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Snelling and Diaz: Building toward the Future

written by Victoria Wolfe

This past Spring at the Chicago Contemporary & Classic art fair, Brown Bag Contemporary sponsored a collaborative project that can claim a unique spot in the annals of art-making as performance. In an effort to de-mystify the creative process, Tracey Snelling and Salvador Diaz gave art lovers an important look-see at what happens behind the scenes when artist work alone in the studio. Most interesting about the collaboration is that these two exceptional talents come from very different personal histories, use diametrically opposed studio methods, and generally work with differing media. Also significant, Snelling and Diaz managed to discover each other and form a long distance professional friendship that culminated in creating art together, and then they sent their work into the future: two mixed media pieces, one tabletop structure and one wall work. Yet most compelling is that the images they chose to create together carry tremendous symbolic weight. The entire Brown Bag installation at CC&C, including each artist's solo installation and their art collaboration, worked out issues and images of nostalgia and change in urban architecture. Snelling and Diaz created mixed media building projects full of sentimentality, references to classic and contemporary art, and insertion of new media whirligigs that in our postmodern world resonate heartily with the collective unconscious. These charming structures, quirky, personal and full of nostalgia, show a thematic concern that is...well... monumental.

Tracey Snelling solo installation, "The City" and Salvador Diaz structure, entitled "We Moved" flanked the exhibition space. In "We Moved," Diaz installed a faux

storefront complete with showcase front window across which he painted the words “We Moved” in blood red color. Behind this ad hoc commercial frame, Diaz hung 48 paintings on newspaper, iconic images loaded with personal reference. Diaz is an oil painter with the facility and poise of a European master. He generally works on canvas and linen, but has a recent line that is all on newspaper, yet his traditional bent is still in evidence, even when executed with a playful twist. Tracey Snelling tells how she fell for his work on first sight. “I originally saw a painting of Salvador’s at Art Chicago a few years ago. It was a young boy dressed for Halloween, and it was painted with a lush and rich quality that made the image sentimental and disturbing. It had an edge. That’s when I knew that this was the work of an amazing painter and I set out to form a friendship with him.” The long distance between the Mexican hilltops of Monterrey and the California urban landscape of Oakland was bridged with professional mutual admiration.

Diaz moved to Monterrey when he was eight, a lucky survivor of a disastrous earthquake that claimed the lives of 20,000 people and left 90,000 homeless in his city of birth, Tlatelolco. That part of Mexico City has a vivid history of upheaval and tragedy. During Aztec rule, Tlatelolco was a hub of commerce grander in scale than Venice or Constantinople. However, Cortes laid siege, following years of bloody battle, ultimately murdering over 40,000 Aztec men, women and children in their last stand in Tlatelolco, during the summer of 1521. Centuries later in October of 1968, again thousands died, when unarmed students and unlucky bystanders were sprayed with bullets by Mexican police during a political protest. Architecture from Aztec times, Spanish colonialism and modern commerce and apartments stand side-by-side in the city where he was born, and

he agrees that this constant reminder of death and renewal informs his own work. Since 1985, Diaz has lived in Monterrey, which is a more industrial and modern city, full of a contemporary architecture that to an artist who has witnessed so much upheaval, must seem merely temporary. The words “We Moved” painted in red across the storefront window are what Diaz considers most important in his installation, and for good reason. The images behind the façade include faces, memories, snippets from childhood, all painted in oil on newspaper.

Steven Turner, Director of Brown Bag Contemporary, pinpoints Diaz’s distinctive style. “Salvador will paint elegant, very realistic work on canvas or linen. When, on newspapers, he will create raw and rough images. When you see his paintings in person, regardless of medium, they hit you with a power and sense of realization that allow only for one conclusion: This work was made by Salvador Diaz.”

Diaz explains he started painting on newspaper out of financial necessity, but then developed a passion for it. “I’d been collecting newspaper clippings and I knew at the same time the works by Alfredo Ramos Martinez, Mathias Goeritz, and Willem de Kooning who all used newspapers,” Diaz explains. “They had pieces that were over thirty years old and are well conserved. So I started using newspapers in 1998 and never stopped. I enjoy it a lot, as an artist, using newspaper allows me to have a conversation with the world. I make the selection of the news that I want to keep and want to ignore but a sense of randomness always exists. Newsprint is more than just a medium for my art, it is by itself information that is sometimes funny, other times serious or cruel.”

Snelling's solo installation for Brown Bag Contemporary, which she called "The City," stands 10' tall, stretches 10' wide and runs 8' deep, and is comprised of four separate components: Downtown, Another Alley, Seedy, and The City Never Sleeps. It is a series of old brownstones and industrial buildings, reminiscent of the older outskirts of Brooklyn, NY. Her choice of an urban landscape is a natural progression from her oeuvre of photos and mixed media sculpture capturing small town Americana, Snelling might be considered a postmodernist, as she mix-matches new media techniques with old school construction work, using a photo or a memory as a model for dioramic sculpture, which she then photographs in context. Often exhibiting the handmade structure alongside its inspirational image and its ultimate reconstructed photograph, Snelling forces the viewer to question where is the illusion and where reality. Once again, in her exhibition "The City," she shows art that is both playful and haunting. Her subjects are drawn from B movie references and long trips across country on family camping trips. "I spent a lot of time looking at the scenery, hours in the camper creating art out of whatever was around. I also read the paperbacks my folks had finished and discarded. I distinctly remember reading "the Shining" all the way through," Snelling explains with a laugh. "When I worked with the California Conservation Corps and then after that as a firefighter with the US Forest Service, I just got to see lots of interesting landscapes and places. It's all in there in the work. That formed a lot of my original vision, you might say."

"The City" sports flashy signage, collage effects and hardcore construction: all easily within the artist's range of materials. A point of interest in her work overall is her

use of words and fuller phrases to reveal a lonely film noir reality. Diaz was attracted to Snelling's taste for the darker side. He explains, "I'm attracted to the urban subject matter in her work and the personality of the places by themselves -- there is a hard silence, a solitude in these remote places that she imagines, and you can fill in the empty space with memories. When I look at a work by Tracey, I feel like a giant poised in an undetermined location, watching from a removed perspective and trying to understand the life of someone else."

According to Steven Turner, Brown Bag has wanted to put together a Snelling-Diaz collaborative project, but wanted the right venue for it. "Tracey and Salvador have been talking about a collaboration for some time, but they both keep very busy independent schedules. The collaboration idea arose simultaneously, when Tracey and I were discussing certain developments surrounding the Chicago Contemporary & Classic Show. We decided that the Navy Pier would be the ideal locale for this installation: the organization and atmosphere of the event was conducive what we were proposing, and the conditions were such that it provided the visitors with a level of comfort and relaxation. Onlookers could enjoy and experience the art work on display with minimal distractions. And needless to say, the organizer of the event, Ilana Vardy, is also someone that I knew I could trust with this sort of project. She performed exceptionally. Ilana gave Brown Bag every resource needed, which allowed the artists to focus only on their work."

All of the ingredients were in place for a positive collaboration, and the resulting art pieces were created in full view center stage in the exhibition space. Snelling and Diaz produced two pieces together, a tabletop construction and a wall hanging. They had decided ahead of time which materials they would need and discussed generally how they would work, but they decided to leave the process to whatever occurred spontaneously between them on site throughout the four days of the fair. They each started one of the two collaborative pieces and alternated working on their own and adding to other's creation, continuously developing the two pieces. They created separate work spaces, sharing only a table, each maintaining their separate area in the manner most comfortable to their habits. As it turned out, their work styles couldn't be more different, and the dialectic of style was at times amusing and sometimes challenging, but never a source of disagreement.

“In his studio, Salvador works under immaculate conditions, a stark contrast to Tracey.” Steven Turner found the contradiction fun but baffling. “I tried to maintain a good working environment for each artist, out of respect for their personal space. As they handed their respective pieces back and forth, it was interesting to see how each treated the other's object.” Diaz initiated the wall work, a piece that is 66” tall x 32” wide x 6” deep entitled “The Greatest Moments” after a headline on newsprint selected for its thematic relation to their project. Diaz painted the first parts of the piece with oils, and then passed the piece to Snelling. “It was a different experience from my usual solo work, because my side was clean just with the newspaper, oil painting tubs, paint brushes, and knife painting,” Diaz reflected. “Tracey used a lot more materials and tools. I put three Chicago newspapers together vertically to create the building image that I

chose from news about a fire. The title came from something I read on top of the other newspaper, the text is "The Greatest Moments" and in lettering that is of the same sort of old design as the neon lights that Tracey used. Tracey made two pieces to integrate as part of the building with neon lights and stickers on the newspaper. That is how the wall piece evolved."

Snelling initiated the second collaborative piece, a tabletop construction, calling it "Yes or No." Depending on whom you ask, Turner, Diaz and Snelling say that this is a building that could be a motel or a brownstone apartment building, or perhaps just an old city building that remains undefined. Snelling remembers covering the first part of the structure with lightweight spackle, "but then I had to wait for it to dry, so in the meanwhile I walked to the pier to scrounge some extra wood from the union guys and used that to start building the other buildings that would attach to the wall with the newspapers. My part seemed to take much longer -- we had to wait for the spackle to dry, then it needed to be sanded, then bricks were carved in and painted. The work is time consuming." Snelling then added a small TV to the tabletop piece. "Salvador painted a mural on the side of it, and he also added smears and drops of paint to the whole building, to make it look old and painterly I put in a small handheld TV behind one window," Snelling drew a picture with her fingers. "We would play whatever station we could find. The commercials didn't work too well. I liked the Spanish soap operas best." Diaz concurs. "On "Yes or No" I painted graffiti on one side of the building, and two murals on its walls. One of the murals is the image of the limited edition card or poster where she made a digital intervention on an oil on newspaper that I made. It is based on a detail of Vermeer's painting. As a result I remembered an idea of the documentary movie directed by Agnes Varda, "The Glaneurs and I." Diaz was inspired by the free

association that was generated working with an artist he admires.

Turner summarized the collaboration of the two talented artists with an anecdote that he says he will always cherish. “Tracey works in a very free form fashion, while Salvador is meticulous from the start, taking his time, and executing his work in a very deliberate fashion. It might take Tracey ten minutes to create a wooden structure, and cover it with plaster, during which the wood dust and plaster goop is flying all over, not just in the work area, but all over her, and sometimes onto the observers. Salvador, on the other hand, might take ten minutes to sand one wall on the tabletop structure, holding it at a fully-extended arm’s length, carefully rubbing the sandpaper in only a downward direction to keep the dust from dispersing throughout the work area.”

Diaz and Snelling both report feeling enriched and expanded from the experience. Snelling says she learned from her collaborator’s facility with paint. “I saw how effortlessly Salvador paints. After we finished working together, he started a new image on a newspaper with an evident Italian theme – before my eyes, I watched as he recreated DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa*, but in the first stages of it, she seemed to be balding and a man! Eventually Salvador added some hair on top, and there she was, *Mona Lisa*. I still wonder if he changed his mind midway through or if he switched it all around to amuse himself. The process fascinated me.”

Diaz’s memory of the collaboration is full of warm feeling. “I did learn from the collaboration in Chicago... How can I explain it? Imagine that I am in my house where I have been living my entire life and suddenly I find doors that I never have used before

and windows that I have never seen before. And I know that I can trust to use them because of the quality of person who used her creativity and vision in building them. After collaborating with Tracey, I changed the feeling of nervousness for certainty. It was a very good experience.” Snelling wants more. “I would like to collaborate in other ways, too, with Salvador. He sent me small paintings on newspaper a year or so ago. I plan to incorporate these into a sculpture at some point. I want to send him a raw, unfinished building, so he can paint it. This would be a long distance collaboration.”

Collaboration on-site at an art fair in full public view can only be called performance art. Since artists are one of our last resources for a moral conscience, one has to look more closely at a project where two creative minds engage together. Even more intriguing in this case, Diaz and Snelling made collaborative art with participation of onlookers who influence the collaboration with their presence. So then what did Diaz and Snelling bring forth? Art that comments on our urban life, imaginary buildings that celebrate eras past, full of headlines, neon lights, a assorted mini drama. One can peak in a window or read some newsprint to learn more, and there is so much to do with each of these collaborative pieces. Perhaps these are the quintessential buildings ‘of choice,’ as labeled “Yes or No.”

In September 2001, one week following the destruction of the Twin Towers, Paul Goldberger wrote a piece for the New Yorker that he called “Building Plans.” In it he reminds us that before the invention of the passenger elevator in the mid-nineteenth century, the urban horizon was dominated by church steeples, and that for urban planners

working post-September 11th, bigger is no longer better. Hired to redesign the World Trade Center complex just months before the terrorist attack, architect David Childs says that clients represented by his prestigious firm, Skidmore Owings and Merrill, no longer request buildings that might someday become visible symbols. “Not so iconic and not so tall,” Childs muses.

Ultimately, the buildings that hold the most meaning for any society and especially so in our current urban landscape are those that connect in an important and basic way with everyday life. Salvador Diaz and Tracey Snelling, artists from very different hometowns, created symbols of urban life in the midst of the crossroads of commerce and creativity, at a contemporary art fair in an old and revered metropolis, Chicago. Throughout the four days of the fair, Brown Bag Contemporary sold a limited edition collaborative print by Snelling & Diaz at an affordable \$20, low cost by art fair standards. Anyone who purchased a print was automatically entered into drawing for the collaborative pieces, and “Yes or No” and “The Greatest Moments” were raffled off at the close of the show. When all was finished, everyone in attendance -- artists, collectors, gallerists, innocent bystanders – packed up their belongings and headed home, back to everyday life.

When asked what comes to mind now when looking at photos of the event, Steven Turner answered “Nice to have a successful conclusion to the event, spend some time decompressing, get ready for the next show, and archive the Chicago Contemporary & Classic 2005 project, until I need it again.” Artists and gallerists returned to everyday life, but the buildings Snelling and Diaz constructed at CC&C move on into the future,

quiet icons of a time when artists and the public alike agree that beautiful old buildings are worth celebrating. Diaz offered some wry advice. “Perhaps you can finish the interview including new questions. I like the end as a beginning. When I am finishing a work, it is when the work is really born.”