

Morris Graves Museum of Art, 2004 Exhibitions: A Conversation with Artist Rebecca Murtaugh

This interview was conducted by Lindsay Washington on July 2, 2004

LM: Are your peices large-scale manifestations of how you personally categorize and synthesize information? Generally how many phases do your ideas go through before you arrive at a finished piece?

RM: Some installations reference the way I break down ssysytems and try to bring order to the things I am surrounded by. There is a lot of variation in the number of phases that a work goes through. Some are quite immediate and intuitive while others may have many stages and plans until the piece has it's own life.

LM: Can you elaborate on your work's emphasis on the concepts of past relationships and contexts of objects and space in relation to each other? (For example, one of your works and the space with which it is to be exhibited in.) Why are these concepts important to you? Do you feel that these concepts greatly shape our understanding of the collection of information?

RM: I find myself trying to organzie what I experience in the world. Our interpretation of objects is greatly influenced by the particular space or context in which it exists. Many of the works in this show have gone through a process of transformation. The history of the Morris Graves Museum as a library led me to reflect on my collection of personal journals. These personal documents have been made inaccessible to the viewer in their presentation. The shell of many of these documents remain, much as the architecture of the museum.

LM: What particularly draws you to the space that the Morris Graves Musuem of Art provides for exhibition?

RM: On January 1, 2000 the Carnegie building opened its doors as the Morris Granves Museum of Art operated and owned by the Humboldt Arts Council. Carnegie envisioned the original library to raise the qulaity of life for the working class. The building continues to offer the opportunity for intellectual development and community service as the library did when it occupied the building.

LM: Is it a more conscious decision or rather a natural proclivity of your towards using materials that are widely recognized by the general public in your works? For instance, many people might not have an extended knowledge of or an intmate relationship with the mediums of oil paint or bronze, but most are very familiar with Post it Notes or paper bags- materials you have used in previous works. What is the message you are trying to convey by using relatable materials?

RM: I am inclined to use a wide range of materials that are appropriate to my ideas. I would say there is a bit of both natural inclination and conscious decision making in regard to my processes. Some materials are very accessible to a general audience, often these are materials I use in my daily existence. The line between my studio and living space has become increasingly blurred and is apparent in my work since having a studio at home.

LM: Your work appears to deal with themes of layering, repetetion, documentation and regeneration. Themes that a lot of us tend to take for granted. Are these themes related to the concept of history? If so, what kind of histry do you feel your works convey?

RM: I wouldn't say my work has a strong historical reference, although it is influenced greatly by Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Postminimalism.

LM: Artists have a historically tumultuous relationship with the art museum as an institution. In what kind of light does your work seek to shed on the museum as a place for exhibition and an institution? How do you feel that the museum as an institution contributes to the public's interpretation of your work?

RM: The museum is a venue that offers the opportunity to interpret work in a controlled and generally audience friendly environment. Plaques, statements, and publication materials often accompany works to make them more approachable and understandable to the general public. The idea and role of the art museum has shifted dramatically over the past forty years. Earth art, performance art, virtual art, and alternative art venues offer the opportunity for a shift in context to occur. The museum as an institution may change the "perceived value" of art in its seeming importance or significance but not its true value as an intellectual experience. I believe that most exhibiting artists are interested in the most appropriate venue for their art, it is a shifting need that the work regularly dictates. For this exhibit, I wanted the closed system of the museum, the work takes on a more precious quality in the clinical white space.

LM: In an interview completed for your exhibition last fall at the Reese Bullen Gallery, you mentioned that last year was dedicated to more site specific work in contrast to previous exhibitions in which great emphasis was placed on the event of moving your work to different locales. Have you noticed a change in the interpretation of your work when it is tailored for a specific place versus your work morphing to accomodate different venues? What do you feel are the drawbacks and/or benefits to having mobile versus stationary exhibitions and how does it affect the soul of your work?

RM: The benefit of installations being mobile is the size of your audience. If it can move from one venue to another it will generally have a larger and diverse audience. If the work is driven by site specificty and concept often the documentation of the piece is shown, such as a photograph or a video. For this exhibit I found myself taking a still photograph of the "Burn, Burn, Burn" video that documented the event that was the art. It gets really exciting and interesting when determining where the art is...

LM: Most of your pieces (and particularly the pieces in this show) have a sensitivity and elegance as well as entropic quality to them. Are these qualities you have in mind when creating a work?

RM: I believe the elegance comes from the sensuality of the materials and their minimal arrangement. I wouldn't say that I am intentionally imparting a sensitivity or elegance to the work, it is more a byprodcut of my intuitive process.

LM: If a viewer were to depart from this exhibition with one concept or experience regarding your work, what would you hope it would be?

RM: I would like the viewer to have an aesthetic and intellectual experience with the work. I want the work to be general enough that the viewer can reflect upon their own experience and come away with something meaningful for himself or herself.