.

AM: Yeah, I'm just looking at their website, some of those images were in my studio. I'm gonna look it up.

ST: I just have a few more things.

[...]

ST: I read in *C Magazine* from 2006 an interview in the article by Helena Reckitt, and she makes this statement that "craft is to the avant-garde as pornography is to cinema," I had never heard that one before, and was curious—

AM: Yeah me neither. But I'd check it out because someone else had told me they had heard it somewhere before, there might be more writing about it if you start doing some research around. But it makes sense to me in some ways. It's like the [inaudible] not made as well, doesn't get the same sort of accolades, but a lot of breakthrough work happens there and with porn too its often done at home, in private not always from the most professional well-funded environment.

ST: Mmhm.

AM: I don't know, but if you're writing a paper about it you should feel free to e-mail Helena Reckitt and ask her. Ask her a question about it. I can give you her e-mail.

ST: She had one reference in the little bibliography in her article I can look up. I don't think I'll get into it too much specifically but I was just kinda curious.

AM: Yeah, yeah yeah.

ST: The analogy made a lot of sense after she explained it, but I didn't know if it was the kind of idea that was common or getting bounced around a lot in art or craft communities.

AM: I really don't know. And I'm certainly no expert on the avant-garde either, so I can't really speak to it too much because I don't feel that well versed in the avant-garde. I guess what I always say is that I would change that sentence to be like "pornography is to," what is it, "experimental cinema"?

ST: Just to cinema.

AM: Okay. Pornography is to cinema as craft is to the capital 'A' art world.

ST: Right.

AM: That's how I always think of it.

ST: And that might work better too because there is a lot of craft that is avant-garde.

AM: I know, so maybe it doesn't work. Maria Elena Buszek, do you know her work at all?

ST: No, I don't think so.

AM: She's this woman who wrote an article in *Surface Design* in the last couple issues, I'm not sure exactly which month. But if you check out *Surface Design*, she wrote this account—Maria curated a show of kind of cutting edge craft stuff like *The Subversive Stitch* or *Pricked* or one of those kinds of shows, you know, called *Extra/Ordinary* and she talks about how, what a weird experience she had. And some of my work was in it and Cat Mazza's work and other people doing this kind of stuff with craft. And there was a big conference happening at the university on craft and new design and, she took a tour of a bunch of craft aficionados through the exhibition and they were actually put off by the work. And these aren't like people coming from the avant-garde or the capital 'A' art world these are people coming from the craft, artisanal capital 'C' craft world.

ST: Oh, okay.

AM: You know what I mean? They were upset by the work because, Maria talks about how they have this romantic attachment to craft. It's sorta like a flip from how we're used to thinking about craft entering the capital 'A' art world, but then what's the reaction of people who are holding on very tight to the boundaries of craft within the capital 'C' craft world?

ST: Hmmm.

AM: It's kinda interesting to think about.

ST: Yeah, that is. Especially I mean, it might be more generational too.

AM: It's totally generational. I think it's really interesting, because it's like, they don't get to have their cake and eat it too. It's like, capital 'C' craft people who diss domestic craft can't get mad when those kinds of crafts they've dismissed as crass, or not like fine craft, when that work is entering into a capital 'A' art world, I think its an interesting thing when people start freaking out, and usually people start freaking out like that because boundaries are coming down.

ST: Mhm.

AM: I would recommend checking that out if you can find it.

ST: Yeah, absolutely that does sound really interesting.

AM: Especially if you're writing a paper, it really flips the way it's usually looked at.

ST: It is for sure. We looked at a lot of art/craft/design type stuff but not so much the critical end of the craft world per se.

AM: It's kinda cutting edge, I don't think a lot of people have written about it yet so you'd be on the forefront.

ST: Just one more thing. Your work is really closely connected to the body and how women's bodies are supposed to look, and I was curious if you had ever made or considered making any wearable art?

AM: No I have not, I've only done that in the sense of like, making costumes for performances I've done. Like I made a crazy gigantic bonnet so I would look like one of those kinda Holly Hobbie ceramic figures.

ST: Mhm.

AM: And I've done some outfits like a crazy polyester pink pantsuit with fuzzy women symbols on the bum, but that's the extent of it. I never really considered making wearable art, I'm really not that much about it, not that into it I don't think.

ST: Yeah, it's sort of a category everyone defines for themselves anyway.

AM: Yeah.

ST: It's a tough one too, especially a tough one to exhibit. Are you still doing performances with, was it a burlesque troupe, Pretty Porky and Pissed Off?

AM: No it was not burlesque. In fact we didn't really love burlesque all that much. It wasn't trying to be that kind of performance, but I can see that it maybe had that aesthetic based on how it looked. I didn't really know what burlesque was when we started doing it.

ST: Okay.

AM: It was more meant to be an aerobics step class—a fat girl's aerobics step class intervening with a Jenny Craig diet class.

ST: [Laughs.]

AM: That was more what it was meant to be, not burlesque really. I think of burlesque as being more for a straight audience really, and most of us were dykes, so it was really about appealing to—using a gay camp sensibility more so than a burlesque history.

ST: But you're not performing any more are you?

AM: Yeah I've been performing here and there over the past few years. I've been performing with my filmmaking partner Christina Zeidler and he's done performances, one called *Laser Vag Magic* where we wear these dance outfits with disco balls, fluorescent pink hair merkins—do you know what a merkin is? It's a crotch wig for ladies.

ST: [Laughs.]

AM: [Laughs.] So we've done *Laser Vag Magic*, and another song we do called *Trans-Mam*, which is like a Trans, alternative health homage to Trans folk that we do to David Bowie's singing and we do a trans version of that, and we also do a thing called *The Girls in the Bright White Sports' Bra* using, I don't know if you know, it's a Canadian song.

ST: Oh yes, I totally know what you're talking about [laughs].

AM: [Laughs.] Yeah, we've done that as well. We've done a few, maybe six times in the last year, so I'm still performing.

ST: That's good to know. And that's mostly in Toronto?

AM: Yeah. But we did it also in Montreal, Portland, San Francisco, Winnipeg, we get around.

ST: Okay that's great. You know I completely overestimated how much time this would take.

[...]

AM: It works really perfectly, because I'm gonna be around Friday afternoon, later in the afternoon, so if there's anything that you've missed when you start writing stuff up, you can just give me a call.

ST: Thank you very, very much, again.

AM: No problem, and send me your address and I'll pop that stuff in the mail to you.

ST: Great I can't wait, and thank you so much.

AM: Okay cool, thanks.

[...]

[End of the interview]

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