

25 Questions with Mandy El Sayegh

Text by Piper Marshall

1) Hoarding or collecting?

More hoarding—I see collecting as a controlled, conscious, more discerning thing. That's not to say that what I accumulate doesn't have its specificities, more that they are not completely known to me.

2) What do you hoard?

For instance, a certain texture of a sweet wrapper while I'm eating it will announce itself, and I'll siphon it away. Hoarding is pathologized due to the element of compulsivity, at its worst it interferes with your personal life, I can identify with that.

3) Do you pile or spread?

Spread. I view 'The Spread' as axiomatic in the practice as well as a formal property of the work. The spread aligns with the biological, it's of matter and material rather than meaning.

4) When do you replenish?

I replenish when I feel that I'm approaching some kind of intangible scarcity. Usually it happens after a show, after the normal low that ensues. I think it has to do with entering the symbolic domain, there's a kind of death of the child's internal world. Or for a reason unapparent to myself, I might want to walk about and pick up 'bits' I don't really need, I think it's why hoarders hoard. It is a response to loss, I've just formalized it. Same reason I'd think why bulimics binge.

5) Where is the boundary?

The boundary is a formal violence, an imposition that limits the spread. Devices are used to highlight the absurdity/impossibility of containment. The boundary of the tables are there to stop/punctuate the flow of material free association—likewise the grid structures to 'hold in' its pieces.

6) What is the difference between the tables and the paintings?

I apply the same methodology of apprehending and reassembling fragments to form a new body to both. Though the tables are closer to the personal in that their sources are less abstracted from the self/subject—the aim is to get the vitrines to function the same as the paintings where the contents simply become a compositional frequency within the whole so that they move beyond the archive.

7) Foundation?

I'm always referring to a literal and a theoretical that conflate throughout the practice. For example the Net-Grid paintings are a net that catches debris, debased fragments and the "grid" as it's known as a motif of modernity especially in painting. A spectrum from the physical to the schematic. I start with the literal as a means to understand the latter, from this enquiry we can enter into the historical/social or pick apart its construction.

8) What is the blank?

When the journalist and activist Ash Sarkar poses the question "when was whiteness invented?," she is querying this conflation of material and history, of foundation. Its conflation and vagueness are key to its power in the psyche and culture. She proposes that it began to appear as an idea in culture at critical moments where Christendom failed to unite the powers of Europe against particular racial others—namely the Ottoman Turk. She posits whiteness as something more than a racial category but a conflation of historical processes and associations up to now. So here there is a question of materiality embedded—how the idea of whiteness held itself to be a natural phenomena (genes/traits/association).

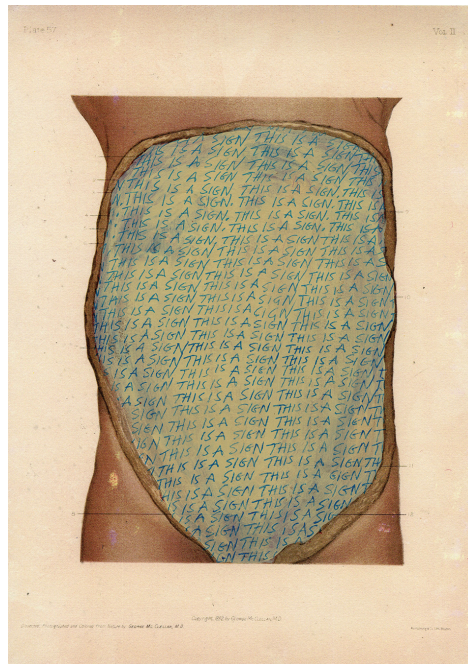
9) How is this made visible?

A neutral background is not constructed and outside of history. The materiality of a particular social field in history intersects with this. The blank, whiteness (white grounds) refers to a constructed objectivity, because of the way my mind works I see it as literal: white primed grounds of a canvas, chalky white walls of the white cube. In both the formal context of the work and systems of viewing in culture it simply means the empty space of the canvas or whichever field; the 'neutral' backdrop of which everything is defined and acquires meaning.

10) When is the body made subject?

On the spectrum of interpellation the body is made subject when it is granted cognitive space (mind), social

and when is contingent, precarious. Its propensity to fall back down along the spectrum toward the body, the meat is a question of the state.



11) Who is the meat of the state?

Which state, when and where? I cannot answer definitively though you can get a good gauge from mainstream visual culture, news, advertising, even film. What is made visible and what is granted privacy for example. For many years the US government had a ban preventing the public from seeing photographs of US soldiers killed in action returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in flag-draped coffins. Yet we are all too familiar with the flesh fest of war carried out against black and brown bodies with many intersections of class and gender.

12) What are the ethics of image-making?

If you are asking in regards to images of bodies in states of duress, death or pornography, I feel there has to be a warranted enquiry and not purely aesthetic revelry, though this is part of it, the artist, the social context aren't independent from this—there is always a fine line, which is why it is hard to answer, as what is deemed as a warranted enquiry and which field is up for debate—here aesthetics offers a productive space. Insert the body anywhere and you'll have a problem—apprehending this problematic is the thing, a practice. There will be a negotiation, a sacrifice rather, on either side, of ethics or of erotics. I'd lean toward the latter.

13) Craft bolsters therapy?

Therapy like emotionality in art are debased to the realm of the feminine and work in opposition to objective formality. See how gendered this term is: lovingly crafted (vs lovingly painted). I don't really know what craft is here, but if you mean of-hand-ness, yes I think there is a reparative power that the hand can achieve as there is a proximity that infuses the material with a different intent to communication—it's why outsider-art has a special visual aura, it's not trying to speak to you.

14) A meme is not the same as a statement of fact.

The concept of the meme fascinates me as there are two contexts of the term that I believe offer a model for thinking through future forms of language and culture: one in the context of evolution, the other as crude internet phenomenon. The word itself is a conflation of the word 'gene' and the Latin 'mimesis.'

15) Is there an aesthetics of transmission?

Richard Dawkins has suggested that the internet high-jacked meme, a term he coined in relation to a 'cultural gene' (idea in cultures) that gets transmitted and is subject to mutations through time. How we understand it in the vernacular is an image accompanied by text that can go viral. There is something mysterious to both (just google "meme-magic" as an account of how Trump got elected) in the same way we (and the scientific community) still don't actually fully understand how genes work in terms of transmission and expression.

15) The importance of evasion.

An ambiguity is important. Evasion of meaning isn't always a defense but a method of keeping free association, even nonsense in play i.e. still generative. There is a politicized element to this too—being an artist of color it's as if the explanation is implicitly expected to be offered, to legitimize the existence of the practice. Who's allowed or granted abstraction relates to the previous question of when a body becomes a subject, there is a microcosm of that within the consumption and understanding of artists within culture. If you listen to David Lynch when interviewed about his films' meanings he'll speak of "the eye of the duck."

16) How does the meme intersect with the work?

In the work the meme doesn't function as a statement—I see it as an intersection of an idea, wish or intent infused through material, that can be repeated. I treat it as real in as much an invocation would, which you can say does involve magical thinking.

17) Can the signal also be noise?

I don't fully understand the question, maybe you can expand a bit for me? The signal means something very

always thought of this as a practice of clandestinity and an invisible way of making proofs of a self/subject to avoid the threats of symbolic death, you need a code name to be in the amateur radio community and utilize the electromagnetic spectrum to send signals.

18) More precisely, does the signal have to communicate its use?

No, for me the aesthetic practice is characterized as in excess of use or of having none.

The signal can perform itself in multiple ways: as a proof (explained above) or contain a secret (coded message) for a real or imaginary recipient or environment. It can go from concrete (as in cell biology) to vapid, like de-friending someone in social media. Because of its ability to be in this excess or deficit of its use and the probability that it may not be received or decoded it can be quite romantic and/or delusional, which I enjoy.

19) Is embroidery passive or active?

If I understand embroidery to be a thing of ornamental stitching, I don't embroider, if anything I'd say there are acts of suturing or fusing to use a more bodily verb, so I don't think you could apply the passive/active dichotomy to this.

20) Does suturing differ from collage?

Yes, there are two different investigations that can sit with one another. Collage is more about chance encounter and surface, a layering of images... Suturing is more physical and implies depth. I think of Merleau-Ponty's term, "the thickness of flesh," implicated in the field of vision. He also speaks of the thickness of history. I could've got this totally wrong, as I didn't study Phenomenology but this notion of a corporeal ontology, which frustrates ideas of dualism, is a nice way to think about the complexities of apprehending painting. As both can co-exist simultaneously, there can be just surface as well as dimension —like a Moebius strip.

21) The newspaper like the Ensemble is always already a collage.

Exactly. It's already a sedimentation of time and matter, physically and theoretically, pulp, ink and information. So the process of painting is always relational and reactive. I remember early on in art school someone had told me I wasn't really a painter as I couldn't think compositionally on the blank canvas, that what I was in fact doing was modifying/manipulating existing things sequentially and they suggested I do film instead. I remember feeling annoyed but I think they were somewhat correct.

22) Why the Financial Times?

The FT is selected as a ground/fragment for its specific formal and conceptual particularities. As the known and 'trusted' British version of the 'ground' of global economic objectivity. For its distinctive flesh tone tint that alludes to the body as metaphor, as a social/cultural field and the process of inscription on/as it. More subtly, I'm drawn to its proportions, more so than other broadsheets it has a more even ratio of image to text within the page layout resulting in a more gridded system, which conflates the experiences of reading (image vs text; info vs composition; en masse vs en detail).

24) Is it painful to give away meaning?

Yes and no. That is to also ask whether there is anything to give away in the first place. At the risk of sounding sentimental, I feel it's important to protect the affective zone from which you produce; to not know too much about it so as to let it speak through other means, material, otherwise I'd be an essayist.

25) Perpetual circulation?

I'm concerned with a continuous play of metonymy, dream logic, and the capacity for non-sense that work alongside notions of capital that news/image production/circulation are bound in. How things, ideas, forms, words mutate within material strata through repetition and reproduction.

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CURA.30

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MANDY EL-SAYEGH (b. 1985, Selangor, Malaysia) lives in London. She received her BFA in 2007 from the University of Westminster, London, followed by her MFA in Painting in 2011 from the Royal College of Art, London. El-Sayegh has exhibited with: The Mistake Room, Guadalajara (2018); Carl Kostyál, London (2017); Sharjah Biennial 13: Tamawuj (2017); and Carlos/Ishikawa, London (2016), among others.

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