

Lauren Britton Interviews Deborah Brown

Lauren: Please talk about the experience of curating the open call for Field Projects. Was it overwhelming?

Deborah: I had a great experience doing the show, though it was overwhelming. I had no idea that there would be so many submissions--700+. Because many of the submissions were very good, I looked at each one carefully, and this took a lot of time. A number of submissions came from recent graduates of the top MFA programs--Yale, Columbia, Hunter—but there were also artists whose work I recognized from their gallery shows. I was really impressed with the overall quality.

My plan was to take the images that I liked and put the work into categories that I thought could be the nucleus of shows. After repeated passes through the 3500 images, I saw 5 shows emerge. I began to aggregate the artists whose work I liked into these categories, when appropriate. What I selected was a dialogue between the work that I saw and the themes that emerged. We ended up choosing a show called, “Momento Mori,” based on the idea of monuments.

One of the shows that I could have done at Field Projects was a survey of abstract painting by young artists. This show intrigued me so much that I decided to do it at Storefront Ten Eyck with the blessing of the curators at Field Projects, Keri Oldham and Jacob Rhodes. The show, “Abstraction and Its Discontents,” opened October 24 and is on view at my space through November 24:
www.StorefrontTenEyck.com.

I've also had the opportunity to be an advisor on the artwork for scenes in “The Intern,” a new Robert De Niro/Anne Hathaway film that was shot in Brooklyn this summer. The director, Nancy Myers, wanted black and white drawings and photographs by Brooklyn artists. I used the submissions for the Field Projects Open Call to find artists whose work fit the criteria. This created an additional opportunity for the artists who submitted work to the Open Call to have their work seen.

Lauren: Did any new possibilities for your curation at Storefront Ten Eyck arise due to this process?

Deborah: As I mentioned, I ended up using one of the shows that I could have done at Field Projects, “Abstraction and Its Discontents,” at Storefront Ten Eyck. It's a large group show with fresh work that I hadn't seen before and that was largely new to the Bushwick art community as well. I've run Storefront now for five years and shown the work of hundreds of artists. Curating the show at Field Projects acquainted me with the work of many artists whom I did not know and whom I hope to work with in the future.

Lauren: Can you talk about your intersection of painting and curating. Is that something you've always been interested in or is it something that you've done for the past couple of years?

Deborah: I fell into running a gallery by accident. When I came to Bushwick 10 years ago, I knew that I would do things differently as an artist but I didn't know exactly what form that would take. I bought a vacant factory on Stockholm Street to renovate and use as my studio. The Bushwick art scene of 10 years ago was much smaller than it is today. It was lead by a few individuals who were doing things communally and providing opportunities for people to come together and share their artworks and ideas. I think that laid the groundwork for the artist community and network of artist-run galleries that still exists today. We're the anti-elitist, democratic part of the New York art world. Those who choose to locate their practices here now seem to play by the rules set by the artists who got here first.

I thought it would be fun to have a gallery and show the work of artists in my circle. I started Storefront at the end of 2009 with Jason Andrew, and we ran it together for two years out of a tiny space on Wilson Avenue that I had found on craigslist. Since 2012, I continued to run the space myself. I didn't know it would evolve into what it has today: a 7,000 sf facility that I own on Ten Eyck Street and where I also have my studio, and where I receive visitors at all levels of the art world food chain. Many of the first shows at the original gallery on Wilson Avenue were the work of artists I had known for a long time, which I think often is the way that artist-run galleries begin. You show your friends. Now, it's morphed into something else much bigger and more ambitious. Curation at Storefront Ten Eyck and at the other artist-run galleries has evolved to encompass site-specific shows with work by artists not always known to us beforehand. In my new space, I feel confident organizing shows on a large scale and inviting guest curators to do things that might never have occurred to me. This past weekend in Bushwick,

galleries staged “Exchange Rates,” a 4-day art expo in which we worked with galleries in other countries and other parts of the United States to host their programs. The event was organized by the Sluice Art Fair and two Bushwick art spaces, Centotto and Theodore Art, as a neighborhood-wide art fair, and it was very successful in bringing new audiences and new art to Bushwick.

Lauren: Can we talk about your own painting practice? There's been a transition recently in your paintings, I've seen them when they were a lot more angular and it seemed as though there were more clustered forms and recently you've been painting a lot more... royalties?

Deborah: I am extensively referencing sources in art history in my recent work. For several years I was painting landscapes of aggregated junk and scrap. The work began to go in a direction where the subject matter became less literal. The paintings began to be much more abstract. They started looking like monuments or monumental heads. That was the point where I had my recent show in New York at Lesley Heller (in February/March 2014). In this show, I exhibited paintings whose imagery began to resemble specific archetypes in art history, images that we're all familiar with, such as the Velasquez portraits of the Infanta Maria Teresa. Some of my paintings are inspired by paintings from the past; characters in works of literature like Tolstoy's “War and Peace” and Stendhal's “Le Rouge et Le Noir;” and operatic figures like those in Wagner's “Der Ring des Nibelungen.”

I'm working more directly from the sources and using them in a more obvious way. But I see now that I was on a path that was logical to follow to its conclusion. When you look at my recent paintings, you can recognize the referent. At the same time, it's clear that it's my take on the source and that I am bringing these images into the contemporary world..

Lauren: It's interesting to see you oscillating between these more representative and more abstract modes of making. Is that something that you struggled with or is it something that came really fluid for you?

Deborah: It was a really interesting transition. Last summer when I was working toward my show at Lesley Heller, I was pushing the work in an abstract direction, but I didn't know where the work was going . It was like harnessing the energy of a moving target. I felt things veering in and out of my control. I reached a crossroads where the marks I was making could become a totally abstract field or a more recognizable form, and I chose to come back to a figurative referent. I look back on those paintings

and see the issues I was struggling with and where I was headed, but it's only clear in hindsight. I was looking at Picasso's Cubist work and his work from the 30's and 40's, which merge abstraction and figuration, the work of George Condo, and fetish and tribal art from all over the world. All provided models for my work. Then I went back into other corners of art history and picked up the models that are the subject of my work at the moment.

Lauren: Has that affected the way that you approach the paintings?

Deborah: Yes, I approach the paintings now as portraits now instead of just fields. The building blocks that I use to construct the paintings remain the same. I underpin the work with the same kind of energetic mark-making and structural examination of a form that I used when the work was less figurative. I'm still making the paintings the same way but they start out closer to what they're going to end up looking like. Before, I was searching; I was trying to find the figure in this big heap of abstraction. Now I'm going right at the subject from the start. I can see if it works or not much more quickly.

Lauren: That must be really refreshing to feel so certain at the beginning.

Deborah: I am on a clearer path than I was last summer, but that was a really exciting time of transition. I was searching and my work was changing as a result. If you keep searching and keep pushing, unexpected things occur. That's what happened to me.

Lauren: How are you feeling about the work now? Do you feel like it is still changing like it was before?

Deborah: I feel like I'm on a good footing. I have a lot of things I want to investigate—aspects of the history of art that I find strange and marvelous, things that I didn't pay much attention to before, so that a lot of things can be the subject matter of my investigation. The world and my sources of inspiration have opened up tremendously for me as an artist. For example, there's a trove of 18th and 19th century British portrait painting, in which the subjects are portrayed with their dogs, their horses, their estates and their accouterments. Changing tastes have caused us to overlook this corner of art history. I want to see what I can do with this subject matter. I am interested in doing large, narrative work with lots of figures.

Lauren: Do you find that the curating you have done has had an impact on your work in a direct way?

Deborah: It's made me work harder as an artist. I see so much good work, and I'm very inspired by what I see. I don't necessarily take ideas directly from other artists, but my exposure to the work of many young artists has pushed me to take my own work more seriously. It's motivated me to raise the bar for my own work.

Lauren: How do you manage to put all this together? It seems like you have a lot going on. Do you have certain days that you're only in the studio or...?

Deborah: No, I do everything all the time. One thing that's made it easier for me is having my studio in the same building as the gallery, which didn't used to be the case. Now, workmen can be at Ten Eyck putting bars on the windows and sky lights, and I can still work in my studio, or I can do a studio visit then run back over here and do some of my own work, or I can answer some emails related to the administrative part of running a space, then head into the studio. I realize that I can concentrate on one thing for a period of time but that I have to keep...

Lauren: Jumping between things?

Deborah: Yeah, I think otherwise I'd get buried. I'm on the board of several not-for-profit art organizations. For example, I have served on the board of NURTUREart for 5 years, and that involves meetings, fundraising, asking artists for donations and strategizing about the future of the organization. Because I am involved in so many things in the art world and in the Bushwick community in particular, I know a lot of people. I try to interest them in the different things that I'm involved with and, at the same time, get involved with what they're doing. That creates and nurtures community.

Lauren: Do you feel like Bushwick is your home or do you think that you might pick the gallery up and move elsewhere eventually?

Deborah: Bushwick is my bailiwick. I love working here, and I would never move the gallery somewhere else. I bought this building with the idea that I would combine the gallery and my studio under one roof. I'll run the gallery for as long as I can, but I have no idea how long it'll go on. The gallery is me, so as long as I feel like doing it, I will. It's a great space to show art, and we have a loyal audience that's expanding along with Bushwick.