

ART SPIEL

Fine Arts Blog

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Trish Tillman – Souvenirs of a Moment



Trish Tillman, "Afterschool Locker", 2017
Hand-printed vinyl, wood, metal, horsehair, resin, 66" x 37" x 6", photography by Ethan Browning

Trish Tillman flirts with materials. She fuses in her sculptures elements of fashion and interior décor like leather, vinyl, studs, ropes, and chains, to create art objects which are often both humorous and enigmatic. While her sculptures bring to mind old relics, early symbols, or mysterious calligraphic forms, they also embody the allure of faux luxury.

AS: Trish, I believe you grew up in Washington DC and graduated with an MFA from SVA in NYC. Can you tell me a bit about some milestones in between and after?

Trish Tillman: In DC I was extremely involved in activism, volunteering with groups like Positive Force DC and Rape Crisis Center. I went to a lot of punk and hardcore shows, and was a musician myself. I met these amazing women who had the same anger I had with how society was categorizing survivors as victims, and we started putting together a series of workshops for survivors of sexual assault. I was usually the person designated to provide a safe zone during the meetings and activities—a type of counselor I suppose. I can see now how influential this has been in my recent work—to see how strength lies between raw emotion and the structural systems we make for ourselves.

AS: It seems that you have been travelling quite extensively. Can you tell me about one experience that you see as formative in your art?

Trish Tillman: My recent trips to Thailand and India have really reinforced my use of loud color with gold accents: the architecture, the fabrics, and the aesthetics of the temples. I love traveling, and think it's an important way for me to refocus perspective. I try to go west once a year and plan some time to hike—Joshua Tree, Utah, Arizona, Nevada.



Trish Tillman, "Standard Issue", 2018
Vinyl, hand-printed fabric, hardware, wood, 32" x 20" x 1"



Trish Tillman, "Captain's Lounge", 2018
Hand-printed and upholstery fabric, hand-me-down towels,
hardware, rope, tassels, hardware, foam, 140" x 68" x 6"

AS: It is reasonable to argue that the borders between art disciplines are getting increasingly blurred. I see you as a sculptor who blurs borders within your discipline. What are your thoughts on that?

Trish Tillman: Since I'm originally a printmaker, I know how particular some people can be about process. I always broke the rules in printing editions, mixing silkscreen with etching, drawing on top, so I've never subscribed to the mentality of keeping all the processes pure and separate. I juried the National Scholastics Awards last year for mixed media, and thought: well, isn't almost everything mixed media these days?

AS: In one of our conversations you told me that you are fascinated by notions of shrines and rituals. Your art objects make me think of urban, highly stylized objects underscored with enigmatic shamanism. Does that resonate with you and what is your take on that?

Trish Tillman: Yes—I've always been interested in how we continuously reconfigure our everyday objects, so that our homes are like big evolving personal shrines. In my work I combine elements of fashion and interior décor to commemorate various ideas or feelings in an altar-like format. The emblematic shapes develop out of my fascination with relics and runes, early symbols, and text. I like to flirt with materials—the leather, vinyl, studs, ropes, and chains play with the idea of self-awareness and faux luxury. Therefore the resulting works become like souvenirs of a moment or a conversation, how we commemorate people by giving them ribbons and gifts with bows. I use utilitarian items like a cabinet handle or a muffler to suggest the works have a function—perhaps a spiritual function. Talismans.



Trish Tillman, "In Aspect", 2017
Vinyl, leather, wood, chrome fittings, chain, 42" x 18" x 2



Trish Tillman, "Way In", 2016
Leather, vinyl, wood, metal, 42" x 34" x 1.5"

AS: For me, there is a strong element of stylization in your work, at times relating to elements in fashion. Can you talk about the notion of "style" in your work?

Trish Tillman: Sure, some of the styling in my work references the music scene and how punk, rock and heavy metal have all influenced the fashion world, especially in handbags. The use of excessive studding on leather started with the diy punk aesthetic and now signifies a high-end status symbol, as if rebellion is something you can buy and show off. I'm interested in the intersection of reality and stylization, where something that should just be a fundamental quality can be highly crafted and flaunted.

AS: Your sculptures are colorful, whimsical and very precise. Tell me about the use of color and material in your work.

Trish Tillman: My materials are simple—what I find desirable. I love the look of finely stitched leather, in cars and furniture. I love plush tufted bar décor, the edges of tables in a diner, the chrome detailing in a kitchen or bathroom, a motorcycle muffler next to deep red leather upholstery. The materials are my vocabulary, and I use vibrant color as punctuation.

AS: How do you start working on a project?

Trish Tillman: I start with drawings and some research depending on the project. I like working in groups, so one piece can inform the other, but they might not necessarily be part of the same series. I'm not sure if I've ever thought about my work in terms of a series, but I'm starting to see how this could unfold.

For example, I'm obsessed with these ribbon-like banner shapes I cut out of wood, and am curious how the vibe would read if it were upholstered in all neutral colors – like a fashion forward mummy. Warhol didn't care if he made the same image 50 times in different colors, and Apple's image depends on that, so why can't I make the same shape three or four times with different outfits on, as long as I am exploring something meaningful in the work?



Trish Tillman, "Hot Mustang", 2018
Vinyl, fabric, tassels, hardware, wood, foam, 48" x
15" x 1.5"



Trish Tillman, "Double Foxhole", 2018
Hand-printed denim, wood, tassels, hardware, foam, 69" x 48" x 18"

AS: What is your typical source material?

Trish Tillman: I cull from a variety of sources—items of home décor, personal mementos, souvenirs, interior spaces, furniture, bathroom and kitchen fixtures, fashion. My father is in the hospitality supply industry, so I grew up hanging out in the showroom where all these expensive shiny faucets, refrigeration units and chrome salad bars were on display across from heaps of disposable plates, napkins, tissues and cutlery of all types. I'm at once fascinated and grossed out by the combination of longevity and the temporary.

AS: Can you tell me specifically on your source material for one object?

Trish Tillman: Most recently I've been working with the personal memorabilia of my late grandparents and exploring how my grandfather's coming of age years during WWII might have affected his humor as an adult. I've been using the patterning in my grandmother's linens and images of my grandfather's medals. The silkscreened fabric in "Standard Issue" is from one of their towels. I printed the Americana eagle and the floral designs in two tones of pink and orange, the colors of the US Army distress signal panel, and placed them on either side of the vinyl, which are in familiar camo tones.

AS: What are you working on now?

Trish Tillman: I just finished a big project in Richmond, VA, and worked with a furniture maker to bring more complicated elements of woodworking into my structures. In "Doublefoxhole" I made a large jig, glued up sheets of ply, and used a vacuum table to make the basic form. Then I used a handsaw and planer to refine the shape that resembles a chaise lounge. So I'm working on a few projects now that will have more of a furniture feel like that. I'm excited about a project for an exhibit of fantastic female artists that will be in a new space in Milwaukee; the show is based on Greek playwright Aristophanes' play "Assemblywomen." I'm making a type of throne and some celebratory shields for the show.