



Sam Anderson's work is curious and eclectic. Thankfully it comes with no heavy handed politics or forced reasoning. Don't be mistaken, this does not infer meaninglessness. To be frank, her sculpture, video, and nascent explorations of a conflated film-sculpture are almost overwhelmingly meaningful to the point of opaqueness – charged with interconnecting narratives, repurposed readymades, and contradicting sensibilities. It is also quite entertaining in its humorous eccentricities and attitude. All of this can be a bit ineffable at first due to semantic gaps – challenging the viewer to form some about-ness. It is even a bit fey, using both definitions: otherworldly and marked by an apprehension of death.



Both of these definitions are applicable, yet I hope they aren't limiting. Sam is more than this. However, I think this quality is unique in a time when many artists forcefully strive to be formulaically relevant, or worse, intellectually obvious. While fey also means a bit crazy or deranged, I don't think Sam is truly psychotic or anything – just enough to self-consciously cull this affect for efficacy – sort of like a director, which she essentially is. Along with this trait is her dynamic use of materials, combining raw inchoate forms, reflexive of their own limitations, with unique odds and ends in original and convincing compositions that incorporate plot-like scenarios. When expounding on her sensitivity to scale, Sam explains, "The physical nature of these objects points to the pathos of model-making. What's lost between the represented and the original has none of the melodrama and romance usually involved with gestural, hand-crafted work. The role of a model (or of a found object resurrected as a surrogate) is completely transparent. There's a clear discrepancy between its materiality and its intention. The small quickly crafted object has no purpose beyond its own humble reason for being. It knows that it can't feasibly recreate accurately that which is lost."



When carefully analyzing specific works, which at first seem to be slightly desultory, sense and reference start to take form and intention becomes apparent – not only in a work’s internal logic but also in her intelligent inclusions of site specific givens. In some works a complete narrative is determined, while in others the meaning seems to be pregnant, ready to be formed or at least ruminated by an engaged viewer. This is no easy task. An artist has to be ambiguous enough to give you both something and nothing – putting you at a dialectical crossroad, challenging the viewer to get themselves out of a dead-end conundrum. Lesser artists either don’t give enough, taking context completely for granted, or give too much, shoving platitudes or corny pith in our over-satiated contemporary art glutted throats. Even while working with an aggressive intensity, and very much in tune with her own sensibilities and allusions, Sam still manages to leave a generous space, a lack of certainty, where a viewer may help them self with their own purpose and imagination.



Her sculptural aggregates can appear to be gritty loose ends, expressive and neurotic chains of semiotic flows, which may make perfect referential sense to Sam, yet in the works material translation, give the audience vague pieces of something esoteric and private, momentarily asking to be at least somewhat cohesive. In her own words she says, “I’m always sort of scrapping and cobbling. I find sometimes that a finished work is difficult to pinpoint verbally, but it comes from an extremely familiar or honest source. I think it’s important to be conscious of what I can and cannot do, with more emphasis on what I cannot do. I really admire artists who can do that well.” Her films can equally seem inexplicable, leaving out information that constitutes reason and stability. Sam’s work is constantly on the tip of the tongue, reluctant to become a fully verbal or rational symbolization. Perhaps she is wringing her own, and our latent, subjectivity out of redundant symbolic configuration, such as stock models or generic intonation, to formulate something visceral and direct, undoing or even comically exploiting the coded and stereotyped artifices which mediate and control the nothingness-grotesque. It is this space between intention and failure, message and noise, that reawakens the vitality of the human sensorium.



When approaching Sam's work in the past, the trajectory of my impression in one sitting usually reads like this; first I scrunch my nose in perplexity, then I make a crooked smile, which eventually turns into a half-nervous laugh, and then finally, I try to make some connections to legitimize this moment of gestated attention. I can immediately tell there is a lost translation, yet that translation is theoretically mutable in the shared social space of Art. On some occasions I have asked Sam directly where a work's reasoning comes from. Other times I rather do the work.



*In Please Keep Snowflake Alive | Sybil Brand Women's Institute Visitor's Center, 1994*, one is confronted with an eel tank and a small model of a jail's outside visiting area – complete with barbed wire fences, benches, little guards, and phone booths. Underneath the tank are speakers emitting a voiceover soundtrack by the character actress Pamela Dunlap, reading a text which Sam composed in “this weird lateral obligatory after-space where all the citational psychology is already so obviously spelled-out before you arrive.” Floating in the tank along with the eel is a bag of peppermints. The whole work situates itself around a pre-acknowledged crack in the gallery's floor, narrativized as the 1994 Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles. This explains the seemingly random and playful inclusion of peppermints, alluding to a moment of misplacement during the shake. I thought this was an ingenious way to include an intentional digressive formal element in this peculiar story about a woman being in jail, calling a friend to make sure her eel is fed and kept alive. This intricate work is particularly interesting as a self-contained “scene” and hyper aware meditation on the bifurcating nature of sculpture, delineating between object and contextual theatricality. The human performer is only present through voice, yet its presence is vivid or even transferred when conjoined with a live eel.



Another work, *Newboots*, is a movie Sam shot and performed mostly at The Madonna Inn, a landmark resort hotel on California's central coast. It advertises itself as "an unforgettable experience with fine dining & entertainment. A hundred and ten rooms each with a special theme, a picturesque European-style pool & state of the art exercise room, celestial Day Spa and the largest convention center on the Central Coast." This makes for a versatile aesthetic experience, which continues the interest in stock formats and over-determined sensibilities. Many of the shots take place in a variety of environments such as an outside hot tub or a zebra printed hotel room. The sensibility seems to be a mix between faux cinéma vérité and true improvisation, which is not so easy to distinguish, especially because the main character, Sam, is only getting more intoxicated and rambunctious as the movie progresses. This begets moments of aggressive drunk tantrums and shouting strange nonsense about eating at a steakhouse. The only other real character is the curiously eyebrow-less "camera man" whose role and connection to Sam is not very clear. He is either a submissive friend who Sam enjoys reminding that he has no sexual chances and is a poor loser, or perhaps some perverted client who fetishistically enjoys being hit and insulted by this real loose cannon woman-child-monster – perhaps an insidious identity Sam wanted to unabashedly explore. She violently abuses the male voyeur and, in a sense, whoever is watching the movie and expecting some obvious soft sexual object.



One of the best things about Sam, which I find so rare, is that she knows everything does not have to be in one piece. All her idiosyncratic interests can be dispersed through multiple works, yet they maintain their connectivity if followed closely. A free associative performance in a film can inform the attitude or action of a sculpture. A small sculpture can easily fit into another aggregate due to her provisional way of constructing segmented narratives. A whole cosmology begins to form, both symbolically and concretely breaking apart the boundaries between symbolic representation and artless thingness. When work is so conscious of its mimetic limits, its inability to be anything other than representation, the person and life surrounding that work can't help but to be its living continuum.