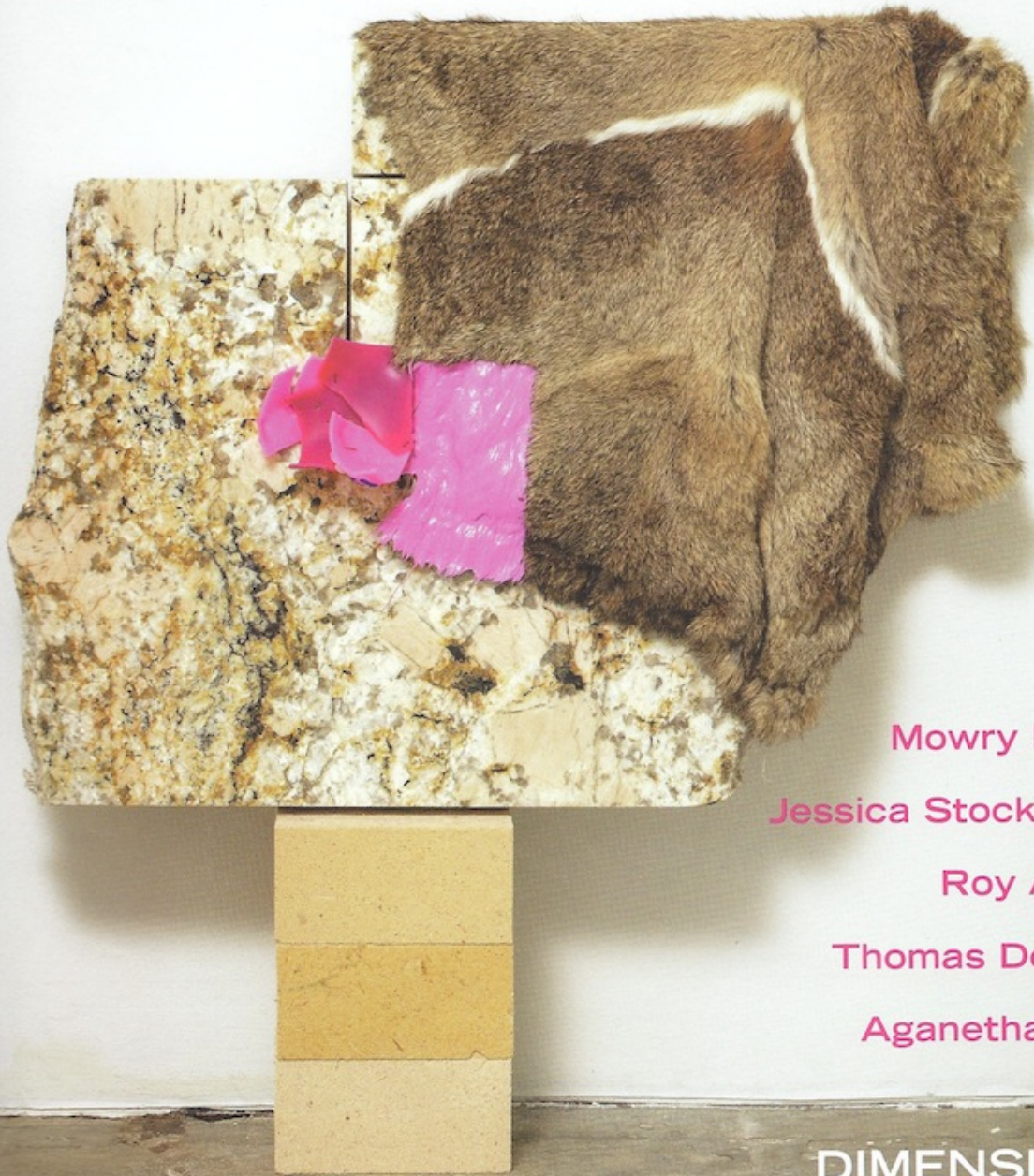


# BORDERCROSSINGS



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Robert Enright, 'Taking Notice: An Interview with Jessica Stockholder', *Border Crossings*, No. 127, 2013

# Taking Notice

## An Interview with Jessica Stockholder

by Robert Enright



“I never stopped making paintings to start making sculptures,” says Jessica Stockholder in the following interview. “What I do is both painting and sculpture.” Her dual citizenship in these two aesthetic countries is everywhere evident in her various and ambitious works. Consider *Bright Longing And Soggy Up The Hill*, one of two major works created for the Kunsthallen Brandts in Odense, Denmark in 2005. (The other was called *White Light Laid Frozen*). The overall installation is characteristic of Stockholder’s interest in moving across the boundaries that separate painting, sculpture and architecture; both works were located in separate galleries but they also established visual and material connections to one another. *Bright Longing* is especially rich in its insistence on a painterly presence in the midst of a considerable amount of occupied space. In one section her use of primary colours makes you think of Mondrian; in another the sweep of the intense red carpet on the floor and the brilliant yellow on the wall is reminiscent of Ellsworth Kelly. Then she installs garlands of tinfoil containers from the ceiling where they hang like the strands of an oversized kitsch necklace. This mixing and messing is uncannily successful. She has said that she often thinks her work is “a little absurd” and associates its humour with her attraction to Surrealism. While individual sculptures do combine a sense of the goofy with the formal, they always seem to tip the balance towards the formal. That line-walking is embodied in her poetic description of *White Light Laid Frozen*, a piece she calls “layers of temperature in tension.” When she goes on to say another of the components in the sculpture, “body fluid glue,” is “shining foil like the glistening in moist body castoffs,” it’s as if she’s channelling Gerard Manley Hopkins through a surrealist scrim.

Her combinations are daring and unpredictable; *Vortex in the Play of Theater with the Real Passion*, 2000, a piece named in recognition of her mother, a Shakespearian scholar and teacher, employs, improbably, swaths of cotton fabric, large industrial containers, LEGO, a park bench, a theatre curtain, throws of white and green lace and newspaper pages. There are occasions when her choice of objects and materials is practical; fluorescent lights can be bought in any country and therefore assume a certain ubiquity in many works. Her fascination with rugs shares some of that availability, but it plays more into aesthetics than out of pragmatics. (*House Beautiful*, 1994, as an example, uses seven carpets, along with 100 balls of yarn.) For her, the rug is a skin, so it can be a covering, it can be laid flat, draped, attached to a wall and collaged into a drawing. The way the purple wool shag carpet hangs over the rudimentary wooden support in *Bowtied in the Middle*, 1996, is perfect; rug as skin, rug as wall, rug as rug.



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1. "Jessica Stockholder, Lift Series," 2013, chalk, acrylic paint, scissor lift, godseye, dimensions variable. Image courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles.  
 2. *Lift*, installation view. Image courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles.

Preceding pages: 1. Zee, 2013, chain, blue foam-covered flooring boards, light fixture base and top, green bulb, green electric cord, brown electric cord, light chain, hardware installed to ceiling, 31 x 65 inches. Image courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles.  
 2. *Related*, 2013, fur, plastic parts, wood fibre blocks, granite, acrylic paint, 28.5 x 27 x 5 inches. Image courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles.



2

Nor does she indicate any fear of scale in her recombinant sculptures; she has incorporated greenhouses and large, constructed ramps in Denmark; built a huge scaffold in Antwerp on which she hangs painted and gutted car bodies like insects on a wall in *Landscape Linoleum*, 1998; and painted the side of a truck trailer outside The Power Plant in Toronto, 1999. And she can move easily from that scale to tidy, singular sculptures, like #471, in which the base is a traditional wooden pedestal and above it, like an abstract bust, sits the rest of the sculptural form.

Stockholder is omnivorous in the way she uses material and in the manner in which material speaks to her. "Everything is full of meaning," she observes, "and all things have more than one meaning." What making art is, then, is finding ways to orchestrate that complex inheritance of received significance. Her special accomplishment is taking objects already encumbered with associations, through colour, form and function, and recombining them in unexpected ways. I'm not entirely sure how she does that; I am simply acutely aware that she does. She talks about her interest in the formative relationship between control and discovery that she regards as "core to making art," but that measure is one she understands and in which we see

only a single component. We get the perceptual discovery but not the practical control.

It may be that the mystery of her work is available somewhere in the workings of her uncompromising commitment to the phenomenological. "I'm interested in physical, formal experience, in the experience of the body being alive and the metaphors that are generated in relation to experience," she says, and then goes on to emphasize the formative role played by this perceptual system. "Everything we make and all the ways we make meaning are derived, initially, from the experience of being alive in a body." By this measure, Jessica Stockholder is among the most alive artists working today.

Jessica Stockholder has been exhibiting since 1983 and since then has had over 100 one- and two-person exhibitions. Her most recent installation, called *Lift*, is currently on exhibition at 1301PE gallery in Los Angeles through August 31, 2013. From 1999 until 2011 she was the Director of Graduate Studies in Sculpture at Yale University. In 2011 she became Chair of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago.

The following interview was conducted by phone to Chicago on Thursday, June 27th, 2013.



1-4. *Fat Form and Hair: Sardine Can Peeling*, 1994, refrigerators, paint, green tarp, aircraft cables, sweaters, garbage cans, pillows, concrete, wool, Styrofoam, building materials, green lights, electric cable, and Plexiglas. Dimensions: in two gallery spaces, the ceiling is 20 feet high in the first gallery and 15 feet high in the second. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

**BORDER CROSSINGS:** Both your parents were professors so I'm assuming your upbringing was a relatively cultured one.

**JESSICA STOCKHOLDER:** Yes, I had a lot of people around talking and arguing. I was often a spectator and I always enjoyed the privilege.

**You also lived in Ghana for a couple of years. How did that happen?**

There was a dearth of professors in Ghana and my parents, who both taught English, made an arrangement with the University of British Columbia where they were on faculty to work in Ghana for two years. I remember the food and the drumming we would hear from nearby villages during the year. And the colour of the textiles; they had baskets and kente cloth and incredibly beautiful blue batiked material. The things people made had a lot of colour. But you know, I was really shy and I wasn't a happy kid, so I don't look back at my childhood and think it was easy and fun, though I don't have any regrets about it. I mean, I loved my parents and my family and the difficulties in my childhood were human difficulties. My parents were secular Jews from New York who got jobs in B.C., and when I was a kid Vancouver was a much WASPier, less diverse city than it is now. On top of the fact that I was a shy kid, we moved all the time; I did kindergarten in Ghana and first grade in two different schools and when we went back to Vancouver I shifted schools all the time. In Ghana people teased me by calling me a little white witch and in Vancouver I was called a little black witch because I was Jewish and dark and probably really tanned, having just returned from Ghana. I didn't know where I belonged. I wasn't easily a part of the place I was in.

**You were only a year old when your parents moved to Vancouver but you clearly have very strong memories of that city. It seems to have played a significant role in your art production.**

I grew up in Vancouver. I was there from the time I was an infant and through college. It is always a little odd to have that piece of my life questioned and it tells you something about the difference between the two countries. In the States nobody is concerned about where I've come from; they're not worried that maybe I'm too Canadian to be American and, of course, I have by now spent more of my life in the States. From the beginning my citizenship in Canada was always in question, which indicates a kind of vulnerability. But I am without question a Canadian product. The landscape and the culture of Vancouver have everything to do with who I am. I am not a nationalist,

either a Canadian one or an American one. I can't be, because I grew from a lot of different places and people.

**Your parents took you to your first poetry reading when you were 10 years old. That indicates something about the nature of the world you grew up in.**

My parents were part of what was sometimes called the New York Mafia in Vancouver, a dynamic group of people at UBC that included Ellen Tallman, Ed Hundert and Roger Seamon. They often rubbed shoulders with Ellen's husband, Warren Tallman and Robin Blaser. When I expressed an interest in taking drawing lessons when I was 14, my father introduced me to Nora Blanck and Mowry Baden, both of whom gave me private lessons. I remember sitting on the side of the street one day when I was about 10, wearing jeans and a headband, thinking that I missed it. I was a little too young to be fully participant in that vibrant and exciting period of time at the end of the '60s. My father was a Marxist and also a poet. He was interested in the intersection of politics and popular culture. He's 83 and still reading a lot. He has an enormous capacity for remembering and collecting factual information.

**You asked to do drawing lessons when you were 14. Had you decided you wanted to be an artist at that age?**

I don't know that I decided; I just did it. I asked for drawing lessons, I took art-making seriously, I made work, treated it as something I should do regularly, developed a portfolio and then talked my way into the second year program at UBC. In retrospect I think it was perhaps a loss to have skipped those beginning, foundation classes. It would have been useful to have them as models for my own teaching.

**What were the drawing lessons like with Mowry?**

That was my most influential, didactic experience. Mowry would put a still life on the table and ask me to pretend that my pencil was a bug and not look at the pencil; just look really closely at the still life and have my bug pencil crawl over it. Then we would talk about the drawing formally and he would have me make another one, taking into account the things we had talked about. I think that process embodied ideas about the relationship between conscious thought and control. Fabricating a situation in which you are out of control enables discovery of things you couldn't plan. That relationship between control and discovery is core to making art.



So when you went to the University of Victoria in your third year were you going to work with Mowry?

Absolutely. Mowry has a unique way of putting language to art. He looks closely at the things that people make, and then puts language to the thing made in a way that is particular and very helpful. He is unusually clear and direct about what he values in a work of art and what makes it a success or failure. He was helpful to me because the things I cared about overlapped sufficiently with his areas of interest. Then I had to get him off my shoulder, which I did at Yale, making room for myself to care about things he didn't care about.

I get a sense that the transition when you moved to the States was not an entirely agreeable one.

It took me a long time to realize that the racial trouble here is not spoken about but is present everywhere. In addition, the social system is such that if you screw up, you end up on the street. It's not like Canada where there is a safety net and lots of social and government support to keep people afloat. It is a very different structure and I felt that difference when I moved here.

So the adjustments were emotional and psychological rather than aesthetic?

It was also a particular moment in life—transitioning to adulthood. It's very hard to tease those things apart; growing up, moving away from home, making an adult life for oneself—a big moment that happened to fall for me with being in a new place. I love the intensity of the art world in New York. There is a dynamism there, where the hierarchies of taste and power and politics are in play all the time. The amount of work you can look at is extraordinary. You can get a sense of what is happening right now. On the other hand, people don't actually talk about art as much as in some other places because the intensity of the money that flows through the place is so captivating. There is an energy attached to that, that I find jangling, and I don't miss being next to it all the time.

Throughout much of your early career you were a painter and yet you are a sculptor, which introduces this complex question of your work straddling both categories. What do you call what you do?

I think it's both painting and sculpture. I never stopped making paintings to start making sculptures. Most of the painting I did when I was younger was on un-stretched canvas. I was quickly involved in the texture of the canvas and gluing things to it. Mowry, who I was studying with, was critical of the un-stretched canvas on the wall. He talked about the way in which stretched canvas has a contextual relationship to the wall; it mirrors the wall, it is rigid like the wall, it is a small wall. So I started to think about the wall and to put pieces of things on it in relationship to each other. I realized that the architecture and the edges of the wall frame the work like the frame of a painting. Then I put things in front of the wall and started to engage the space of the building, and I noticed that the building framed the work. My work is still very concerned with pictorial space and picture-making, which I've explored by looking at how things are bounded and paying close attention to edges. Which brings

us back to that question of nationality, another kind of question about boundary.

In 1965 Donald Judd declared that sculpture "is over." Obviously, what was in the air was this discourse about what determines an art form.

I'm more concerned about that kind of question now than I was then. I was happily exploring and asking questions about boundaries. I read the white-cube essay by Brian O'Doherty when I was a graduate student, and while I also read Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" essay at that juncture, I couldn't really understand it. I read it again when I took the job at Yale and then it was useful to me. I am concerned about the whole trajectory of minimalism. My work doesn't look minimal but it grows from the emphasis minimalism placed on the space outside the work. The art that I, and many others around me, have made is vulnerable to the space it's in, unlike a sculpture on a pedestal or a painting, which are both clearly separated from the space we move in.

So you didn't set out to investigate the line between painting and sculpture; that investigation evolved naturally out of your practice?

No. I was more interested in a direct exploration of pictorial space and its relationship with three-dimensional objects. Whether you called it painting or sculpture didn't matter to me.

This idea of shifts in scale and point of view is something that you have referred to in a very positive way. Is the effect of that shifting to destabilize the viewer, or is it a way for you to establish a sense of visual continuity and a relationship between things? I guess I'm trying to get at why you're doing this?

That's a good question. I'm interested in physical, formal experience, in the experience of the body being alive and the metaphors that are generated in relation to experience. It seems to me that everything we make and all ways that we make meaning are derived, initially, from the experience of being alive in a body. That relationship between being a subject, which is small in relation to the objective largeness of the world, just seems at the core of being a human being.

Does your work develop out of what I want to call a kind of apprehended phenomenology; that is, you know what you're going to do by seeing rather than by having decided ahead of time how to proceed?

Yes and no. It depends which work. In my studio, when I'm alone I have the privilege of being able to make a lot of things that are responsive to what's there, and one thing leads to another. Part of what interests me in making work is that you can't think everything. The things I make couldn't be made by sitting down at a desk and thinking them; they are made by discovering things through the process of making. But when I'm invited to travel and to make something in two weeks that is bigger than what I could make alone, then I have to think in other ways and create structures for things to happen that are invented beforehand.

You seem to resist categories. You dislike the term "installation" and prefer to say that you create "situations." What is





1-2. *Air Padded Table Haunches*, 2005, hanging lamps, fluorescent lights, park bench, carpet, linoleum tiles, fake fur, 2 rectangular tables, 5 coffee tables, 5 floor lamps with shades, acrylic paint and Plasti Dip. Installation, dimensions variable. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



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it that accounts for your rejection of the term “installation” first of all and secondly, who is it that you are creating these situations for?

I don't think the word “installation” is meaningful in the same way that “painting” is meaningful; “sculpture” is less meaningful as a word than “painting” even though it has a long history but it is more meaningful than the word “installation.” When you tell people that you are making installations, they have no idea what that means. It's a catch-all word that encompasses so much—that's why using the word “situation” at certain junctures has been a useful thing.

I value making art because it is a place to take stock of what my thoughts are and what my experience is. Growing up the way I did, with two English professors for parents and with people arguing about things all the time was great, but I always lost the argument because I was a kid. My mother loved to argue and if she was talking with somebody who was too agreeable she would take the other side of the argument just to make life more interesting. She loved the conflict, not emotionally so much, but intellectually and she liked to make these arguments and suss out the space between different points of view. So I discovered that working with material was a way to ascertain that something really existed. The material couldn't be argued away, it's here, and the experience of the thing is definitely an experience. It's a place to ascertain the essential nature of my apprehension.

**Does the title *Vortex in the Play of Theater with Real Passion: In Memory of Kay Stockholder, 2000*, acknowledge your mother's “real passion” for rhetorical argument?**

Yes, and I think theatre and melodrama as well. She had died not long before I made the work, and although I didn't make it for her, it was a real pleasure to title it for her. She was an incredibly complicated person, really smart and loving. She cared passionately about people and ideas. But she wasn't always easy; she could be invasive and she was challenging. I miss her and I'm sorry she didn't stick around a bit longer.

**You've also said that you see sculpture as a kind of theatre in the art space.**

I made *Vortex* shortly after I read Michael Fried's essay, when I could actually tend to it. So I was thinking about theatricality. At Yale as the director of the sculpture department I was asking myself, “What is sculpture, what is this thing that I am the director of?” I started to think about theatricality and noticed that Fried lost that argument. In the wake of minimalism, the whole art world

and the space of the art gallery has become a very theatrical space.

**This question of language intrigues me. You say you look inside to find what you call “a mute feeling, a thing for which there are no words.”**

Language is an abstraction, and putting words to things involves a level of remove from immediate experience. Nevertheless, it is also probably true that our experience, however immediate, is informed by our language structure. It's not that these things exist separate from one another, but I do think they are distinct and that they are different ways of making meaning. Visual meaning is not easy to translate into words, just like musical meaning doesn't get translated into words. Listening to music is one experience and talking about how and why it is meaningful is another. So there is something about experience and meaning that is complicated and I am interested in how that intersects with language. Clearly, we use language amongst ourselves all the time in appreciating visual art.

**One of the most obvious things about your work is its sense of colour. You mentioned Ghana earlier, but do you know where your sense of colour originated?**

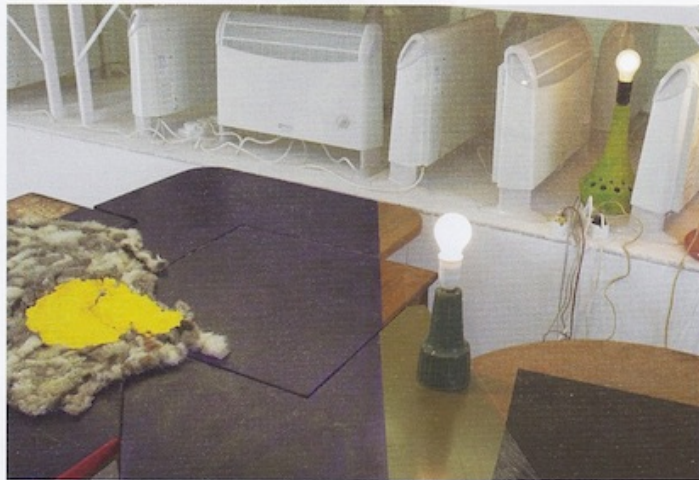
Not really, though the summer between our two years in Ghana my parents took us all to Europe, so I saw a lot of painting. They dragged us past playgrounds, kicking and screaming, to a lot of museums. So I was exposed to a lot and I remember the pointillist paintings really well in Paris, and loving the way the little dots of colour exploded apart from one another and then came together making images.

**I would have thought Matisse more than Seurat as your main colour influence.**

I love Matisse and always have. Jumping from talking about language to colour reminds me that it is really hard to put language to why colour matters and why it's impactful. I like colour because it feels physical, in that it is tied to matter, but it also has this ethereal quality—it is carried with light to your eyes. It can feel like smoke; it can fill up the air and it can feel concrete and extremely physical. I'm looking out a window now at leaves; the leaves are green material, they are physical green stuff and then at the same time the light gets filled with that green-ness. This experience of colour becomes a metaphor for the relationship between the etherealness of mind and body that we experience as completely physical. I can't be extricated from my body on one hand and on the other, I can imagine myself as separate from

1-2. *White Light Laid Frozen*, 2005, plinth, 40 heaters, fluorescent tubes, white carpet, painted shelf and locker, rope, various coffee tables, fur, paint, lamps. Installation, dimensions variable. Kunsthallen Brandts, Odense, Denmark. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.





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my body—that piece of being alive has been mulled over for thousands of years.

You sometimes arrange colour in a painterly way. You don't mix the colours but you place them in space very discretely. In *Vortex* your use of the LEGO allows you to establish the colour in layers.

One of the ways to orchestrate pictorial space to transgress the boundaries of a rectangle is to keep the colour blocky and bounded. This allows me to work with groups of things that are not the same, but that can be proposed as the same. I often do this; a bunch of things sharing a colour, like a green plastic thing and a green carpet thing and a green piece of paint, can all be grouped together as green, in contrast to a large expanse of another colour. The arbitrariness of using colour to group things opens up the possibility to think about other ways of making sense and making wholeness. I am always interested in the difficulty of understanding things and experience as coherent; the work comes together and then falls apart again, and colour participates in that process.

What is it about you and rugs? There's a prominent purple shag carpet in *Bowtied in the Middle*, 1996.

The rug is a kind of a skin, like paint is a skin, like the surface of a wall is a skin. Carpet is also available in many colours, like paint. Unlike paint, carpet has a real thickness to it. So it addresses both picture-making and materiality.

In *House Beautiful*, 1994, you say you would have liked to have used a real Persian carpet instead of the one you used. Is this a quality control issue, like not being able to afford really good oil paints, so you use an inexpensive substitute?

I don't think it's quite the same. Because a polypropylene carpet is a completely different thing than an expensive Persian carpet, whereas cheap and expensive oil paints are essentially the same thing, one is just a higher-quality than the other. Whether I prefer to use cheap or expensive materials is a complicated question. The experience any of us has is limited by who we are and where we are. The making of my work is bounded by who I am, by my capacities, and money is one of those limiting factors. I am neither the poorest nor the richest of people. I don't know that I wish I could have made *House Beautiful* out of a Persian carpet. It doesn't matter to me that much. I am more interested in the fact that that boundary is there. If I were filthy rich and I could buy Persian carpets and if all my work was made with really expensive material instead of the less expensive material it has been made from, would that make the work better? I don't think so. It would certainly make it different.

One of the other notable things about your work is the range of materials you use: birchbark, wicker chairs, cookies, resin fishbowls, plywood, plastic and real fruit, metal gates. There doesn't seem to be anything you won't use. What makes you choose one thing over another?

It's different for every piece. In part, it's what's available. I don't suffer over finding exactly the right quality of wood. I'm not



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1-2. *Line Walking*, 2010, purple extension cord, Styrofoam packing material, roofing tar, photo frames, bamboo furniture, wooden fragment, plastic pieces, nylon strapping, green extension cord, light fixture, fluorescent yellow bug light, hardware, 29 x 42 x 18 inches. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Preceding pages: 1-2. 2009, wooden pedestal, flag pole holder, metal pole, vinyl fabric, plastic parts, acrylic and oil paint, baskets, fabric-covered board, pipe cleaners, thread, ribbon, yarn, 6 Ikea lamps, rope, ribbing, 2 green extension cords, carpet, 124 x 67 inches by ceiling height. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



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fetishizing any particular material, but I do care about materials. I'm interested in the fabric of what's there in the landscape around me, and I do make choices. It's impossible to separate me, the chooser, from the stuff there. I tend not to keep things from an installation to use again. I like to be freshly engaged with material in the world.

**Do the materials and objects speak to you about their potential utility?**

Sometimes. When I'm out clothes shopping for myself or buying pots for my kitchen I tend not to be collecting things for the studio. Those are two very different ways of engaging the world and material. I do however sometimes use castoffs from my home in the studio. There are other times when, in the middle of making something, I know exactly what I want, and I go looking for that. There are some qualities to material, like the colours in the cheap plastic that is around, that are incredible. Plastic colours can be beautiful and, at the same time, it's painful that even when it's new, the material seems to be on its way to the dump, where we are all aware it will exist for many years.

You use benches in your work fairly often, as well. I'm thinking of *Air Padded Table Haunches*, 2005. Are your benches meditative spaces for the viewer to sit down and consider the work? Or are they more simply about being objects?

Both. I made this work in Hanover around the same time I was thinking about Michael Fried and theatricality. The piece is like a fashion runway that you can walk out onto. Next to it are a lot of couches, so you can sit on them and look out onto this pier, you can be on the pier and look at people sitting on the couches, and the whole work was situated in the gallery next to a window that was near the entrance, so you can watch people coming and going. I was raising a number of questions about the theatrical space the gallery has become. What are we looking at: are we looking at the art; are we looking at ourselves looking at art; are we looking at other people looking at art; are we being looked at? This picture-making involves the distance between myself, the viewer and the picture, as well as my participation and the viewer's in the picture. So giving somebody a place to sit both makes the person part of the work and places the viewer in a place to view the work.

The sense you have of wanting to create a physical experience in the work is based on “a form that floats free of orchestrated meaning.” But the individual objects you use aren’t free; the component parts are loaded with meaning. Is it a question, then, of neutralizing what the objects bring to the piece? Is your job to remove meaning so that you can establish your own frame of reference?

Everything is full of meaning and all things have more than one meaning. I orchestrate things with their meanings in a way that makes room to appreciate the complexity of meaning. My mother plays a role here; she studied Freud and Shakespeare and she drew my attention to how we human beings are complicated. What does it mean that part of us is unconscious, that we’re not aware of the entirety of our motivations and our thinking processes? Psychoanalytic theory proposes that dreams can be understood in many different ways, and that different elements in a dream are significant and meaningful in myriad ways. That meanings aren’t fixed is part of the richness of being a human being. Also, the distance between the particularity of an object and its general, more abstract, meaning is riveting for me. For example, a chair in an artwork is representative of chairs everywhere, but the particular chair and the experience of that chair is also distinct. Then the chair can be orchestrated so that its yellow-ness is really what’s at stake. Next to yellow plastic wastebaskets and yellow carpet, the yellow-ness can be meaningful in many different ways. It can be meaningful in relationship to landscape, it can be meaningful because that year yellow was a chemical that was used in plastic and you recognize it from Home Depot and Target and Sears, and next year green will be more prevalent. So it’s not like I’m trying to erase meanings, I’m just opening up room to appreciate the myriad meanings that are possible. I’m not interested in a single narrative being proposed by the accumulation of these objects.

One of the remarkable things about your works is how they sustain a sense of being formal. So you can seem closer to Hans Hofmann and colour abstraction than you do to the minimalists. Have you worked to do that or do you see the world in that way and then construct it according to that perception?

That is how I see the world. During the time I grew up, and I think it is still true to some extent, Expressionism was taboo. I wonder why it is so upsetting for people to consider that experience is full of feeling and that the significance of the artwork is somehow tied to the feeling of the person who made it. I think a big piece of being human and managing ourselves socially and politically has to do with making sense of how our feeling intersects thought. I do think that matters a great deal in art.

You refer to the weight of things, like the weight of a surface and a coloured object. I wonder, then, if your art is about taking the measure of that weight and composing out of their variation?

The actual weight of an object is distinct from the perceived weight. The perceived weight can be understood as a kind of fiction. There is a slippery and intense relationship between the thing that already exists and invention. It seems to me that my work is full of fiction. We have a remarkable capacity for invention and fancifulness and storytelling. For me, this capacity substantially informs the quality of life. Storytelling—the things

we invent—becomes part of the actuality of the world. As a result, there is no crisp, clear line between the fiction and the fanciful and the factual in terms of how a life moves along. The boundaries between our imaginings and the concreteness of the world are full of questions and potentials.

You told the critic, Lynne Tillman, in an interview in 1995 that you used material as a way to make fiction, fantasy and illusion at the same time that you used it to disrupt stories. I’m interested in that disruption.

That intersects with things we’ve already talked about, with the way in which the yellow chair can be appreciated and used for its yellow-ness and/or for its chair-ness. The chair is a kind of story; somebody invented it and we share that particular story transculturally and over many, many years. But it’s not like chairs grow out of the ground or anything. It’s a story, an invention. Then there are stories like Toni Onley’s vision of landscape that resonates with the experience of many people, particularly in Vancouver. There are also stories that are so personal that no one ever cares about them. So, yes, I’m in the process of valuing the invention of story but also tending to shared stories that are facts of life, like the fake rock in *Wide Eyes Smeared Here Dear*, 2009. It’s a fact of life just like the boulder on Grouse Mountain is a fact of life. But the fake rock is clearly the product of a lot of storytelling.

You have also talked about your interest in a lack of definition and in things not cohering. It’s as if the narrative has to establish itself through materiality at the same time that the material disrupts the possibility of narrative. Do the works add up to something that falls apart, or do they add up to something that holds together?

In order to understand one’s thought and one’s self you have to risk things falling apart and then put them back together again.

And it’s in that sense that you establish the relationship between what you call form—and you see that as orderly—and a sense of chaos. You do talk about things hanging out there “chaotically.” Is there that much tension in the work, or does the work resolve itself into a more formal relationship to both space and object? There is that much tension, and it does resolve itself into a formal relationship. Some works fall apart more than others. When you’re moving around the work, there are moments when your experience of the thing is awkward and uncomfortable and then there are moments where the work is pictorially beautiful and coherent. Photographs of the work are more coherent than the actual experience.

When I look at *Fat Form and Hairy: Sardine Can Peeling*, 1994, I see a red section and think of Ellsworth Kelly; then I see a cut-away section and I am put in mind of Gordon Matta-Clark. Are those associations that make sense to you?

That’s all there.

Do you see it once you’ve made it or do you want to get it there, so you make it?

That’s the second time you’ve asked me that question. I need to somehow make sense of being alive and while I’m making sense of



1-3. *Hollow Places Ash Tree Court*, 2011, American ash wood, paint, plywood, dimensions variable. Installation view, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Connecticut. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



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being alive, in making things, my experience of a lot of people's work is present. I'm not struggling to get that; it just is present.

**In *White light laid frozen*, 2005, I can see Donald Judd in two places—in the alignment of the heaters and also in the arrangement of the lime green stacked containers.**

I do love Judd's work. I owe debts to many different artists. I also think about Frank Stella who has worked with image and space and material, Anthony Caro, a really pictorial sculptor, and Roland Brener. I am less often involved in conscious quotation. When I give talks I show a piece that is mostly white with a little colour on the back that reflects on the wall. I often describe that as an ode to Robert Ryman. Some years ago, I made a show in New York that was called "Table Top Sculpture" and the title was a recognition of Tony Caro. In fact, the exhibition included the work of many other artists who I felt were influential—part of my context. I am conscious of taking things from other people, using the work of other people and following the work of other people. I don't think that I, or anyone, exist alone.

**What about how play functions in your art-making? I think a lot of your works are funny.**

Occasionally I laugh in the studio but I'm not a comic. I think my work is often a little absurd. I enjoy that funniness. I like Surrealism as a moment in history and sometimes the humour comes from that.

**In your recent exhibition at Barbara Edwards Contemporary in Toronto I admired the apparent casualness of the drawings. I wonder what role drawing plays in your practice. Or is drawing another category you resist? After all, you did have a big clump of carpet in one of the drawings in that show.**

I think it is normal for artists to resist being categorized, but my work relies on categories to cohere. The work is structured visually and intellectually in relation to the history of sculpture, and certainly painting. But I don't suffer over the category of drawing. It's not easy making drawings. Sitting in front of that white paper with your pencil is a much more difficult place to begin than with a bunch of stuff rattling around in the studio. The paper is white and the onus is on me to make something happen. It's more difficult but it is also more generative. Recently I have started a group of drawings that are new for me. I'm making these almost cartoon-strip drawings where I am thinking about the alphabet and the form of letters, although you wouldn't necessarily see that in the drawings. I'm finding drawing right now a lovely place to be working.

**I wanted to ask you about a piece you made for the Aldrich Museum in 2011 called *Hollow Places Court in Ash-Tree Wood*. That was a work I was invited to make with an ash tree that had been cut down a few years previous. It had been dried and was cut into boards. I made several works for that exhibition, one with some big, free-standing wooden screens in the middle of the room, and then some work with a screen printer in Connecticut where we screen-printed seven or eight different images that fell over these boards like leaves fall over the ground. It was a randomness that wasn't quite random because there is**

a predictability to how it happened. In that work, I was proposing and exploring another bracket for picture-making. Growing up in Vancouver, I really loved the totem poles and the work of First Nations people, and I admired the silkscreen printing that comes from the meeting of those traditions with a more Western tradition of picture-making. But it seems to me that the totem pole proposes another way of understanding picture-making, where the pictures on the totem pole are based on the eye shape, the eye frames our viewing as a body in the world. On the totem pole the eye shape frames entities or animals. And sometimes the pole exists separately from the building—and it is definitely not rectangular; it is a round tree shape.

**I haven't asked you about how your work engages architecture. One of your most spectacular pieces is your work in the Cristal Palace in Madrid in 2010. Can architecture be so determining that you have to respond to it more full on than you might normally do?**

Well, the work was called *Peer Out to See* and the architecture was really specific; it's a crystal palace and in some ways a kind of kitsch building—a huge tchotchke that was part of the World's Fair. It's all about the expansiveness of the sky, so I made a star-shaped pond and a half-moon shape on the platform. It is a romantic work that was responsive to the particular nature and experience of that building. In most cases working inside of architecture, and particularly museum and gallery architecture, there is a white-cube thing going on that is not so particular. I have had my fill of that in a way. I'm less interested in travelling around the world making one white-cube installation after another. I have been doing more pieces in relationship to outdoor spaces that tend to be more eccentric and particular than white-cube spaces.

**You talk about architecture as a mediating practice and what it mediates is people, the world and nature. Obviously your interest is in nature more than between people and the world.**

Well, when I work outside I'm still working in designed spaces. It is very different from being in the woods or on a mountaintop.

**It seems to me that you never seem to run out of ideas or enthusiasm for the process that realizes objects out of those ideas. It's in that sense that you seem prolific.**

I think that is true. I can remember when I was first taking drawing lessons from Mowry, I had the thought that there will always be things to do because all you have to do is look at something.

**Phenomenology is the key to your work isn't it? It's about looking.**

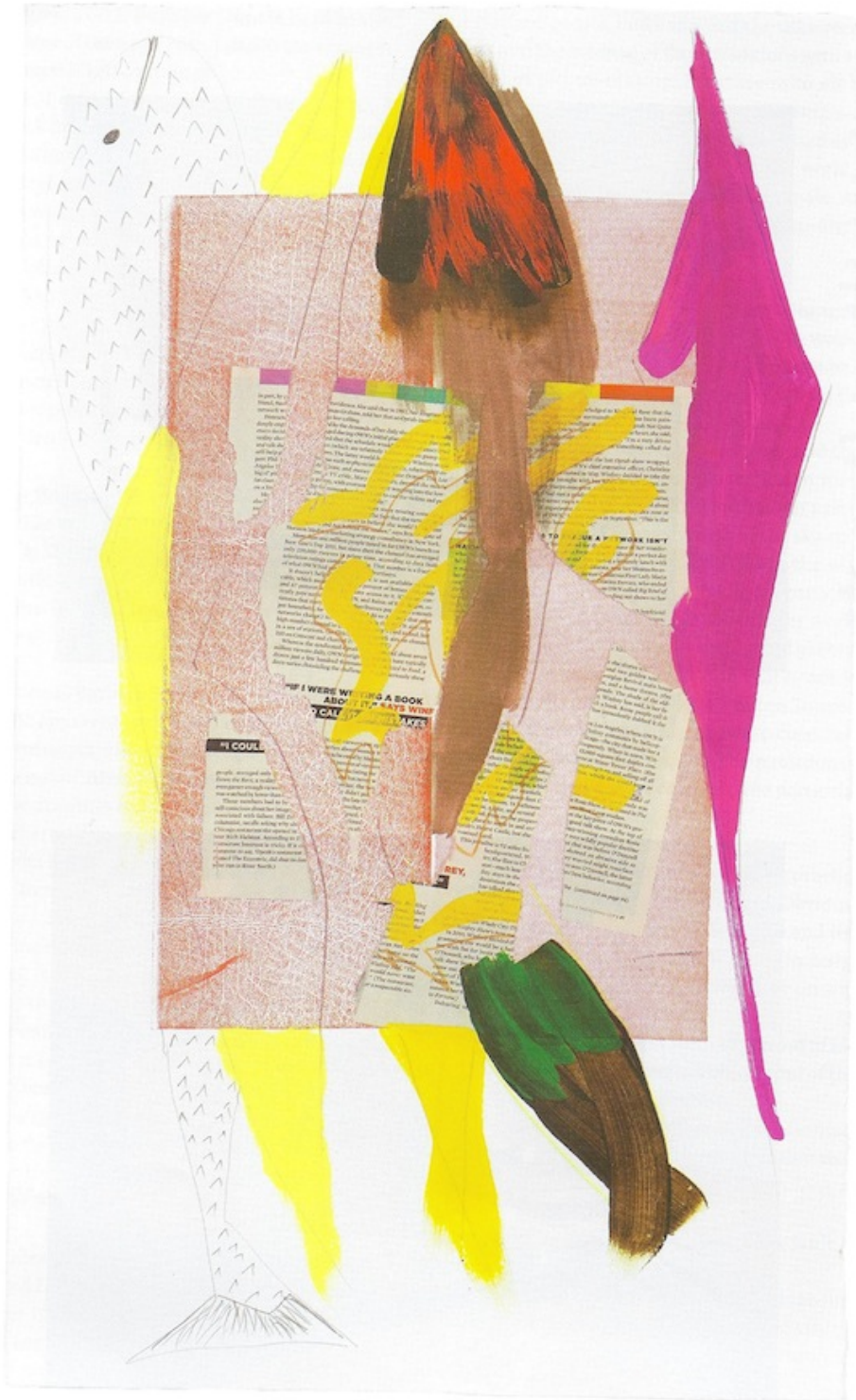
Yes. I think that in one way or another, art is about observation. I'm talking, for myself, about a physical and visual observation, but it can also be a political or a social observation. Art is always about noticing things. ■

1-2. *Vortex in the Play of Theater with Real Passion: in Memory of Kay Stockholder*, 2001, Duplo, theatre curtain, work-site containers, bench, theatre light, linoleum, tables, fur, newspaper, fabric and paint, dimensions site-specific. Installation view, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland. Image courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Following pages:  
 1. *Fish*, 2013, litho print, acrylic paint, collage, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 29.5 x 18 inches. Image courtesy Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Toronto.

2. *Red Rug*, 2013, litho print, acrylic, glue, graphite and red rug on paper, 30 x 22 inches. Image courtesy Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Toronto.







Robert Enright, 'Taking Notice: An Interview with Jessica Stockholder', *Border Crossings*, No. 127, 2013