



Mary Ann Papanek-Miller

Looking for Alice: You Won't Know Who to Trust

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"you won't know who to trust"

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My artwork deliberately bombards the viewer with a collection of visual layers to be read as a narrative within itself. The packaging of collected visual information in my work often parallels with various time based media systems, events, or experiences that have become cultural norms in the USA; for example: the shifting of images on the television and on the computer, flipping through pages in print, the transport of the body through space in travel, and the perception of auditory focus and depth in sound and music. I assimilate these "time gap" experiences into suspended still events to translate into my art work. These images often remain as an after image, layered over the next image and the next image and the next; provoking chance. The layers are seasoned with reflections from stories, songs and rhymes of childhood, that are then woven with a deep concern for the environment relating to animals, wet lands, and water access, use and ownership. I continue to be attracted to toys as social barometers and cultural souvenirs. I believe that toys are beautiful and magical objects that bridge our many cultures and age groups as "contemporary amulets" and "time devices" serving as truthful conceptual tools. I often include images of toy objects from my extensive collection in my work as visual guides to provide a safe passage for the viewer into my complex idea path. The surfaces of my works include transparent cloths, pre-printed fabrics, wood, plastic, sheet metal and weathered paper. My work is intimate in scale, often in series, and dependent on the spatial and immediate qualities of drawing as I utilize line and employ a painting vocabulary with a mixed media palette of graphite, charcoal, acrylics, oils, gouache, and collage through a photographic digital capture and archival printing process.

Mary Ann Papanek-Miller  
Artist Statement



Free Water Project: Shedding Water, II, 2006, acrylics, oils, graphite and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, 12" x 9"

Mary Ann Papanek-Miller expands on the impetus for her artwork and her intentions and experiences as both an artist and teacher in a dialog with Jack Olson Gallery Coordinator, Peter Van Ael, September 2008.

PVA: You mention the use of digital capture. How important is digital technology to the evolution of your work as an artist and as an art educator?

MAP-M: I consider my art work to be drawing based. I use digital technology as a drawing tool. Drawing for me as an artist and as a teacher is about constructing and assembling internal vision and repackaging it externally with the intent of the maker being included within a contemporary context. I prefer for a drawing assignment that I give to students to relate to the next assignment and the previous assignment, and that it be concerned with the individual voice of the student through his/her sense of place. My teaching involves design applications and the development of physical and visual skills of seeing with the skills of recording, which must be realized in order to develop a visual language to be able to communicate through one's work with the intended voice. Teaching drawing and making drawing based art work is a partnership for me with my philosophy being inclusive and directed to technological relevance and access if an idea warrants its use.

PVA: You discuss the use of toy imagery in your work, referring to toys as "contemporary amulets," and mention stories, songs, and rhymes from childhood. Please address the importance of a common, even universal experience shared by artist and audience in the audience's ability to access the deeper meaning of the work. How important is the shared/common/universal cultural experience?

MAP-M: Most humans have experienced play with toys at some time in their lives on some level, usually without instruction and

often with pleasant memories remaining. Even when a toy is static, its potential is alive. A toy object, through play, can transport itself and the owner or participant to another moment in time and to an unknown place with the possibility that one can hover in between the abstract and the real. Play is universal - it crosses gender and culture, and it does not require wealth or privilege of the participant to be involved. My work requires a certain degree of participation or visual play from the viewer to navigate. I use titles as clues in relationship to the ideas that I am exploring in each individual work, works which are often in conversation with each other as a series. The creation of my work involves conceptual and intellectual play.

Visual references in my work responding to stories, songs, and rhymes from childhood have been an interest of mine for many years. The book *Alice in Wonderland* was, and continues to be, an impetus for several of the works in this exhibition. It is a story that has provoked many visuals and political overtones for me (see *Looking for Alice: "you won't know who to trust"* 3.1 - 3.4, 2008, covers), much as *The Wizard of Oz* film has. I also enjoy the mysterious "re-packaging" of the scary classic fairy tale often as a "happy" interpretation in American pop culture, which can be an enlightening contradiction that yields a polarizing intersection between the two - where the ideas for much of my work often live.

PVA: You address the importance of time and time lapse in the creation of your work. How, if at all, does site or location inform your work?

MAP-M: Time as a conceptual idea informs my work as it links and overlays all of the aspects of place including sound. Time also

preserves events or conditions as a memory reserve, which is stored and can be recalled. Books and toys are objects that can be time triggers for memories to a particular place in one's life because they are applied interactive objects that allow the mind to wander. Place moves physically and intellectually and I look to it as a resource for my work. Light and color change with place. Sound changes with place and the visual options change with place in addition to the cultural and political conditions that guard place. Time zones are conceptual passages and maps are conceptual drawings of place that I am attracted to as contemporary art forms within themselves.

Having lived full-time in Houston Texas, Seattle, Washington, rural northern Minnesota, and Missoula, Montana, I have been fortunate to be able to have had these places directly in conversation with my work. However, it's the transition and the travels between these places that inform my work. The colors of the summer grasses in northern Minnesota (that I have not perceived in the past) have now exploded in my mind. I expect that this visual explosion of observed color can be attributed to the dry tinted grasses of the Rocky Mountains west of Montana where I recently lived - a discovery and observation based on the contrast of two specific places that I know. Without Montana or Minnesota I am not sure that my perception of prairie grass colors would be so obvious, nor would this color palette have been able to seep in to my work.

**PVA:** The use of an "environmental imprint" suggests openness to a certain amount of chance at an early stage in your work. You subsequently take control of the process through drawing and painting. How does that practice reflect on your relationship with nature?

**MAP-M:** Weathering paper is a process that I developed which results in an "environmental imprint". This imprint is achieved by placing paper out of doors for many days with various materials placed on top to create an activated ground, which is influenced directly by nature and water as collaborators to determine a first visual layer which is the surface. This has become a collaborative risk for me with a minimal involvement from nature for a small amount of time. I never know, however, what results I will get. It's a borrowing from the land on paper which produces a symbolic activated ground for me to respond to as an artist.

**PVA:** What personal experiences triggered your deep concern for the environment? As an artist, is it important to you that your audience senses that concern when viewing your work?

**MAP-M:** At some point in the late 1980's the environmental oddities of living in Houston, Texas and the strangeness of my personal urbanity created an awareness for me which overlapped with my limited knowledge of wild places and I had to get out of the city as a result. I visited the wetlands of the Texas gulf coast and traveled the coastal area from Texas to Florida. I also traveled to the mountains of west Texas being very comfortable yet a bit fearful in Big Bend National Park. The acceptance of fear in a wild or rural place was a risk for me as an urban gal born and raised in the Chicago area. I was naive of these and other non urban areas, and as a result I have been

chased by snakes and wasps, approached by a manatee, visited several times by a black bear, and had a bit of an "experience" with a porcupine. I also respect the power of nature in all her forces as I have lived with: 60 degrees below zero temperatures, life threatening blizzards, a hurricane, ice packed mountain passes, and a mild earthquake. I am actually more comfortable now in places where nature appears to be more obviously in control of each day because I am required to change something as a result - which I usually try to resist at the time, and then I really like and appreciate afterwards.

My artwork somehow evolved from these initial contrasts with the city of Houston and the rural and wild places near it which overlapped as separate combined realities in my mind. As a result I discovered a lifetime of ideas for my work. My environmental concerns have evolved out of my respect through experience with the land and water and all of its life. I do select environmental concerns often as an impetus to create my works, however additional personal experiences often cross and mix with these concerns - the local and the current always seem to seep in to my work as well. I welcome this idea seepage, (see *Looking for Alice: "and a bear passed by,"* 1, 2 and 3, 2008, right). With my current works I am interested in vulnerability (see *Free Water Project: Shedding Water II*, 2006, left) a worry that I have learned from understanding some of our environmental troubles to which all life on this planet is subject. I am interested now in placing vulnerability in front of the viewer and I do not plan for any specific environmental information to transpire through my work, though it might. To be vulnerable (capable of being wounded) I believe presents to us all a contemporary human environmental malady - a lack of trust.

**PVA:** Who are your "art heroes"? With the layering of imagery, I sense a strong kinship with Francis Picabia, but there also seems to be a shared aesthetic with later works by Lee Bontecou - the fantastical fish drawings and mobiles come to mind. I also find parallels in some of the more whimsical works by Paul Klee and Max Ernst.

**MAP-M:** Yes to all the above. Add in some Mark Rothko and Laurie Anderson, and absolutely a yes to Picabia as he was actually a part of the focus in my M.F.A. thesis. I would cite the most significant artistic influence on my work to be John Cage. As a high school student in the Chicago area I heard and saw one of his prepared piano works performed in a concert. I met Cage while teaching at the Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston after a live performance of his work which was out of doors in the museum sculpture garden. At Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, where I was Chair of the Art Department, he and Merce Cunningham met in their early years (Cunningham is also an influence), and their first collaborations began there. So my fate it seems has been seasoned by Cage somewhat through the years. I am often more attracted to sound and media art when I travel and visit exhibitions, and I look to these works for my own artistic study. Space is the most critical formal and visual element for me in my work and risk is a process that I welcome both informed by sound and the land as layered environments. I consider my works to be about visual sound. —



*Looking for Alice: "and a bear passed by" 1.1, 2008, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, 22" x 22"*



*Looking for Alice: "and a bear passed by" 1.2, 2008, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, 22" x 22"*



*Looking for Alice: "and a bear passed by" 1.3, 2008, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, 22" x 22"*

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Gallery Hours: Weekdays 10 am - 4 pm

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Looking for Alice: You Won't Know Who to Trust

October 10 - 30, 2008

Opening Reception and Gallery Talk: Thursday, October 9, 4:30 - 6:00 pm

Mary Ann Papanek-Miller was born in the vicinity of Chicago, Illinois. She received her M.A. in metals from Northern Illinois University, and M.F.A. with a dual emphasis in drawing and metals from the University of Houston, Texas in 1984. She has exhibited widely across the country, was one of the recipients of the 2004 State of Minnesota Artist Initiative Grants co-supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, and completed a commission through the Seattle Arts Commission for the new federal justice center building in Seattle, Washington which opened to the public in November 2002. Currently, she is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Art Media and Design at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. Formerly she served in the same capacity at the University of Montana, Bemidji State University, Minnesota and Cornish College of the Arts, Washington.

<http://papanekmillerartist.wordpress.com> (current works)

[www.papanek-miller-artist.com](http://www.papanek-miller-artist.com) (past works)



Left to right: *Looking for Alice: "you won't know who to trust"* 3.1, 3.3, and 3.4, 2008, acrylics, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, 12" x 9"  
Cover image: *Looking for Alice: "you won't know who to trust"* 3.2, 2008, acrylics, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, 12" x 9"