

PLACE

Q&A with Dawn Clements, Cynthia Lin, Gelah Penn, Fran Siegel, and Jonathan Rider

In late summer 2015, *PLACE* began as a series of conversations between me and Gelah Penn about the fluid definition of drawing and how monumental works physically occupy, and, at times, create space. For an exhibition of four large-scale works and one collaborative piece, it felt fitting to have the artists discuss their work in regard to ideas of space and territory, and also in relationship to one another.

As schedules wouldn't allow for an actual conversation, the following epistolary exchange occurred during March and April, 2016.

Jonathan Rider: Before we jump into the exhibition, it'd be great to start with an overview of how you work and what you make. Walk me through your studio practice, your daily routine.

Fran Siegel: I rise at 5 am. Everything is still quiet and I am still in a semi-dream state. During coffee I get started: first sweeping the floor, drawing in a journal, or looking through images of recent travel. I am still in the mindset of Brazil where I recently was for 4 months during a Fulbright.

Gelah Penn: I turn on WNYC and dig in. Probably because both my parents worked when I was a child, I came home every day after school and did my homework in front of the TV. Now, the spoken word seems to provide an even better background buzz for working.

Dawn Clements: I work wherever I am. I have a studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a few blocks away from my apartment. Sometimes I work in the studio, and lately, more often I work at home. Much of my work concerns where I live and other representations of domestic space, and so the work often happens at home in my living space. I travel for work (teaching at RISD and Yale). I try to keep my studio active when I am in transit by drawing on the train, in a room where I lodge. Even when I make large works, I want the work to be portable, and so my work is often folded and somewhat distressed. This is a part of the working process.

Cynthia Lin: I am generally more productive when I have very large blocks of time: 7-12 hours. This allows me to deeply enter a meditative state of mind that is quite separate from the logical, verbal, and analytical thinking necessary in everyday life. When I have shorter blocks of time, I try to do specific technical tasks that require fewer decisions.

JR: Where do you find your source material?

FS: I keep replenishing my ideas and images that involve population movement through cities. Driving around, flying into LAX, global travel, and an imaginary traveling circus inform my work. I photograph, often from a mobile position, so compositions are imperfectly cropped and layered by framed portals (car or airplane window) that I am looking through. The Port of Los Angeles, where I live, is the largest port in the country. Goods are continually being taken off of boats from monstrous cranes and put onto truck or trains. The infrastructure is grand and constantly being rebuilt.

CL: My drawings are based on scans of people who put their face or scar directly on the scanner, but they also have connections to skin and transitional surfaces are made, such as those in landscape—grasses in California, peeling bark on trees, reflections on water, condensation on windows, night skies, etc. Also, I collect images that remind us of the fragility of the earth: retreating glaciers, oil spills, tsunamis, tornadoes, etc. my drawings depict skin as a record of exterior and interior events, and thus metaphors extend to other skins and topographies.

GP: Shadows, metaphorical and actual, in films, fiction and materials. I watch a lot of old movies – particularly film noir, thrillers and melodramas – which form the psychological undertow for my work. The complex, gritty characters, especially the women, and queasy cinematography of film noir are key to the nature of perceptual incident in my work.

I tend to become obsessed with particular materials. At the moment, I'm having a torrid affair with lenticular plastic and plastic garbage bags.

DC: My sources come from my home, from movies, from transportation vehicles, rented rooms and from the street.

JR: Do you work on more than one piece concurrently?

DC: Yes.

FS: One major piece at a time, but I am always tinkering with many other smaller or 3-dimensional works, which I constantly cut and reassemble. My studio is often a sea of particles.

CL: I usually focus on one piece, but others develop along the way. I look at images for a very long time before deciding to draw them, and lately, they undergo many steps of abstraction, which requires even more looking. I strongly believe that time invites multiple interpretations and the longer I look at something the more it changes.

JR: Do you make preparatory sketches?

FS: I consider all my work to be preparatory and in a state of possibility.

GP: Only perfunctory ones. I find that too much preparation makes my process, and the final work, less compelling. Since my natural state seems to be rooted in anxiety and my tendency is to overthink things, it's usually best for me to have a more open-ended notion of where I'm going.

CL: Much of my initial planning is digital – I make abundant variations based on a particular image, so these function as “sketches.” Again, it's important for me to view these “sketches” over a long period of time before proceeding to the large drawing.

JR: Do you feel the term “monumental” is fitting for your work?

CL: Yes, the work is monumental in many ways; I aspire to make the work feel vast – as if one is traversing a landscape, unknown territory, a wondrous and unlimited space.

FS: Yes, but monumental of the handmade. Anti-corporate.

GP: I like the term “monumental” drawing because it lends gravitas to a discipline that's often marginalized. I think it's interesting that a number of women artists are claiming this territory as their own right now and reinvigorating it with tremendous vitality. Of course, we're certainly not the first in this lineage—e.g., Nancy Rubins's tremendous graphite pieces—but we're having a moment.

JR: Large-scale work physically commands and occupies gallery space, which limits (and sometimes focuses) the scope through which the work can be seen. Please speak to how you see your own work in space and how it does/does not play well with other artworks.

FS: In my large *Overland* drawings, I hope to generate an over whelming visual experience. As a woman I feel that it is important to make work that needs to be contended with. I try to push on the format of drawing; the construction is quirky, not rectilinear, and physical gaps engage the wall, so it often does not work well too close to another work--even my own)

GP: I've been trying to bring my installations and works on paper in closer proximity for a while now, both conceptually and materially. Organizing this show allows me the luxury of playing with both, using other artists' work in combination with my own, which is great fun.

DC: I hope that my work occupies a space that encourages thoughtful looking and reading. While it occupies a physical space, I also hope that it invites viewers to take time to read the images that are often derived from fluidly shifting points of view and time-based sources (e.g., film or perusing a space). I cannot speak to how it plays or doesn't play well with other works, it depends on what the works are. My work is often unframed and made of paper, and so sometimes an ephemeral quality makes my work look rough when in the context of crisply framed works. This can be a problem. My black and white works can have strongly contrasting tonal values, and this can overwhelm other surrounding works in close proximity. I've noticed this even when installing solo shows. Bold black and white ink drawings often make my gentler watercolor works disappear.

My piece in *PLACE* probably won't overwhelm at all, if anything, there is some risk of it disappearing. This watercolor work is quite light, gentle in tonal value and color, folded, not square and has a surface that is somewhat distressed.

CL: The scale of my work addresses a relationship to the viewer's body, as well as to architecture. The three-part piece in the show is similar to picture window dimensions. Other works recall doorway dimensions. The effect of these dimensions is that the viewer is positioned to look into a pictured space, but simultaneously, the artwork exists in the actual space and architecture of the viewer. Thus, representational space and actual space are intertwined; the viewer becomes an active participant within the space.

DC: I hope the viewer feels a freedom to visually move across/read the drawing and have an experience with the image and with the physical process of the work's construction. My process of making is slow and close, and I hope the viewer may have a related experience.

JR: Large-scale works tend to envelop a viewer, creating a sometimes intimate space to interact with the work. How do you see a viewer's relationship to your work?

FS: I think of my work as a kind of portable installation. I want the viewing experience to be both intimate and encompassing. Images zoom in and out in scale. For this reason, I have always loved the multi-positions for seeing a Seurat painting. The sense of vast space and perception of the landscape is different on the west coast.

GP: I encourage the viewer to read a piece from any starting point. I think there's a fair amount of visual noise in the work, so I'm happy if the eye jumps from place to place, landing and pausing indiscriminately, enabling a peripatetic, contrapuntal experience. I think that in *Big Serial Polyglot Y*, each segment also conjures a golem-like body part—a new sort of allusion for me.

CL: I aim to envelop the viewer in an intimate space and aspire to create a visceral reaction and an instinctive sense of familiarity or recognition. This intimacy, physicality, and familiarity can intensify contradictory reactions: seduction/repulsion, familiar/strange, intimacy/vastness, factual/enigmatic, etc. I would like to initially engage the viewer with familiar, as well as subconscious reactions, and then lead them to a more complicated, uncomfortable, contradictory place. I think one role of art is to take the viewer to a place they did not know.

JR: There's a site-specificity to the work in terms of its themes, not necessarily related to how/where they're installed. Can you speak to ideas of "site" and "place" in relationship to your work?

FS: My work is about location (usually an urban study) that is then reinserted into an interior site. Because my work is constructed from a multitude of pieces its physical porosity allows architecture and light to interact.

GP: Despite its scale, I think of my work as representing a kind of intimate, abstract, idiosyncratic, interior landscape.

DC: I often remove the human figures from my work in order for the viewer to have a viewing experience that encourages a reading of traveling through a space/place. This "space/place" may be the architecture of a house or the landscape of a tabletop. Rather than having a human figure be an object in the image, I would like the viewer to

be the figure, figuratively entering the space of the image. This is not always so. I do include figures in my works sometimes, and maybe even often. But for the work in this exhibition PLACE, there are no human figures in the works.

CL: Referring to the title of the show, the “place” that is depicted in my work is the skin on the body. But the “site,” as you imply, is the boundary between interior and exterior, between known and unknown, a journey from familiar to foreign territory. Topography is another theme I explore, how it’s formed by interior and exterior forces – earthquakes, rivers, volcanoes, etc. – shaped by trauma/disruption/pressure resolved through time and adaptation.

JR: Speak to your involvement in this particular collaborative artwork. How did you approach this collaboration and walk me through your decision-making process.

FS: In January I began a drawing that I then segmented and mailed to Dawn Clements. I sent along these notes: “The photographic image I began with was taken flying into JFK. In fact, I imagined that it was just over the cemetery where my grandmother is buried. When I was growing up I was always told that she was a suffragette but I am not certain that is true. In any case her name was Jeanette but we called her J and she was tough – once she left my 12 yr. old brother and me alone while my parents were away because I got into an argument with her – I was only 8!” I also love Dawn’s idea of using the film *White Heat*. I have not seen it but have just now ordered it from school. Somehow all these areas on the periphery of cities are so similar. They contain the oil tanks, rail yards, cemeteries and everything else unwanted but still needed.”

DC: I received Fran’s work in a mailing tube and I honestly could not find my way in to add to what she sent me. I thought about some approaches that concerned how I read Fran’s work as landscape, and it reminded me of my experience in the landscape of Los Angeles (particularly the industrial fuel storage tanks in Torrance that I had seen in life and in the film *White Heat*, 1949). With this in mind, I thought of turning to the film *White Heat*, but I just didn’t find a way in. Much of my studio practice involves drawing from observation, and so I decided to make life-sized drawings of Fran’s work in ink and pencil.

CL: Fran began with a digital image of a vast urban topography. Applying hand-drawn marks over cyanotype, she integrated the mechanical and handmade. Dawn copied her image with brush and ink, emphasizing its pattern and structure, while applying a more organic, subjective feel. Further integrating the digital and hand, I collaged fragments of prints of scans of my hand-drawn work, which are based on direct scans of the body. The microscopic views of the body appeared astonishingly similar to the landscape views. Similar patterns, rhythms, gestural movements, and structures were apparent. Thus I used my work to integrate microcosmic/macrocosmic connections. My goal was to construct visual connections between intimate views of the body and vast views of urban landscape. I aspired to create uncanny, illogical connections that only “make sense” in an unconscious, purely visual or tactile way. I tried to create paths that traveled across the known to the haptic and unnamable.

GP: I thought it would be useful to set some broad initial parameters. It was a bit challenging logistically because Fran is in Los Angeles, and the rest of us are based in NYC, with many commitments that involve traveling. So after scrapping an early idea of working on one large drawing, the best solution seemed a kind of sequential collaboration, with each of us working on real estate of approximately two by four feet in any number of fragments of any shape--an “exquisite corpse” paradigm, except that we would each see what had gone before. I wanted this to be a freewheeling process, with each of us engaging and invading each other’s territory in any and every way. The element of surprise in the development of the piece seemed essential, at least for me.

I liked the idea of beginning with Fran because her work deals most broadly and geographically with the notion of place. Then on to Dawn, whose work centers on her physical and metaphysical surroundings. Next to Cynthia, whose concerns are with the body and its discontents. Finally, to me, whose work is perhaps the most raw and interiorized. Bookending the process with Fran and me seemed to make sense, since we also do installation. The final collaborative step was for Jon and me to configure and install all the elements into a big collage in the gallery.

JR: What did you learn about your own practice through the process of collaboration?

GP: I think it reinforced the sense that for me, installation and drawing are virtually always linked. It's energizing to be in the middle of a piece, rather than at the beginning or the end, and with all these wonderful elements made by my cohorts, I was in the middle right from the beginning. It was liberating to work so closely with other artists' work—having the freedom to subsume it into one's own and the reverse, to both collude and invade. This opportunity to incorporate not just the ideas of one's colleagues, but their actual work, was quite heady.

DC: Each time I collaborate with others, I respond to new sources, images and ideas that open and stretch my way of seeing, looking and working.

CL: This project pushed me further into abstraction, subconscious connections, and collage, which were directions that I had already begun to pursue. I was able to take risks and pursue directions that lacked any foreseeable resolution, knowing that Gelah and Jon would approach the work in ways that I could never imagine. I'm using everyone else to teach me how to expand my approach.

JR: Were there hiccups along the way?

GP: Although I'd anticipated a bit more of a conversation in developing the process, that didn't quite materialize. With this group of artists, I shouldn't have been surprised that an extraordinary dialogue happened in the making of the drawing itself. It became very much of a call-and-response. Fran set the baseline and everyone riffed off the previous artists' work in the sequence. By the time the work came to me, there was a substantial topography in place that I could embrace, deconstruct and invade. It was exhilarating.

CL: I was excited by the imagery I was given, but I immediately concluded that I would not be able to work over Fran and Dawn's drawings. Fran's were very dark, and Dawn's were very dense. I knew that collage/interruption/fragmentation would be the best approach. Upon reflection, I now realize that the decision not to insert my hand was a self-imposed rule, perhaps driven by such great respect for their work, and also by my own aesthetic and practical sense. I explored how things can be re-seen, by changing context, scale, and relationship, rather than by directly imposing one's hand on an image. Practically speaking, withholding my personal mark-making allowed me to work faster and to not feel protective of the work after it left my studio. I used the handicap as an incentive for freer experimentation.