

"Q & A with Alevé Mei Loh"

By: Simmy Swinder

Alevé Mei Loh is a Melbourne-born artist living and working in Los Angeles. As a child she observed how her perception would start to shift if she stared at an object for a long time. This intrigue with consciousness and perception led her to explore lucid dreaming and its applications to art making. It also brought her to Los Angeles a place which she describes as being "continually on the creative cusp." Artists, particularly the surrealists, have often drawn upon their subconscious as inspiration for artwork. Curious to see how a contemporary artist continues this tradition of using the convergence of art and dream states led me to interview Alevé.

Simmy Swinder:
Could you tell us about your fascination with lucid dreaming?

Alevé Mei Loh: The idea that other worlds exist as layers upon this one, other worlds we can tap into, perceive and actually be in, is an extremely thrilling and captivating premise for any artist. Lucid dreaming is one form of perceptual transportation. I find it fascinating that during lucid dreaming we enter into a completely unique or 'new' type of consciousness. And this is not just fantasy, German researchers verified with EEG monitoring that during lucid dreaming brain waves are not in an awakened state, nor are they in a dreaming state. Many artists intuit and express this tapping into other worlds. For me this is kind

of the 'proof' behind the intuition.

SS: How does one tap into this?

AL: Salvador Dali documents a technique called "Slumber With A Key," where he would sit in a chair with a key, or something equally heavy, in his hand. The purpose was to try and reach the point of



an awakened dream without falling asleep, thus the key which would fall and make a loud noise to wake you up. It's very annoying because you want to go to sleep! It's really quite a struggle but the more you train yourself to be in that in-between realm, the easier it becomes to access lucid dreams. Also, in this state you are able to make image connections of objects you normally wouldn't make. Imagine discovering objects that you find in your normal environment, but in this state they've changed in

some way becoming "dream-found objects." You bring these works from the unknown into waking reality, how extraordinary.

SS: Could your work be classified as dream-found objects?

AL: The intention behind my current body of work is to be 'dream found'.

Some of the works are direct recreations of objects I find in dreaming while others are results of discoveries I made in dreaming that change a process or approach to the work. I strongly feel the byproduct or affecting result on the viewer of a dream-found work is to subtly shift perception. Similar to the way that some tribal artifacts are imbued with power or magic I feel that dream found objects can impart transformative or have perceptual shifting affects.

SS: How long did it take to learn the technique?

AL: I've been actively practicing lucid dreaming for over 15 years. Around the time I started I was becoming increasingly annoyed with status quo and the idea of "fitting in." I attended a very conventional private girl's school in Melbourne, but really I wanted to be an artist, to be in an environment that nurtured artistic freedom. I loved the graffiti scene in Melbourne and wanted to be around other creative types, so I signed my mother's name and enrolled myself in an art high school.

My parents were actually quite liberal so in retrospect I could've just asked and got permission. Everyone was an artist or a rebel of some sort at this school. I had a high level of personal discipline so within this unstructured environment I found the freedom to carve out who I wanted to be. Around this time, an older student at the school introduced me to the books of Carlos Casteneda. One book in particular called *The Art Of Dreaming* was pivotal for me because it outlined specific practical techniques to enhance dream awareness. I spent all my lunchtimes and after school hours hanging out in a local "soteric bookshop" reading books about mind expansion, psychic perception and ways to enhance creativity. Every night I diligently practiced dreaming techniques. After a few months I was able to fine-tune these and be much more directional with my dreaming experiences. You can learn the fundamentals and technique fairly quickly but to get good requires continual and lifelong practice, sort of like making art, or doing yoga.



SS: *Could you talk about the lucid dream you had when you found yourself at the National Gallery of Victoria. You mentioned that this particular dream was very influential in a large body of your work and that you saw a monochrome piece that led you to perceive "real depth."*

AL: It began as a "normal" dream. That is, I was in the dream quite unaware I was dreaming, just going about reacting to things as they happened to me. Then something caused me to notice that the world was a little odd, I seemed to have more flexibility and stretchiness in the way I moved. This was a

trigger for me to check in to see if I was in a dream. When I checked I realized that I was indeed dreaming. I noticed I could also feel my body asleep in bed at the same time that I was aware in my dream body. I decided to look around and see if I could figure out where I was. It soon became apparent that I was in the National Gallery of Victoria, a place that I had frequently visited as a child. I stabilized my dream awareness and decided to task myself with looking at paintings. I wanted to see if I could perceive something deeper than was possible in waking life. I found myself being pulled towards a kind of storage area, a place where I had never been. There was a painting propped up near a shelf. I distinctively remember reading a tag

indicating the artist was "Ian Burn." It was a minimalist work done in blue with one or two tones at most. The thing that intrigued me though was as I stared at the painting I started to perceive this depth almost like a topographical landscape. It was fascinating. I was glued in front of it for what seemed to be a really long time. Then I moved on to another painting and another and another. The same thing happened each time. As I looked at the works at some point a highly dimensional geographic texture revealed itself. I had a realization that what I was seeing was one of the "cores" of painting.

This was the beginning of my studio practice of seeking out objects in the dreamscape and attempting t

o recreate them in waking life. The crushed works I create are a product of this exploration.

SS: *Speaking of your crushed work, it has been compared to John Chamberlain. In my opinion, there's something more feminine and caring about the way you deal with your materials. You start with a malleable material and mold it, to create a crushed option, while Chamberlain manipulates a tough object into the form he wants. Can you speak to your process in this regard?*

AL: I agree that the process of crushing the canvas is probably better described as shaping and molding opposed to Chamberlain's process where he actually crushes steel using a car crusher to manipulate the material. I have worked with car parts and steel and while I love the permanence and inflexibility of the material at the same time it drives me crazy. It doesn't let me flow or change directions or turn around and go back in the way I want to. Even when canvas is reinforced and stiffened to emulate metal sheeting, it still

retains fabric-like qualities and is still much more forgiving. I like a certain amount of room for spontaneity with the materials I use; at the same time I do find myself constantly drawn back to the painterly tradition of using linen, gesso, paint and stretcher bars. The crushed works were for me, as I mentioned before, a product of my dreaming investigations.

SS: *In addition to your wall sculptures, you also make sculptures with text or with text on canvas. Where do the words come from? What kind of message are you trying to deliver?*

AL: I feel a strong compulsion to use text in some pieces. We talked about the use of text being in the vernacular of many West Coast artists. Andt

hose influences perhaps stem from the driving culture, billboards and the entertainment industry. I feel that graffiti, tagging, advertising and copywriting have also influenced me. Advertising fascinates me. I like the distillation or funneling of ideas into one message. I like words or combinations of words that express the invisible, conjure up specific feelings or stir ideas.

and from it get a sense of what the word is communicating. This happens especially in driving and the almost unconscious reading of billboards and advertising. It makes me consider questions like "What is perception?" or "What is communication?"

A good example is *Freedom*. The "o" is missing here. I think of this "o" as

then something in me makes me want to crush it. Something gives way. I push up against something and something collapses. Then there's an urge that wants to come through you. You're possessed and you have to do it.

SS: *Does this uncontrollable compulsion lead you to believe freedom doesn't exist?*

AL: It makes me believe the opposite:



SS: *Why do you decide to crush the text you paint? Is it to obliterate the message?*

AL: Words on canvas often feel like commands. Crushing this is on one level subverting the command. I also like the idea of having text that's crushed because it is somewhat analogous to how the brain functions. For example, when we read we don't necessarily see the letters, but just the word

the opportunity in freedom, a passage for it to go through. But then I crushed it. It felt like something I wanted to do. I definitely plan out a work and I'm convinced it's actually how it should be and I try to stick to it. But then there's an element that's out of your hands and that's when the real flow comes in and you can't tell what it's going to do. I've often had a painting stretched and for a moment I think it's finished; I'm feeling happy with the aesthetic and

that freedom really does exist, but it is not a given. Instead, it must be earned. When I say earned I mean in the sense that we probably couldn't recognize it if we hadn't understood and worked within the boundaries first. It's weird that planning and discipline are ingredients in the mix. You have to know the rules to know when you are throwing them out. Being in total control of the process and sticking to the plan isn't freedom. Being in 'flow' with the

work and channeling that art spirit is freedom. I am always amazed at the way order reinvents itself in the most chaotic environments. I like to remind myself, at any given moment, especially when facing the work, that there are 3000 choices in front of me. Perhaps I've been choosing to go down one again and again because that's the neural pathway I've been carving out. But I can recognize another choice and by doing so I could open up another world.

SS: *There's something in particular about the car hood piece that seems to*

zero cockiness and as much lightness and sincerity that can be held in one human vessel. Constantly reinforcing the idea that we know the future before it happens brings about a change. It draws out that "all seeing" shy part of us that hardly ever gets its time in the spotlight.

SS: *What are you working on now?*

AL: In addition to my studio practice I'm working on a performance piece that involves oocyte extraction and cryopreservation (aka "egg freezing"). This juncture between technology and evolution is fascinating, exciting and

Alevé Mei Loh is showing her work at the Fountain Art Fair in Downtown Los Angeles from September 30 through October 2. For more information about the artist, visit alevemeiloh.com

About Simmy Swinder:

Following her successful direction of photo l.a. | artLA projects in January 2011, Simmy Swinder was appointed Director of Carmichael Gallery, Los Angeles, to assist the gallery's transition in program from its primary focus on street and urban art to a wider range of fine art, sculpture, film and photography. She continues to curate independent projects through TS+



be wrapped in ribbon and claims "you know the future before it happens." Are you alluding to lucid dreaming with this? I feel many people are blessed with a foresight but many are blind to this higher level of understanding. How do you differentiate?

AL: Not lucid dreaming specifically in this piece although I think higher states can be reached through dreaming. Dreams are portals to the parts of us that are not always accessible. But maintaining consciousness is the difficult part in dreaming and awake life. This is the differentiation. I think knowing the future before it happens requires a tremendous amount of confidence,

scary. For an artist there is so much material in this inquiry. The project is still in its infancy, so I can't say too much. But I'm noticing people do feel challenged by the idea. Definitely on a personal level it is confronting, both physically and emotionally.

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Projects, an art advisory and creative venture enterprise she co-founded in 2010. To date, TS+ Projects has curated shows in galleries, corporate and temporary exhibition spaces, and contributed to the limited edition print company, Artstar. She continues to write for Gallery Crawl and, most recently, American Contemporary Art and tasj, magazines.