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ON VIEW THROUGH
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In Words: Ruby Sky Stiler
By Kelly Devine Thomas



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Ruby Stilers' An Earlier Vessel

Ruby Stiler has been photographed on the street, has a boyfriend who speaks of her, and works for a pretty cool boss. Lately, when she's not making art, she's been taking driving lessons, hoping to earn her license before she turns 30 this summer. This month and next, she's having her first solo exhibit, "High and Low Relief," at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery (through June 14), which she has converted to resemble an attic space with a distressed floor and shortened ceiling. On exhibit are seven works, five sculptures (including the show's wooden floor) and two wall reliefs, that combine tactile and comic elements. The show includes a related print she made with the Brooklyn print shop Forth Estate.

What follows is her story of her art in words:

I was born in Maine in 1979. My parents divorced when I was 5-ish. Then my Mom had an astrological reading that convinced her we should move to New Mexico, which we did when I was 8-ish. Taos is beautiful but I was so bored there, eventually I quit smoking weed, and had nothing else to do. I was super excited to get to art school (RISD) and I moved to NY after I finished in 2001.

My sister and I never wore clothes growing up, and we would paint our bodies. Body painting with watercolors is my "early work."

I made a small body of work before I went to grad school [Yale, 2006] that was particularly important to my development. These sculptures were based on a very specific idea. The problem with them was that they didn't evolve beyond what was in my head. So, I reworked them numerous times, and it was then that I discovered my brain is not as smart as my hands are. My intelligence comes through the process of making the object and that's where I have the potential to learn something and create something unexpected. I don't really even make sketches anymore. It's futile for me because I can't imagine how the thing should be before I work on it.

[KDT Note: I love Ruby's comment about her intelligence coming from her hands rather than her brain. It reminds me of an article I read the other day about how robots learn. An excerpt:

Perhaps the most interesting reason to design robots in our own image is a new theory of intelligence now catching on among researchers in mechanical engineering and cognitive psychology. Until recently the consensus across many fields, from psychology to artificial intelligence, was that control of the body was centralized in the brain. In the context of robotics, this meant that sensory systems would send data up to a central computer (the robot brain), and the computer would grind away to calculate the right commands. Those commands (much like nerve signals) would then be distributed to motors—acting as the robot's musculature—and the robot, so directed, would move. This model, first defined decades ago when the very first computers were being built, got its authority from our concept of the brain as the center of thought.

As time went on, however, it became apparent that central control required an almost endless amount of programming, essentially limiting what robots could do. The limits became clearer with deeper understanding of how living organisms work: not through commands from some kind of centralized mission control, but via a distributed interaction with their environment.

"The traditional robotics model has the body following the brain, but in nature the brain follows the body," Fumiya Iida, of MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, explains. Decisions flow from the properties of the materials our bodies are made of and their interactions with the environment. When we pick up an object, we are able to hold it not primarily because of what our brain says but because our soft hands mold themselves around the object automatically, increasing surface contact and therefore frictional adhesion. When a cockroach encounters an irregular surface, it does not appeal to its brain to tell it what to do next; instead, its musculoskeletal system is designed so that local impacts drive its legs to the right position to take the next step.]

I'm not sure where/how Nicelle (Beauchene) saw my work originally. She contacted me unexpectedly, and it was good timing, because I had been doing a lot of group shows which change so much the meaning and context of one's work and I was stoked and really ready to have an environment that I could fully control . . . And Nicelle is rad and really supportive!

It was a much different experience making a show of only my work. I felt a lot of pressure (coming from myself), and it's a vulnerable feeling. It was an effort to sustain confidence that I deserve this opportunity, and I have sort of oscillated in the last few months between super ego-maniac to totally insecure. Also, my work is really demanding physically and takes serious work ethic, and at times I've felt like a complete slave to my own sculptures, and a savage who never leaves my basement studio.

The show has many different themes running through it, but there is a tendency towards exploring the structure of

value, monetary and emotional, and how that can be played with. It is an awkward time to make a show of “for sale” objects, and I wanted to overtly bring that into the work. I created an attic environment through installing a creaky wooden floor with distressed boards and shortened head space—as an alternative to the high-end showroom quality of a gallery. I was interested in the idea of rendering the objects I was showing useless.

The sculptures *An Earlier Vessel* and *No Legend* play with authenticity and how that quality is perceived and creates value in a thing. Initially, because they incorporate the iconography of classical antiquity, I think one assumes the sculptures are historically accurate and authoritative (though probably not genuine), but as you look closer they fall apart and you realize they are essentially cartoons, made of contemporary art supplies, and are a mash up of centuries of images that span many different cultures. I hope that through this shift in perception the viewer can actively engage with the work through their changing relationship to it.

An Earlier Vessel started with a foam core armature, and then I basically skinned it by breaking and bending a thinner foam core on which I had painted with *gauche* (a super matte paint). The adhesive is a powerful hot glue; you can see it coming through the cracks. The work was inspired by a trip I took to Naples last year. My friends and I went to visit Pompeii, which was amazing. We were staying with these Italian artists who told us about this incredible archaeological and scientific discovery regarding the color of the frescoes at Pompeii. The color “Pompeii red” is integral to the way they have restored the site; this iconic color has been painted over many of the artifacts and is a part of our sense of this place and its history. However, this may not have been the original color, which was probably oxidized by the fire of the volcano to create the “Pompeii red” color. I love how this story points out the potential for fiction and subjectivity within things that are considered fact.

In *No Legend*, I made the relief elements by cutting into the surface of foam core with a blade, and pulling out material, as well as applying paper additions on top to raise the relief. Then I would set a layer of resin over the surface, and I used essentially a stain to “distress” the surface and bring out the details. (This feels like a cooking show!) I had made a first version of *No Legend*, which I was really invested in. I had spent over a month already, putting all of my energy into fabricating the piece. Then I had this entirely visceral realization that there was no internal, material logic to the way it was being made. At that point, I only had an emotional and physical understanding of why the thing wasn’t effective—I couldn’t articulate the conflict I felt. That part came later, but at the time I was heartbroken, it was like a relationship that you’re trying to salvage but you know is over.

Stretch [a ladder with red wool felt hands] started with the impulse of giving a utilitarian object, something that usually skulks around in the shadows, a moment to perform in the spotlight. I have also made a few pieces that were loosely inspired by the form of a coat rack. It seems like a really natural tendency to apply human characteristics to inanimate objects.

Felt has been integral in previous sculptures I’ve made. I like the draping quality of it, which reminds me of the draping you see in the robed figures of classical marble sculpture. I’ve always appreciated that cool moment where the artist really gets to flex their skills, show off, and seduce the viewer. In this show the wool felt is used sparingly, but it definitely has a precedent in my work. There is a lot of simulacra in the sculptures, so the materials I use are often ones that can transform in a surprising way. The material transformation is most exciting when I manipulate ones with inherent limitations.

I’ve been plugging away on this work for the last year, though my work ethic the last six months has been more hardcore. I make a lot of scary-bad stuff and then I remake it repeatedly, and I edit a lot. So, although it’s a smallish show, it’s a lot of work for me. For example, I made about five large samples of the floor in my studio. Each time I made it with a frame structure, so that I could feel how it might fit with the altered headspace (and how that would effect the size I made the sculptures). I started with a really different looking floor, much more of a cartoon or a drawing, but it evolved. What I eventually did was distress all of the (brand new) pine boards, with knife, hammer and saw, and stained the wood to age it. It was grueling and tedious, but I had people help me so I didn’t get carpal tunnel. The process of distressing something new and making it look old and imperfect is funny, it reminds me of diesel jeans or something.

If you are interested in being featured in In Words, send me an email (kdevinethomas@gmail.com) with a link to your exhibition/work and answers to the following questions: Where did you grow up? When and how did you start making

art (describe your early work)? What went into your current work? What were the challenges? What were you trying to communicate? Describe your current work for me, focusing on the details of how it was made and the outcome, using very simple language. Now pick one work and tell me a story about it. Submissions by artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, and musicians equally welcome. The only condition is that you have a current work available for consumption by others (meaning on exhibit, screen, stage or in stores). Full disclosure: you may be Googled and submissions may be edited and/or elicit follow-up questions.

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