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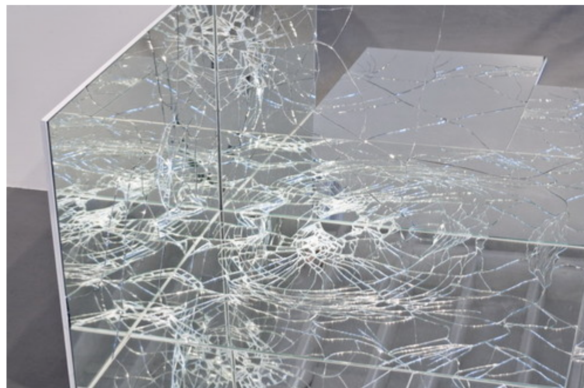
Interview with Emilie Halpern

Los Angeles - Emilie Halpern deals with monumental ideas but she does so in a quiet, subdued way. The work in her new exhibition focuses on little gestures, like covering the moon with a thumb or hearing the heartbeat of a blue whale, but, together, these gestures begin to build a picture of the whole, birth-to-death process of living.

I met Emilie at Anna Helwing Gallery and she gave me a dynamic tour of her show *Abracadabra,* explaining the fluent threads that tie her work together. In the following interview, Emilie describes her working process, her reliance on the Dewey Decimal system, her interest in constellation making, and her future plans.

Emilie Halpern's exhibition, Abracadabra, is on view at Anna Helwing Gallery, Los Angeles, from May 17 - June 28, 2008.

-*Catherine Wagley*



Catherine Wagley: I keep thinking about the universal-ness of your show. But starting an interview with a question about your work's relationship to life, love, and death seems precocious. So let's start at the other end. You're dealing with big, romantic sensibilities, but your approach is literally hands-on. How did you physically interact with this work in the studio?

Emilie Halpern: The first piece I made that's in the show is the sculpture "49 Years of Bad Luck", which consists of 7 broken mirrors mounted onto MDF. When I first started, I just had these 2 concepts, one was the superstitious belief that breaking a mirror will give you 7 years of bad luck, and the other was the scientific estimate that woman in the US on average live to the age of 79. At the time, I was 30 years old and breaking 7 mirrors meant bad luck until I die. So here I was in my studio with seven mirrors and a hammer. I grabbed the first one, laid it on the ground and stood over it, hammer in my hand, ready to go, and I remember in that moment feeling kind of scared. I think I was intimidated by the sheet of glass. I mean, what if one of those shards went flying into my eye or sliced an artery. But I think also part of my apprehension must have been because of the superstitious taboo. So at first I gave a shaky gentle tap, and of course nothing happened. In fact, it took me a while to figure how to break a mirror-turns out whacking it with all my strength or dropping it from great heights is pretty useless. This piece comes to mind first in response to your question because the process of making it was so literal: break a mirror, pick the pieces off the studio floor, fit them back together and glue them down. And yet in such a literal process, there are so many moments of fear and comedy and mistake, I guess so many

moments of being a human being and not a machine. I have always been drawn to the hand made or homemade in my sculptures. I think it's in those moments of human imperfection or flaw that the viewer has an entry point into something genuine.

CW: Did one piece lead to another, or did you work through multiple ideas at once?

EH: Both. I usually work on several threads of thought at once, and within that pieces are interconnected, like several constellations in one sky. For example *49 Years of Bad Luck* directly led to the photographs *2061* and *Immortality*. *2061* is a photo of Halley's comet framed behind dark tinted acrylic, and over time the tint fades and the images appears. *Immortal* is a black and white photograph of a small jellyfish, Turritopsis nutricula, the only immortal animal on the planet.

After I made *49 Years of Bad Luck*, I was thinking a lot about the year 2055, that supposed estimated year of my death, and what that year could mean, what the world would be like then. And it was like staring into that shattered reflected corner of *49 Years of Bad Luck*. There's nothing you can see that makes sense, that's tangible.

2061 is the year Halley 's Comet is due to reappear, 6 years after the estimated year of my death. When Halley 's Comet, last appeared I was 9 years old, and it seems to me that that year all parents turned towards their elementary school aged children and said you know next time this comet will appear you'll probably be alive to see it, but I'll be gone. And in some ways that comet became a symbol for an awareness of mortality to an entire generation. I the love way this comet is a constant in the sky, unchanging, and predictable, and there's mankind beneath it living, dying, creating and destroying, making a mess-blaming it for lost battles and the death of kings 1000 years ago, and polluting the sky so badly so that it will no longer be visible to the naked eye in 50 years.

CW: You do a lot of research. But your approach sounded more intuitive than heady. How did you conduct the research for this show?

EH: I wouldn't be able to make my work without the library and the internet. When I need to get inspired, I always go to the library and spend all my time in either the science or art sections. I'm a huge fan of the Dewey Decimal System. This time I started by checking out a giant pile of books on space exploration, meteorites, exotic plants, animal behavior, marine biology, and ceramics, and then ended 3 months later with a biography on John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

CW: The part nostalgic, part critical, part "science fair" sensibility of Abracadabra is low-key, but also weighty. I found the show genuinely, immediately pleasant, but I had to think about what it meant on my way home. Is this push and pull between pleasantness and weightiness something you wanted to achieve?

EH: Yes, absolutely. It's what Yoko Ono described as starting a revolution with soap bubbles.

CW: I'm still stuck on the uncanny relationship between "Bouquet for a Soldier" and "Last

Love Letter." You've got this carefully researched image that relates Yoko Ono's mourning of Lennon to the Achillea flower, which stands in for the tension between war and peace. Then you've got this image of the last love letter you ever received--a crumpled piece of white paper. But this image doesn't mean that you don't have love in your life. It just means that you don't receive handwritten letters anymore. These images both confront loss, but in an unbiased way. When you talk about loss in your work, do you do so from a neutral ground? Are you more interested in how people relate to loss than in whether loss is good or bad?

EH: Loss is both always painful and inevitable, and that's where my interest lies. The end, though tragic, is necessary, and that makes it at once both bad and good.

CW: Your approach to space travel and the fragility of imperialism also has to do with loss. How did you become interested in space travel or in the moon in general?

EH: It started when I read Andre Breton's *Claire de Terre* (Earthlight) 10 years ago. It was the first time I conceived of seeing the night sky not illuminated with moonlight but with earthlight. With that simple title, Breton had managed to turn my perception of the world inside out. I then became fascinated with the Apollo astronauts' experience of seeing Earth from the moon, and what happened to man kind when those images where beamed back, basically the birth of environmental activism. In a 1981 edition of *The Whole Earth Catalog* I found the following quote by Apollo 9 astronaut Russell Schweickart that then directly inspired me to make the video *Earth*:

"The size of it, the significance of it- it becomes both things, it becomes so small and fragile, and such a precious little spot in the universe, that you can block it out with your thumb, and you realize that on that small spot, that blue and white thing is everything that means anything to you. All of history and music and poetry and art and war and death and birth and love, tears, joy, games, all of it is on that little spot that you can cover with your thumb."

CW: Almost all the work in the show relates to the past, the future, or the cosmos. Yet you've really tried to make the exhibition an immediate, present experience--I'm thinking of the placement of the TV monitor, the telescope and the Blue Whale heart beat. How do you think of Abracadabra in relationship to time?

EH: I really want to engage the viewer in the moment, but also to have them thinking about it later, like what happened to you on the drive home. In thinking about the show and time, one piece comes to mind in particular*. Yesterday and Tomorrow* is 2 color photographs of the same image in a double-sided frame that hangs perpendicular to the wall. Visible from both sides, the image is of the ocean on the dateline between the islands of Samoa and Tonga. On one side of the image it is yesterday and on the other it is tomorrow. As the viewer walks around the piece they are time traveling.

CW: The palette of Abracadabra is understated and almost cold. You've got these romantic ideas of loss, love, life, and death weaving through your work, but there's nothing sentimental about your treatment of these ideas. Why not?

EH: The palette of the show is the palette of the photographs taken on the moon. It's as if the world has been desaturated so any moment of color is so intense and so heightened, like the astronauts' gold face shield against the grey landscape. In an essay on Robert Bresson, Susan Sontag writes: "There is art that involves, that creates empathy. There is art that detaches, that provokes reflection. Great reflective art is not frigid. It can exalt the spectator, it can present images that appall, it can make him weep. But its emotional power is mediated. The pull toward emotional involvement is counterbalanced by elements in the work that promote distance, disinterestedness, impartiality. Emotional involvement is always, to a greater or lesser degree, postponed." (Sontag, Susan. "Spiritual style in the films of Robert Bresson." Against Interpretation, pp. 177. New York: Dell, 1966.)

CW: In the essay for the Damaged Romanticism show that we talked about, David Pagel basically says that Damaged Romantics, unlike the original Romantics, don't want to enlighten anyone. Instead they want to connect the dots between moments in order to get closer to the big picture of how life works. When I was listening to you describe your thought processes, I felt like the dot-connecting was why the show worked together so nicely-all of the work gestures toward the big picture. Do you see yourself as connecting dots?

EH: I'm a big dot connector, a constellation maker.

CW: What next? Have you been researching anything fascinating?

EH: I will be spending the month of June in Vermont doing a residency which I'm sure will bring lots of new inspiration. Opening June 14th, I'll have a piece in Outpost for Contemporary Art's *Intersection 2008*, a multi-sited pubic installation project on York Avenue in Highland Park. It will be a balloon text piece inspired by Laika, a soviet dog, that was the first animal that went to space, and died cooked alive because no accommodations had been made to ever bring it back. Also, I've been researching the first time flowers were used for a funerary bouquet, which was for a caveman's funeral 60,000 years ago in Iraq. And how certain kinds of starfish rip themselves in half and become two. On occasion, their behavior appears to become deranged, for instead of their five arms working in unison to propel the starfish over the seabed, two arms start to move in opposite direction to the remaining three, and the starfish splits in two. Each of the two parts, consisting of a half body, goes its own way and grows the missing portion of the body and the extra arms so that each ends up as a complete starfish.

Images top-bottom: *49 Years of Bad Luck* (2008), *Abracadabra* (2008), *Bouquet for a Soldier* (2008), *Last Love Letter* (2008), *Yesterday and Tomorrow* (2008)