

Mia Pearlman interviewed by Anna Hascher, Berlin architecture student, 4/6/11

You're working with very basic paper – how do you deal with breaking strength, water resistance, dust or dirt? How important are these characteristics for you?

Most of the spaces where I work are climate-controlled, so I generally don't have to worry about moisture, dirt, etc. The paper is quite strong and durable, so if no one touches it, it won't rip or break, or even sag. The installations can be dusted with compressed air or a light hairdryer. Generally speaking, I love the fact that paper is ephemeral, that it will change, etc. People always suggest that I work in steel or other materials but I think they are missing the point: the work is ABOUT the fact that everything is always in flux, and so is the material. Not everything has to last forever, even art--because ultimately, nothing will.

Example: You're getting an invitation from a gallery to do an installation in a certain room. What are you looking at in this room at first?

Usually I get to pick where I am going to work in a gallery or museum space. Some requirements are purely functional: the walls have to be made out of drywall or something I can put map tacks into. Ideally the ceiling is also made of drywall and there is ample and flexible lighting available. My attraction to a certain space is instinctual, but I am always conscious of traffic patterns, how viewers will enter the room or come across the piece. I always want to draw people in, so that they see the totality of the dramatic movement of the work, but want to get closer to see the details.

How do you want your installation to be sensed/noticed by beholders? What should they feel and experience by entering your room? Do you keep these thoughts in mind during your working process?

I want the viewers to have a visceral reaction to the work--to be repelled or attracted to looking at it, or to feel a connection to the work--before they have a conscious or intellectual reaction. I'm not interested in creating a specific message or content that the viewers are supposed to understand or "get." The type of work I make requires me to trust the viewer to bring whatever he/she has to the work, not to force some didactic "aha" moment or lesson. The meaning of ALL art changes over time. The way we see the Sistine Chapel or the cave paintings at Lascaux or a Jackson Pollock painting has little to do with what the artists intended, or what it meant at the time it was made. The experience of art is in the experience, not the art. It is about eliciting a conversation or emotional response or thought pattern within the viewer that the viewer creates. I love hearing what people "see" in my work: that IS the content of the work.

You are taking your inspiration from nature (different moods/atmospheres of clouds...). I think you want to transform a neutral room into a very atmospheric and natural one. Why? Are you missing good atmospheres in architecture? (I do, I think there is a huge absence of atmospheres).

This is an interesting question. My work is not really about architecture, but YES, I think most art spaces are completely bland and boring. The white box is not the ideal setting for viewing most art. I love seeing art in old buildings from times when people weren't afraid of a little decoration or color or pattern. For

example, I just returned from a trip to Washington DC, where I went to many of the museums of the Smithsonian, including the Renwick Gallery where I am going to create a new installation in 2012. The Freer Gallery, which is a collection of Asian art, is in an Italian Renaissance style palazzo with a central courtyard, barrel vaults, moldings, etc. Even though the architecture isn't Asian or modern, it just WORKS with the art. The art may be from a different culture and a different period, but it doesn't have to be isolated in an artificial white box to make sense. It seems to me that the white box's purpose is to neutralize a space's atmosphere, to remove any sense of context. But art is not neutral and there is always context, even if it is reduced to the personality of the woman at the front desk, or the street the gallery is on. I would love to make installations in Venice or Rome or the Met in NY, or any space that brings it's own sense of history and character. I'm not afraid of it!

I make large scale installations because I believe that we are all deeply influenced by our surroundings and by the relative scale of art to the dimensions of the human body. My work is about invisible forces much bigger than us that we can't control, from weather to terrorism to the stock market to death. To give people a visceral sense of our smallness in the universe, the work has to be big. While these ideas can be overwhelming and let's face it, depressing, there is a freedom to acknowledging them, or trying to remain in conversation with the fact that we are just a microscopic blip on the timeline of the universe. We still have to live our lives in this present moment.

Your works are like three dimensional frozen moments. Why don't you want to let your paper installations get moved? Or put different light on them? Like a choreography for your installation? I think it's an important and interesting decision, to do it or not!

Well, because I work directly on the walls and ceiling, there is no way the pieces can be "moved" like a conventional sculpture. There is no armature underneath the paper other than the architecture of the room. That said, my piece DO move, because I reuse the paper pieces from one installation to another. Conceptually, it is really one big piece that keeps metamorphosing into a new state of being. In fact, the piece I am making for the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian will be twice as large as the one I made at the Museum of Arts and Design in NY and will travel to five other museums over two years. This means that every 3-5 months I will get on a plane to a new museum and make a completely different installation from the same paper pieces. At the end of the show the installation will become part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian, but as flat paper pieces rolled up in a tube. In order to reinstall it, they will have to put it back together in its original form from scratch according to my directions.

Basically, my work doesn't exist, except when it does---just like performance art or theater or music or dance.

The lighting is part of my work, I do it all myself and it changes drastically from show to show. Sometimes most of the light comes through a window through the piece, sometimes I put halogen lights inside the piece, sometimes all of the light is from track lighting in the room, or a combination of these.