

CORRESPONDENCE



SERENDIPITY: WILLIAMS HOUSE

2014-2015

Serendipity: Williams House
Onemo, Virginia

Texts by
Michael Corris
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Airprint Press

Hi Lucy,

I've got a little bug, too. I think I caught it in Miami; or rather, on the plane trip back home, which was very cold . . . could just be that end-of-semester bug when the semester is difficult. but it all worked out in the end.

I looked at Fox and just smiled, since I can really "feel" what's going on there . . . a fragile – not flimsy – diaphanous atmosphere. The environment of the old house matches the works, mostly. I'm not sure about the Secretariat photo, it feels jarring, as if to say "this kind of mechanical reproduction not welcome". Oh, I just realized I misread the painting as a photography and completely missed the caption!!! OK, delete. Start again.

The contrast between sophistication and ruin is, of course, a fashion-photography cliché and, in Britain at least, I can't tell you how many exhibitions I've seen of work sited in abandoned hospitals, mental institutions, and other suitably picturesque, peeling, mouldering, atmosphere-laden buildings. Yet in your FOX, the installation photos are really engaging. I think in one sense, I find the installation photos to be enough, to "be" the "work" . . . if you take the distinction between "object" and "work" seriously: the "object" is the thing, the "work" is everything that it is attached to, its context, your intentions, the history of its making, the means of its having been made.

Thinking further, FOX is a Gesamtkunstwerke. A total artwork. My feeling is that all the photographs should include a window, even if only a partial view. The charm is the tensions between inside and outside. And, of course, having just completed reading T. J. Clark's "Picasso and Truth", the "truth" of the interior as an emblem for Picasso for "what has passed" is stunning. For Clark, this explains why Picasso never painted landscapes and had such a hard time figuring out the difference between "interior" and "exterior" in Guernica. It's a complicated argument, but you can listen to the original lectures that were then expanded and turned into a book, at the National gallery of Art (DC) website, where they have tons of podcasts of lectures, all free.

I digress. To get back to my intuition about the kind of project FOX is, or could be, or is aiming at. It's certainly mediated by photography, which in the installation shots is really strong. Maybe it's the environment providing a lot of visual interest and things to puzzle over. Maybe it's the idea that there is still some life in the concept of the catalogue at all. The catalogue-as-work, rather than simply document, is the oldest Conceptual Art trick in the book. It is the book. So, as an artist's book, a plan seems to emerge in my head. It goes something like this: retain a consistent format, continue to use color as you have, sparingly. Each volume is a project, a different title, same design, different "color". Each project takes place in the space, which is always photographed such that the "works" and the "space" are united (as they are in your current mock-up, for the most part). I'd eliminate captions indicating titles,

dimensions, media of the "art". I'd foster the fiction that the images are the art (that is, all that is visible in each frame IS the work). I'd also leap into the collaborative mind-set and not distinguish your work from Justin's. It's all both of yours, and it doesn't matter who actually fabricated the piece. (At least for this publication project, encourage the fantasy of seamless collaboration, of two-as-one organism, and this is your joint "shell", "cave", "hutch", "foxhole", etc.) Try to do at least a dozen of these, digitally (no need to publish yet), using whatever works you have or will make. As far as I can tell, your work spaces and exhibition spaces have always been integral to your works, so why not make the leap?

So, when artists come to town to hang their show in your space, do the same thing. Here's why I think this works for me and maybe I can persuade you: artist's residencies are often situations, as my friend Mary said, where the sociality is structured around eating and fucking. That's pretty lame, when you think of it. I mean, is that what art has come down to? A thinly-disguised Bohemian-esque romp? Returning to T J Clark and Picasso, the author points out that when Cubism was born, it was meant to be a *momento mori* for the death of the Bohemian life of the 19th century. It was already OLD OLD OLD. Here's where the cliché comes in: artists in formal gowns and tuxedos, posing in the Ochre House. Artists mimicking the Bourgeoisie but not against a backdrop of elegant architecture and lush interiors.

Speaking of lush interiors . . . consider the Ochre House (that's the name of the "ruin", yes?) a home. It's almost like that in the shot of you and Justin "curating". I like it, it is perfectly oblique.

You know about THE FOX, I'm sure. I like FOX. It has no relationship to THE FOX, which is good for all of us!

I've attached something from Ullens Gallery (the place in Beijing where my friend David DIAO will be having his show in September ... he's the artist I mentioned on the phone, whom I've written about in the past and continue to write about). It's Post-Internet and it seems dumb in a way. My new mantra about the internet: Connected & Protected. There, no chance of danger if you like. So much for being "networked".

Don't go to MFA yet ... develop your project and then apply to the best places, based on the work being done there and the money they can give you! You are already doing great work, and if you are not interested to teach, why do it? Be an artist, which is what everyone in our MFA program would like to be. You are already there. You have time.

Bard is good for curating, and I know they do an MFA with the ICP, but I don't know about the other stuff; Mary Walling Blackburn, my colleague, does, she did some teaching there. It sounded interdisciplinary enough . . . sniff it out some more. But don't dislocate yourself just yet. Think clearly and carefully about what you want to get out of it.

If you want to be ready to participate in the PS1 book fair or get

something into printedmatter (NY), then you'll need more than one volume. Here's a thought: you can get individual ones printed really cheaply via FedEx stores or Office Depot ... cheaper than on-line. Just have a nice set, and make the rest print-on-demand or downloadable from your website with PayPal charge. All you need are samples and a few nice posters to make a "stand" at the book fair. Hopefully, it doesn't cost much or anything at all.

I think a minimum of 3 publications, but 6 is better. It can be like a periodical, coming out three or four times per year. People could subscribe, as could libraries in art schools and universities. if this is what you want to do. If you only want to do a few, then OK, but it's something else, and for me, not quite as interesting as immersing yourselves completely in an idea. whatever idea. one needs to move away from the ordinary, the conventional, the usual have-a-show-make-a-catalogue hamster wheel.

I hope this ramble has been fun, perhaps even helpful. It was lovely speaking with you. Send Justin my best and warmest regards. M.

Dear Lucy and Justin,

I am excited about your exhibition called FOX and delighted that you asked me to contribute in the form of a letter.

Lucy, I have had the pleasure of writing about you in public for Glasstire. Among other things, I mentioned your highly articulate thinking about reproduction and creative use of space. You have a studious temperament, one who studies art, not the world. Which is to say that you spare people canvasses about fast food, errands run, and other commercial interests. You seem to be careful of what you learn, probably for the awareness that what you learn is what you know. That seems so basic as to sound ridiculous. But so many of us are indiscriminate about what we learn – celebrity conduct and all that – and the results are cloudy minds. Whereas, Lucy, what you know or what you want to know are the things you draw or paint. By leaning your field, you learn its forms, its edges, and by learning the edges, you feel where exhilaration lies. That is why the art that comes out of your studies, whether it is a long and open look at the work of Gerhard Richter or found photographs, invokes another order of reality – the marvelous.

Here is what I wrote in Glasstire about your piece titled "Richter Painting":

"Richter Painting" considers two Gerhard Richter paintings that were reproduced from photographs, Woman Descending the Staircase and Nude on a Staircase. Kirkman found the paintings reproduced in a book at the Dallas Museum of Art library. She photocopied the page with the Richter images and then painted a reproduction of that photocopy. Rather than degenerate, the women in these images keep their power throughout the process. One wears a glamorous gown; the other is beautifully pure. They are like two aspects of an archetypal image: a goddess descending into the plaza to deliver news to the people.

And this was my response to a couple of the Ghost Paintings you showed me, which further illustrates my thinking about the "marvelous" reality you get to in your work.

The woman in the center picture – her bare legs standing lightly on the ground, her tight top, loose hair – she is an All-American beauty. Even though we don't see her clearly for the distance and strength of the sun, we can just tell. I love the mysterious narratives this situation invites. Her gaze directed at something out of frame to the right and the viewer's vantage above her – the viewer cast as some voyeur that can only relate to beauty from the prideful, private distance offered by an upstairs window. Whatever the woman sees, it has stopped her for a moment. But it doesn't seem to have startled her. Whatever it is, she gives it an open look. And the growing thing she has paused beside is strange – something right out of the wilderness sprung up in this clearing. It is right upon her, but doesn't seem to menace her. It's presence lends her the authority of a vegetation goddess.

The strangeness of coastal trees is quite pronounced in the third picture – an infernal quality about the fanning limbs–wild fecundity spreading wildly. And this woman, too, seems a vegetation goddess figure. Perhaps the young woman in the second picture is someone like Persephone, a beauty in the clearing so self-contained in nature, so tempting and exposed with wild innocence that even Hades rushed to put a claim on her. The woman in the third picture is more like a Demeter figure. She has the shape of an earth-mother, and the strange power of the trees behind her reinforces this sense of dominion. And she's a bit like the character Flannery O'Connor describes – Mrs. Shortly from "The Displaced Person." O'Connor makes the character a historical symbol: " Her arms were folded as she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was."

Justin, I haven't had the pleasure of writing publicly about you before today. And maybe this letter, to be published in the book about the FOX exhibition, isn't the right start. I'm probably relying too much on something I just read, two pieces by Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" and "Portraits and Repetitions." Stein's idea was that one can see better from the periphery than from the center, and it is the same idea I think you've taken up in your work. The way I see it, a subversive temperament is the predicate of your gifts as an artist. I'm not talking about an outlaw temperament or a jokester temperament. By subversive temperament, I mean that what it is that drives your thinking – or, rather, what it is that seems to me to drive your thinking – is the search beneath the status quo for some oddity that can be exploited, pushed out or pulled in, as a way to bend perceptions and shape the world into fresh apprehensions. The art is just a minute's glimpse, as any artwork is, but the effect that is meant to take hold in the viewer's mind is some instruction to alter and deepen alignments of ordinary time and to acknowledge the elasticity of space between objects, the forms of objects, and their meanings – a way to imbue intense imagination into experience. Just as Stein believed poetry protects language from serving any master, Justin it seems that you believe art protects symbolic thinking about objects from serving any master. Your work exhorts the viewer to trust and embrace peripheral and subversive points of view.

One wears of the fuss so many contemporary artists raise in response to the art market. I'm grateful that the two of you have larger ideas. The market is outrageous and certainly not an indication of quality. The idea of worth and utility is not fixed by media at the service of the art market. Rather, it is an idea that is continuously developing. Time is a leveling experience, in that it will eventually reveal everything. "Of the moment" in art really doesn't mean very much. As the ancient Romans used to say, "Art is long." A deep look toward a lasting view is an attitude that will come out on top over fashion – in good time. That is not to say art is better when it considers wide, cosmological problems. An artist can take a deep and lasting look at the people in his or her life, the immediate landscape, or the ideas in other art works or in books he or she values.

Here is how Robert Creeley put it in 1961 in "A Note About The Local:"

The local is not a place but a place in a given man – what part of it he has been compelled or else brought by love to give witness to in his own mind. And that is THE form, that is, the whole thing, as whole as it can get.

I think we will be fools to be embarrassed by it.

The local is an environment of prodigious dimensions for the artist. Like a fox, an artist may put a mark on particular territory, but then may choose to range far. An artist, like a fox, adapts to locations very quickly. And so the idea of the local is like the idea of worth, it continues to develop. And while the fox has different aspects in folklore and mythology, it remains a very real and resilient thing, and so long as it continues to exist, continues to reproduce and increase its range, then what has been imagined about it before not only ought to be respected but also reinterpreted and made new. I'm talking about adding to that vibrant line that connects old negotiations with the world to new ones.

The art market, unlike a fox, is not a real thing and it never was. Nor is there a lasting mental image for it, unlike the lasting mental images from folklore and myth. The only relationship possible with the art market is an ironic relationship. And any relationship that invokes irony is second rate. The better way for the artist is an honest approach to the materials at hand. It is a way of honoring the sense of reflexivity that develops when an artist wears the struggle of manipulating these materials on one's sleeve. And a way to celebrate the sense of grace that radiates out of triumph for a mastery of these materials.

The work that you are both up to describes complicated thinking about the mind's relationship with images and objects. You choose projects with other artists that move viewers to think differently about whatever the eye encounters. That is why I am excited about FOX being a collaborative exhibition. Collaboration is not group-think, but rather the collective input of individuals acting as individuals. You both celebrate the finest sense of artists in collaboration, and the fox is an excellent image for this type of agreement. An animal that can be a homebody or itinerant. One that can range with a unit or range alone. One freighted with psychological meanings for its different roles in folklore and mythology.

Like I say, I'm grateful to have been asked to participate in this exhibition in the form of a correspondence. Any true correspondence ought to reveal something personal, and so I'll tell on myself for a moment. My modes are poetry and filmmaking. I've been having a terrific time lately celebrating the confluence of charged language and moving pictures. Recently I got an email from a new media festival in the Northeast. The organizer of this event wanted to know how I thought audiences might interface with my work. Wanting to get some of my films into the festival, I made something up and used that word "interface" several times. Honestly, it never occurred

to me how an audience might interface with the work. Soon after answering the festival organizer's email, I had the realization that interfacing is not one of my intentions. Interface sounds too much like interruption. I know this probably seems unsympathetic, but I don't want the art work to be interrupted by the viewer. I want the viewer to take a look for a minute. A silent look. I want the viewer to let the films (which are very modest in length) unfold like an expression or a question unfolds. Let it come to the end of what it needs to say or ask without interjecting opinions or allowing distractions. Yes, selfishness plays into my intentions, but I suppose it has to. There also has to be reason for a viewer to pay attention. And so gratitude, in anticipation of that attention, is an attitude that has to be apparent in the work. So much about the work I'm doing is a reflection of gratitude for the lasting and odd mysteries in people and landscapes that flame out to me as subjects. And so does the feeling of gratitude that someone at some time will view my arrangement of these mysteries, made out of the materials I had at hand, and give that arrangement and honest and open look. I look at gratitude as being big medicine. The work, for me, is a form of prayer. Public prayer. Sometimes outlandish, funny, and erotic prayer. Gratitude has many forms, and I know there is no know way that I'll ever get to them all. But it is my errand to express as many forms of as I can get to. That is why I regretsituations when I allow enterprising intentions to take over my ambitions. And why I regret the use of marketplace terms like they're passwords into venues for my work. These are gross distractions that take away from my thankfulness for a wonderful gift. Wonderful, but also complicated and attractive to trouble. The gift of being able to see and say what isn't obvious. The gift of an inclination to be an artist.

That said, I move on now to three poems I'm proud to share for this exhibition. I hope you will like them. Wishing you all the very best,

Richard

FOX AND THE FALL OF THE REBEL ANGELS

Fox, not being one
to insert and erase herself
in grand designs all day,
awaits her next instinct.
In the clearing of a forest
she sees a fool.
He's got an act of balancing
what looks like five
prehistoric vertebrae
on the ridge of his forehead.
He says he's playing
very hard to get today,
playing very hard to get.
At the border of the forest
and the road, she watches
two highway shapes
come forward-fast-
and pass in a roar,
willfully blind to the evil luck
of fatigued asphalt.
The racers disappear behind a swell
and as she pads onto the road,
she feels tires scrape,
the terrible impact and the roll.
And there-blades of flame
flash above the hill,
almost disappearing
in the glare of white sunlight.
Far away from wreck
and fool, fox at her base
of roots on a ruined tree.
One paw out slowly,
and slowly with tongue over fur,
as though tending her thigh in a dream.

SOME SCIENCE A FOX TOLD ME

Entropy is a species of angel
fluttering over hot coffee and flashlight batteries,
flapping their wings that these items go cool.
Heat is the covenant between sun and stone.
Angels leave this pattern alone for fear of exhaustion.

THE LESS THAN TRUE FRIENDSHIP OF THE GROUND AND THE SKY

A fox rolled a rock a hundred miles
from its mound of scree by order of a cloud,
who enjoyed games of interrogation.
Deprived of its kind, cloud thought rock
would reveal some things.
But stone was stone and kept silent.
Cloud threw down hail and lightning,
but rock never revealed its inner cargo.
Cloud obsessed for too long
and failed to migrate.
It yelped when the sun took it in its mandibles
and died in slow pieces in the sky.

To Lucy and Justin:

Last night I was looking through a box on my desk, a catchall holding all sorts of little things that I don't know where to put, so into the box they go. There, amid a few old ticket stubs and a long since outdated subway token, was the slide you gave me when we went to the National Gallery last fall. I like old slides. Viewing a slide is such an immediate experience. The moment I picked up that slide, I remembered the last time I had looked at it. We were at the National Gallery. It must have been mid-afternoon. We were ready to take a break, but not ready to leave the museum. Then there we were, acting out a little bit of tomfoolery, each in turn holding the slide ten, twelve inches in front of our face, positioning it to catch the light of the skylight. After taking a glance at the penciled notation on the cardboard mount - "National Gallery, East Sculpture Hall with the Clodion Urns" - I stepped backwards until I was standing in the spot where the photographer who took the photo had stood when the shutter clicked. Its a silly game, I know, placing oneself in the spot where someone else stood so long ago, but so be it. I passed the slide to one of you and stepped aside, pointing to the black marble pavement where I had just stood.



When I picked up the slide again last night, its image looked different. Weaker, less brilliant, the light of the streetlight across the way dim compared to the clear illumination pouring forth on a bright autumn afternoon. Dim or not, the glimpse of that square of film was transportive, making me think of the places we have stood and looked at art together. For the better part of a decade now, we have been going to museums, first weekly trips to the Metropolitan Museum, then excursions to collections in whatever city we could arrange to meet in, such as last fall's rendez-vous at the National Gallery. There were the months spent scouring New York for all the work we could find by Manet, Courbet, and their cohorts - the Spanish guitar player, a wisp of smoke trailing off the roach he has dropped on the ground between his legs, and The Woman in the Waves, her raised arms revealing tufts of hair, her breast a beacon to that speck of a ship on the horizon. And the time spent wandering the Louvre together, the Richelieu Wing, in particular, looking at French sculpture. In one particularly clear recollection, Joan of Arc looms overhead, holding her hand to her stony ear. We sat on a bench below, paying little heed to her divine summons. And, more recently, a muggy Texas afternoon, standing at the bottom of Ima Hogg's garden, watching a black and red ant scurry over the roots at the base of a tree.

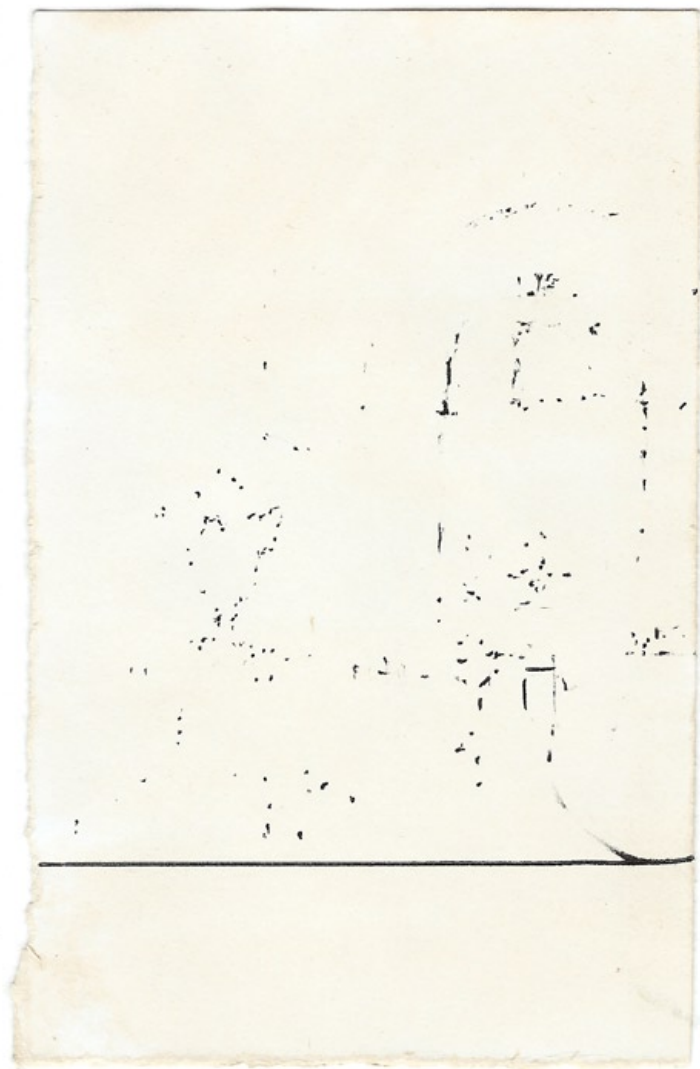
I have a second aide-memoire in front of me, this one on a postcard, not a slide. On its front, Manet's nanny sits on a low wall overlooking a train yard. She holds a dozing puppy and a book, her fingers interleaved in its pages. A little girl stands beside the nanny, her back to the viewer, looking at the steam rising off the engines on the tracks below. The steam dissipates into the air, but even so, the painting

has a caged feeling about it. The girl grasps a wrought iron fence that runs across the canvas, an even cadence from one end to the other. This postcard of Manet's Gare Saint-Lazare stands in for the real thing: when we were at the National Gallery a few months back, we were eager to see the painting. After entering several galleries, each time expecting to be faced with the au pair's deadpan gaze, we came to realize that the painting was not on view. It was fine, though, not seeing the Manet. Disappointment cannot last long in such an environment. Then a few weeks later, while going through a stack of postcards that had been accumulating on my desk, I came across a reproduction of the painting. I promptly addressed it to Bavon, VA, and put it in the mail. Postcards are my preferred means of communication – no words, though, no message, just a pretty picture on one side and the address and postage on the other. A week or so after sending the postcard, a most remarkable card arrived in my mailbox, the latest in a series of drawings you, Lucy, have been sending me for some time now, postcard-size drawings of the images on the face of the very postcards I have been sending you. A Degas washerwoman, one of Stubbs's thoroughbreds, two Renaissance lovers strolling arm-in-arm, each loosely drawn and scattered with touches of watercolor. The drawing shows the reverse of the most recent postcard I had sent you, the Manet Railway. On the left of the card, your facsimile of my handwriting spelling out the mailing address in Bavon, done with an accuracy that would cause a forger to do a double take. On the right, three stamps sketched in watercolor – Hopper's nighthawks lost in their reverie, a magenta portrait of St. Gaudens, and a smudgey green man, his identity lost. At the top of the card a few finely limed lines of letters identify the painting. Most remarkable of all, however, is the palisade of brown, black, and neon orange marks running across the bottom of the card: the postal meter mark from the original card, now rendered by hand. These postcards back and forth, printed sent, drawn returned, are an eloquent repartee, with the latest card, the drawing of the reverse of the Manet postcard, the clincher that changes the game altogether.

A decade of looking at art together – that makes for lot of shared experiences, be they pleasures, challenges, or ennui. I enjoy the seriousness you two bring to the act of looking, the dedication you give it. It is difficult to look at something, to really look. And it is tiring, too. But look you do, carefully, diligently, with an open mind and an ecumenical eye. I see this care, this attentiveness, in your work, be it your paintings after plates torn from art books, Lucy (was there ever a more shameless dis-memberer of books than you?), or your strings of letters and punctuation, Justin, that coalesce to form an image with the liminal flux of a Seurat drawing. But enough of such grand phrases. Instead, one more reminiscence, then that's it. Another Texas afternoon, this one at the Menil Collection. We were looking at a show of contemporary painting, muted colors, thin brushwork, prosaic subjects. Politeness only goes so far, then it is time to speak one's mind, albeit quietly. I overheard the two of you discussing the sloppiness with which the canvases were stretched. The folds were not

aligned with the corners of the stretcher, making for ugly gathers where there should have been inconspicuous pleats. It was civil criticism, but decided, just the kind of observation that comes from looking at art long and hard with a careful, attentive eye.

Michael Dorsch



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Serendipity: Williams House
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Correspondence

Texts by
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Fox

Works by
Justin Hunter Allen
Lucy Kirkman Allen

Eagle or Hawk

Text and works by
Travis Iurato

Twilight Time

Text and works by
Joe Allen

Fullmoon Mysticism

Text and works by
Philip Hinge

4 Winds

Text by
V. B. Bandjunis
Works by
Cynthia Bandjunis

Royal Waves

Works by
Kelly Kroener
Eli Walker

Stranger States, No Longer Real

Works by
Makiko Nagaya
Peter Lewis