

SWOON

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The advantage of being an artist is that the process of becoming is manifest in creative output. As an artist, and as an individual, Swoon is changing, evolving. Her projects are growing both in scale and impact. First recognized as a street artist for her signature wheatpaste print and paper cutout portraits, Swoon later organized a flotilla of jerry-built boats that floated down the Mississippi River (2006), the Hudson River (2008), and into the Venice Biennial (2009). Responding to the earthquakes in Haiti, Swoon instigated the Konbit Shelter Project, which offers a sustainable housing solution to an environment in dire need. Most recently, Swoon has been to Kenya, where she strove to bring some sort of reckoning, and possibly even healing, to the endemic assault on African women. I spoke with Swoon by phone in Boston, where she had caught a few rare hours with nothing to do before she was heading out to work with teenagers at the Institute of Contemporary Art.



Adam Falik: If I were to enter into your studio now, what would I see?

Swoon: Right now I am working on a carving that is a new print. I just got back from Kenya working with a group called the Equality Effect. There is an epidemic of rape against women and children going on in Kenya. This organization is taking on the problem at different cultural levels. They do everything from rescue women from unsafe situations, to take on the legal system. I teamed up with them to spend a week with the girls.

AF: What exactly did you do?

SWOON: They have a sort of rescue house for girls who can't go back home yet, so I took two of [Equality Effect's] collaborators and we went and did drawing and singing and dancing. A sort of art therapy week. I'm making a portrait of a couple of the girls and incorporating a lot of their drawings.

AF: Are you becoming more interested in art as activism?

SWOON: What has happened is that the rest of the world is starting to recognize my intention, meaning to understand me as that kind of artist. It's been a process of me having the feeling that I've wanted to impact the world for the better through art-making, but really not knowing how to do it.

When I first started making street art, and then when I built the series of rafts, I remember having this feeling that I wanted to create something that was positively impactful, but there was also a lot of doubt whether this was the way. I wanted to go deeper, to create models for social change while making artwork. But I'm an artist and I don't have a lot of training in social work or in activism or in aid work. The Haiti project was a little bit brave to think we could take something like this on. And there

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were definitely people who thought, “What the hell are you doing here? You’re not in an aid NGO.” We found that that ended up being our strength because we were able to build a close bond with the village and be able to start building while almost all the other NGOs were still stuck in limbo. Because we were a small group of people, [we] were able to work in our own way.



left: Konbit in progress, right: Konbit completed

AF: You started out with changing the physical environment, engaging architecture and communities; now you’re engaging the lives of individuals, not just the landscape.

SWOON: And of course myself. The thing that felt really urgent to me was to understand about human survival. Whether it’s psychological survival or physical survival. I think the projects that are purely sort of fantastical and artistic, there’s a kind of survival of a certain part of our imagination and our psyche; and then getting into these other sort of projects, like home building, it’s about what it takes to keep us safe.

AF: Do you feel that art is the best way to engage? Do you think the arts can pick up where governments are failing?

SWOON: I think that people can pick up where governments are failing. I always know that if I’m going to do that thing, I have to do it from my place of strength, which is as an artist. So even if it seems a point of departure — like now I’m interested in sustainable home building — I take that interest and bring it back to my core and say, okay, I’m artist, I come from an artist community, I support myself as an artist, I think like an artist, how do I achieve something unique [without losing] that sense of who I am?

AF: When I look at your wheatpaste prints, which are exposed to and ultimately destroyed by the elements, I think about you taking on concepts of impermanence. When you’re building homes in Haiti or working with women in Africa, do you feel as if you’re moving away from impermanence?

SWOON: It’s not that I’m moving away from impermanence, it’s that I’m also taking on permanence. Like the project I’m working on in New Orleans, the musical house. [The Music Box, which premiered during Prospect.2, was the first phase of Dithyrambalina, an interactive home composed of musical instruments.] If we succeed, it’ll be a permanent structure, a landmark in New Orleans. I’m also working with a collective in Braddock, Pennsylvania, called Transformazium. We own an old abandoned Lutheran church, and a parking lot that we’ve pulled up all the pavement from and started building a farm. Between working in Haiti and working in New Orleans and working in Braddock, I now have these three lifelong projects.

AF: Have you come to any firm conclusions about how we live and how we engage urban settings?

SWOON: I wish I could say that. It’s more like I remain convinced of the same thing that I was convinced of at the beginning: that we need more participatory urban environments where people will feel creatively stimulated and feel that they can participate creatively. Settings in which they can connect with each other and things to connect with each other about. Like the musical house. I was having a conversation last night about Trayvon Martin, the teenager that was just killed in Florida. I think one of the reasons that story has struck a chord for so many people is that beyond the issues of race, and what it means to be a black teenager in that area, is people simply being afraid of each other. If you’re out walking, you’re a threat. Artists working publicly work towards getting people more

connected with each other in our public spaces.

“ARTISTS WORKING PUBLICLY WORK TOWARDS GETTING PEOPLE MORE CONNECTED WITH EACH OTHER IN OUR PUBLIC SPACES”

AF: The flotillas had a Mark Twainish feeling, and your wheatpaste portraits have a somewhat folk quality to them. Do you think we need an innocent eye to look at things afresh?

SWOON: I think it's about a do-it-yourselfness. Cutting paper and making block prints and putting them up outside, or building a boat out of wood that you found at a construction site and taking it to a river with a motor found in a car ... it's about reaching for the material you can find at hand and doing what you can with it. It's about participation. It's about not letting resource scarcity stop you because there's enough waste in this society to make anything out of. It's about not letting a lack of skills stop you because you can always learn.

AF: The street artist works mostly alone, gets in and gets out quick, but as your projects have grown in scale, they've involved collaborations and collectives.

SWOON: I started working collaboratively when I wanted to cover up all the billboards down this huge stretch of avenue [in Brooklyn] all in one day. I thought I could just cover them with my own paintings, but that would just seem egomaniacal and crazy. But to get together a group of people and all do it together would be like a community participating in its environment. It's such a powerful force, the feeling of camaraderie, seeing what people are able to achieve when they work together. It's what has often attracted me to working collectively.

AF: Do you have a collective you work with exclusively?

SWOON: There's a community of artists that's pretty scattered yet all kind of know each other and everyone refers everyone to everyone else. It's something that has nothing to do with me, but that I'm able to tap into. So I don't have a specific collective, but I am part of a larger artist community that I can call upon and that call upon me.

AF: This article is part of a “Women in Art” issue. Do you feel it's still important to designate art by gender? It is important to you to have your success as an artist also measured by being a woman?

SWOON: I move towards a greater equality. People don't want to be tokenized. On the other hand, I'm not afraid to discuss it. I think an issue on women artists is great, just as much as I think that there's many



Cairo 4, Paris, 2010

different ways to slice a cake and look at the picture. I was recently listening to Toni Morrison talk and she said she didn't feel tokenized by claiming her place as a black woman writer because she felt that the title of being a black woman writer is broad and infinite. While there is a lot more equality in the arts right now, there is room for that to grow and change. If you look at the prices that women's works sell for versus men's works, and you look at the percentages of women in major institutional collections, any of those sort of factors that show the position of gender in this larger settings, I think there's work to be done. So I don't mind having it acknowledged that there is a certain voice to be

heard.

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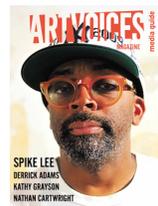
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