

IN THE STUDIO

AMANDA ROSS-HO

WITH STEEL STILLMAN

The title of Amanda Ross-Ho's recent solo show at the Pomona College Museum of Art, "The Cheshire Cat Principle," is a clear tip-off that she's an artist who thinks about invisibility. Things, in her oeuvre, are not always what they seem. Working with images, objects and ideas from everywhere and anywhere—from mass culture to private life, from high-end philosophy to the diurnal routines of her feline companions—Ross-Ho sorts her gleanings in a studio world where improvisation and elaboration rule the day (and night). Frequently, when her work emerges into public view—as paintings, sculptures, photographs and installations—it is so imbued with studio process and atmosphere that it might seem to be art-about-art. But that is its paradox, for it turns out that what passes through the studio is the stuff of life itself, and that Ross-Ho's material visualizations contain the same sorts of twists and turns, contradictions and enigmas, that we all encounter—and overlook—every day. This art-about-art, it turns out, is about the world.

Ross-Ho was born in 1975 in Chicago and lived there until 2004, when she moved to Los Angeles to attend graduate school at the University of Southern California. Her career, which had begun in Chicago, accelerated in 2006, the year she earned her MFA. Since then, she has had six solo shows and been included in more than 25 group exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe. In 2008, she participated in the Whitney and California biennials. Her contribution to the latter has been reinstalled at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, as part of the exhibition "Production Site: The Artist's Studio," where it will be on view until May 30. In addition, Ross-Ho has two solo shows planned for this year: at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, in New York [Apr. 1-May 1]; and at Cherry and Martin, in Los Angeles, scheduled for November.

Ross-Ho's studio is in a spacious, one-story industrial building in downtown Los Angeles. We spoke there for several hours over the course of two late January afternoons, with three cats prowling about.

Opposite, Amanda Ross-Ho in her Los Angeles studio. Photo Erik Frydenborg.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Amanda Ross-Ho" at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, Apr. 1-May 1.

STEEL STILLMAN How were you first exposed to art?

AMANDA ROSS-HO My parents were both working as artists throughout my childhood. They met in the '60s when they were students at the Art Institute of Chicago. My father was studying painting, and my mother photography. The three of us lived in a large house where a commune had once been, and with both my parents working at home, there was always a lot going on, and people floating in and out. My father remains an artist, but when I was a teenager, my mother went back to school and became a conservation ecologist.

SS I hear you were a competitive figure skater when you were young.

AR-H I started skating when I was five and quit at 17. It was intense—doing it meant giving up being a normal kid. I trained six days a week before and after school, and traveled for competitions. But I loved skating and learned a lot from it. And the day-to-day discipline of studying a craft, the pleasure of perfecting it and the fun of improvising taught me how to have a practice.

SS What kind of art education did you have?

AR-H I was an art major in high school and then went to the Art Institute, where I became interested in cultivating a conceptual approach. After graduating, I stayed in Chicago for seven years, working full-time at various jobs—including one as a textile designer—all the while making artwork and exhibiting locally. But I could see a ceiling for myself as an artist in Chicago, so I applied to graduate schools. USC was great for me—it was a small program, and I was thrilled to be back in school with two uninterrupted years to reinvent myself.

SS Toward the end of your time at USC, you began making pieces that prefigure the work you make today. One example is *Invisible Opponent* [2005].

AR-H *Invisible Opponent* consists of two elements: a lightbox photograph that hangs on one wall opposite a cutout, freestanding section of my studio wall, with space for the viewer between the two. My original plan had been to make a





This page, overview and details of *Invisible Opponent*, 2005, Duratrans lightbox, Sheetrock and mixed mediums. Photo Amanda Ross-Ho.

Opposite, close-up of *Seizure*, 2006, inkjet print mounted on Sintra, two aluminum sawhorses, 30 by 44 by 57 inches overall.

All photos this article, except p.83, courtesy Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

large abstract painting, modeled on a portrait photographer's backdrop. But as the painting developed I became interested in how it interacted with the physical space of my studio. So I decided to make a work that referred to its own moment of origin, and took a photograph of the painting, showing all the detritus around it. Then, when I took the painting down, the paint had bled through the canvas, leaving a beautiful imprint on the wall, so I cut the wall out and propped it up facing the photograph, leaving the viewer to complete the circuit.

SS So already your studio process was part of your subject.

AR-H I've come to think of everything in the studio—from art materials, tools and source material, to trash and cat toys—as if it were organic material. I'm collaborating with things that have their own charge, and the process is like dancing. I'll make a gesture and watch it resonate with whatever's in the space or in my head, and things will blend and grow. My process is often less about initiating actions than about paying

attention to something that is already going on, and then responding.

SS Within your body of work, families of objects and images recur. In one family, similar or related images are collected and arranged in loosely gridded taxonomies. *Seizure* [2006] may be the first of these.

AR-H I'm fascinated by large archives and databases because they index the overwhelming accumulation of stuff that makes up our world. I love to troll through them looking for patterns and repetitions that might clarify, if only temporarily, some little piece of reality. When I was working on *Seizure*, I searched for images of contraband seized by the police—guns, drugs and money, mostly—and then printed out and taped the images on my studio wall. I noticed that the contraband images formally paralleled the symbolic bounty in Dutch still-life painting. And then, at some point, I realized that the accumulation of seizure photos on my studio wall mimicked the compositions of the contraband in the police images. So I shot a photo-



“I’LL MAKE A GESTURE AND WATCH IT RESONATE WITH WHATEVER’S IN THE SPACE OR IN MY HEAD, AND THINGS WILL BLEND AND GROW.”

graph of the photos on the wall, blew it up to match the scale of the originals, mounted it and laid it on a pair of sawhorses, like a tabletop.

SS There is something about your interest in taxonomies that reminds me of the panels in Aby Warburg’s “Mnemosyne Atlas,” and its rebuslike use of imagery as a language system.

AR-H As my interest in collecting and ordering imagery has evolved, I’ve come to see arrangements of objects on tabletops as if they were pictograms laid out on tablets. Just as a body of text is an accumulation of perhaps obscure marks adding up to something legible, these taxonomies—both the ones I’ve found and the ones I’ve constructed—have a kind of legibility that their component elements do not have on their own.

SS Where did the idea of using gift baskets—another recurring motif—come from?

AR-H To begin with, I’m a world-class gift giver and love inventing new ways to wrap things! In my work, gift baskets play a formal role—as compositional devices, as things to be filled or emptied—and a more questioning one, as I wonder about the role of generosity in art. My own inclination is to be generous, but artists make a lot of work. Who are we making it for, and in what spirit? How is it being received?

SS In 2006, you began a series of what eventually became 12 large shaped paintings based on images of lace doilies. Why doilies?

AR-H It occurred to me that doilies, like paintings, are objects that present something else; so I wondered what would happen if I made the thing that presents something else itself the focus of attention. I found doily images on the Internet, and projected and painted them in black on large drop cloths, and then cut out the negative spaces. In the end they function both as sculptures and paintings: the canvas, and hence the image, is held together only by paint. I titled them “Black Widows,” thinking partly of spiderwebs and also that the doilies were mourning their objects, waiting for viewers, or suitors, to come and call.

SS Though you make individual

pieces, your work may be best understood in installations where multiple elements—family members, as you call them—gather in mixed groupings. When that happens—as in your solo “gran-abertura” [2006] at Western Exhibitions in Chicago—themes, variations and reversals ping-pong off one another.

AR-H An exhibition is a time and

cutouts to other objects and images, could move behind the walls into an articulated peripheral space.

SS With your first solo at Cherry and Martin, “NOTHIN FUCKIN MATTERS,” in 2007, the foamcore models and computer printouts that you used to plan the installation became themselves the sculptural motif that organized the exhibition.



place where objects and images can perform together like characters in a drama. As with *Invisible Opponent*, my sense is that objects are not bounded by their physicality but instead occupy spaces larger than themselves. With “gran-abertura”—which means “grand opening”—I wanted to reverse the idea that art is about creating objects, and to think instead about creating spaces where activity can occur. I created a set of three freestanding Sheetrock walls. On one, I presented a doily painting; on another, I cut the negative spaces of a large, unpainted doily out of the wall itself. So the walls functioned both as support and aperture, and viewers, seeing through the

AR-H I’d been running around with 8½-by-11-inch sheets of paper filled with images of the pieces I was working on for the show. There were hundreds of these papers, and as I shuffled them around, knowing I wanted to connect the process of making the work to the gallery space, it occurred to me that I could translate this process into my presentation strategy. So I produced wall-size Sheetrock panels that were the same proportion as the paper sheets, and propped them, like pieces of foamcore, against the gallery walls.

SS The panels functioned like pictures or displays.

AR-H Right. I’d discovered that the

“THERE WAS A GOOD, INTENTIONAL CONFUSION ABOUT WHETHER THE WHOLE PANELS WERE THE PIECES, OR WHETHER THE THINGS ON AND AROUND THEM WERE.”

taxonomy logic of the *Seizure* images could work with my own content, so the panels, like the pieces of paper, displayed images and objects. In addition, most of the panels had holes cut into them, so that as they leaned against the wall, spaces opened up behind them. These were occupied by things you might find in the studio—among them, a cat’s water dish and a pair of sneakers decorated with paint splatters. In all, there was a good, intentional confusion about whether the whole panels were the pieces, or whether the things on and around them were.

SS One of the leaning panels has a large black shaped painting on it, similar to the doilies, but resembling a macramé wall hanging. You’ve gone

on to produce a series of these, collectively called “White Goddesses,” a clear riff on the “Black Widow” theme. Are the “White Goddesses” about craft, or about the cultural associations that macramé conjures up?

AR-H Though the macramé pieces come from vintage craft books, I’m less interested in their cultural indices than in the technique itself, which involves knotting together a series of points to make a unitary whole, a process that, again, reminds me of how language is structured. But what I love most is that the photographs in those books translate real things into images that can then be used by anyone to bring those lost objects back into the material world. Of course my own translation deviates somewhat from

the model, in that I’m translating the photograph into a painted object.

SS The leaning panels seemed to give birth to another series that is ongoing, the Sheetrock pictures, which are in a sense studio still lifes.

AR-H Yes, the series is titled “Untitled Still Life.” Working in the studio, I can see my own gestures accumulate and repeat in much the same way that objects pile up. I began to think about how various traces of my hand—whether marks or drawings on the wall, bits of tape holding up images, patterns of pin holes or the bleed-through of earlier paintings—might be incorporated into artworks. I’d already exhibited actual sections of my studio wall, so with this work I decided to create fictional gestures that appropri-





Above, view of Ross-Ho's work in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. Photo Ellen Page Wilson.

Opposite, view of *gran-abertura*, 2006, Sheetrock, wood, canvas drop cloth, wicker basket and mixed mediums. Photo Ruyell Ho.

ate authentic ones. I cut up Sheetrock panels and scattered them around the studio, sometimes making very specific marks or arrangements on them, but also just allowing them to accumulate the studio's grit and grime. I think of these works almost like film stills—frozen moments, captured from a constantly fluctuating space.

SS Many of the materials you work with—especially Sheetrock and canvas drop cloths—are used in interior construction.

AR-H Partly it has to do with economics and accessibility. I like that the drop cloth is the lowbrow version of painters' canvas, and that Sheetrock is a ubiquitous material used in our homes, studios and galleries. So these are pragmatic choices with conceptual implications.

SS For the 2008 Whitney Biennial, you drilled 100,000 holes into three walls to create the impression of another lowbrow material—Peg-Board—serving as a subtle and deceptive backdrop to your display of images and sculptures.

AR-H I loved it that the largest gesture spoke the most quietly—some people didn't notice that it wasn't actual Peg-Board. To me, Peg-Board is a construction textile. My goal was to use its motif and the physicality of the drilled holes to establish an intimate connection to the museum, and to organize a space for my other pieces. The second largest piece was a giant cat litter box sculpture filled with kitty litter, which referred

to the cats that live in my studio. They are the living element here, running around, energizing the space, so I wanted the litter box to refer to the endless cycle of the studio, and to what we, as artists, are doing—making work, installing it in another space, removing it.

SS What about the shit metaphor?

AR-H Well I certainly didn't mean that my work—or the rest of my installation—was shit! But I did want to talk about temporality in relation to *all* activity. All the works I included were, in a poetic sense, about cycles of life, and, in those terms, art is just one of many ways of being in the world.

SS For your second solo at Cherry and Martin, in 2008, you used your earlier exhibition as a template, a mnemonic architecture, to organize the pieces and their layout.

AR-H I was thinking about the gallery as a place embedded with memory, and I set about making pieces and arranging them so that they could

“I WANTED TO MAKE A SHOW THAT IS AN ACCUMULATION OF ABSENCES—THAT RELIES ON NEGATIVE SPACES TO HIGHLIGHT IMAGES AND OBJECTS THAT ARE PRESENT BUT NOT VISIBLE.”

pick up references from the former installation. In most cases the pieces evolved from, or responded to, pieces that had occupied the same place. You needn't have seen the first show, but this idea was consistent through everything, including the installation photographs, which were all shot from the same angles.

SS And you returned to the leaning wall panels, but this time they were made of canvas instead of Sheetrock.

AR-H Right. Instead of walls behaving like paintings, I made paintings that behaved like walls.



SS Last fall you did a show in Ghent, at Hoet Bekaert, where you did something quite different: you literally upholstered the gallery walls with drop cloths.

AR-H In producing artwork, there's always an accumulation of things that may seem peripheral to the work itself. For years I've used the same kind of drop cloths for the doily and macramé paintings that I've used to protect the studio floor or to paint something else on. I realized I had 11 of these, and that by installing them edge-to-edge I could cover the gallery walls. The fact that they fit so nicely—they were almost the height of the walls—meant that there were only a few places where adjustments needed to be made, places where a bit of excess material meant that I had to do a little pleating or tailor it as if it were a custom garment.

SS And then you accessorized them.

AR-H I have a collection of jewelry that I've found on eBay, mostly single earrings that have lost their partners, so I began embedding them in the drop cloths, accessorizing small lapel-like moments, or taking cues from paint splatters, dirt and other inadvertencies. I wanted to match the accidental or chance elements with something more focused and intentional, to find homes for fugitive particles.

SS I must admit my first thought about this installation was that it was rather ugly, so I was surprised to be intrigued and then seduced by the detail.

AR-H As I worked on them, I began to think of the canvases as bodies, and to think of jewelry as a humorous response to the body's seemingly arbitrary contours.

SS Having just seen your installation "The Cheshire Cat Principle" at the Pomona College Museum of Art, it occurs to me that you have adopted, quite benevolently, the role of artist-as-trickster, and that looking at your work requires extra attention because things are never altogether what they seem.

AR-H Though the title comes from a principle in quantum physics, it worked



Above, view of the exhibition "The Cheshire Cat Principle," 2010, at Pomona College Museum of Art, Claremont, Calif. Photo Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Left, detail of *Pumpkin Head* (top) and *Window Treatment* (bottom), both 2009, mixed mediums on tacked canvas drop cloth; at Hoet Bekaert Gallery, Ghent. Photo Amanda Ross-Ho.



well because I wanted to make a show that is an accumulation of absences—that relies on negative spaces to highlight images and objects that are present but not visible. The centerpiece of the installation is an enormous sculptural re-creation of an empty candy dish shaped like a white cartoon ghost. A certain kinship seems to exist between my own canvas pieces—especially between the negative shapes they leave behind—and the familiar representations of ghosts,

as sheets with eyeholes cut into them. Both, like most art, are materializations of something immaterial. **SS** I've heard you say that the foundation of your work is the attempt to describe the present moment. What do you mean by that? **AR-H** We live and act in the present, and yet it is the hardest moment to describe. The present is our ongoing, ever-changing moment of origin; a collage of everything; a multifaceted jewel made up of memory, feeling,

thinking and whatever you're looking at. I want my work to reflect this multiplicity of forces and dimensions, to embody both the immensity of everything and the impossibility of making sense of more than little bits at a time. I think of my work as a form of local reporting, connecting this moment right here to everything else. ○

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York.