

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Bombsite  
February 2010

## Amanda Ross-Ho

by Elad Lassry



*Peacock*, 2006, c-print mounted on Sintra, 52 × 40 inches. All images courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. All photos (except when noted) by Robert Wedemeyer.

A small, turquoise, plastic thing that was almost certainly made in China is peeking through a roughly cut sheetrock panel that leans casually against the wall in a gallery's corner. The sheetrock itself has silhouetted images and patterns mounted on it, sharply printed with digital resolution that recalls the proximity of image-to-scanner. There's a small space between the panel and the permanent wall left for it, signifying that it must be a sculptural entity. Text printed on it reads "Le Bistro." Up close, the structure clearly registers as a water fountain for a domestic pet, probably a cat. The corner becomes its crude habitat. It's a relatively characteristic work by Amanda Ross-Ho.

Judging from her work, Ross-Ho doesn't come across as an artist likely to embrace the tradition of self-portraiture, but I found myself thinking of her image while looking at the piece, enigmatically titled *Peacock*. Amanda herself bears a resemblance to *Peacock*; nooks and surprises unfold in a non-linear pattern. Actually, her piece *Composite* could reasonably be

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described as a self-portrait, although the photo of her is as an adolescent. The phantom of nostalgia is everywhere in Ross-Ho's work; she alternately rejects it forcefully and embraces it totally. Her work is handmade and backward glancing as often as it is industrial or composed primarily of disposable consumables.

I met Amanda in grad school, at USC, and the duration of our studies created the long view necessary for me to get to know her inclusive practice; stopping by her studio meant absorbing a new constellation of images, objects, pixels, and tools to consider. It felt as though with every conclusion, a new set of variables revealed themselves. Like *Peacock*, the hidden and the visible in her work actually occupy the same space.

**Elad Lassry** I'd like to ask you about your last solo show here in LA, *HALF OF WHAT I SAY IS MEANINGLESS*. I'm still thinking about it. It had everything that is so special about your practice, but something else too, something surprising. I'm referring specifically to the fact that some of the work was made by your family—like the quilt made by your aunt. Even the studio photograph of you as a youth, posturing like a child model, which you seemed to reprint directly from a negative. The surprise was because I think of you as such a hands-on artist. Your physical touch is very *present*, like in the hand-drilled sheetrock pieces, or even in simple gestures like using a piece of tape to hold an image in place. How did that exhibition develop? Was there something different in the studio that led to these other methods of work?

**Amanda Ross-Ho** That's a great question, but also a rabbit hole. *HALF OF WHAT I SAY IS MEANINGLESS* was an attempt to further complicate the languages I have been building within my work by proposing both their reversibility and constant evolution. I wanted to directly challenge previous assertions I had made, like my attempts to claim generic or impersonal imagery in order to thoroughly understand the structures I was examining. I think of my work as an organism that fluctuates within an expanding framework, so introducing an increasing complexity into the forms was a way for me to not only reveal their organic tendencies but to also be rigorous about articulating the slippery territory they occupy.

I've always been interested in the shared realms of opposing structures, in testing those boundaries. Collapsing the universal and the personal was one way to do this. In previous works, I mined the generic for found personal indexes, as a way to find room within constructs that left little space for the individual. Locating undiscovered territory or dimensionality within a contradiction is gratifying, and with this exhibition I wanted to perform a different inversion—this time to a tendency in my own approach—and attempt to find the generic within the personal. I wanted to exhaust the possibilities within that investigation, really evacuate it. I was also feeling an ongoing need to further map and draw parallels between the structures of connectivity and proximal relationships I was identifying and subsequently creating. Looking to the family as a structure was a way to diagram the relationship between individual elements and a totality while talking about the generational layers embedded in any evolution. This became an analog

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for both my own working structures, and my own place within them. Working with material that has such a biased charge became a challenge—as to whether the operations I was engineering in my work could hold up when predicated by such loaded content. The important thing is that I wasn't interested in creating an autobiography or something embedded with nostalgia—this was a vehicle towards creating an indexical, formal environment.



*Composite*, 2008, light jet print mounted on reproduction of original photograph by Peter Dean Rossi, wooden camera made by Ruyell Ho. 52 ½ × 30 ¾ × 2 ½ inches.

**EL** What did it mean to you as a body of work? Did it trigger new ideas about how your familial relationships have informed your practice?

**ARH** The anecdotal part of all this is that I come from a family of photographers, both commercial and artists. When I was a kid, I spent a great deal of time on Saturdays or after school at the photo studio where my father and uncle worked. They specialized primarily in product photography, and occasionally I would stand in as a model for a backpack or a toy or a bike. Sometimes I would make it into a test shot or they would shoot a few pictures of me for fun if there were frames left in the camera. *Composite* is such a photograph. It is reproduced from a color slide and features me, at age 11, wrapped in the hood my uncle usually used with his viewfinder

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camera. He threw it to me to use as a prop and shot me on a set built for a fashion shoot he had just finished. The image that results is both mannered and improvised. I was interested in this image because of the simultaneity of the commercial and the personal. For all intents and purposes, it is a family snapshot, but it maintains the veneer of something staged or constructed—generic. Rediscovered, this artifact almost became a found image that, for me, diagrammed the potential and dimensionality of a picture. It is paired with a small wooden camera that my father made for me as a child. This object, a sculptural picture, represented an early moment in my relationship with representation, but also functions within the piece to pollute the singularity of viewership when looking at a framed photograph.

Several other works in the show had a familial index—I reproduced a photograph taken by my mother, an artist in Chicago in the '70s—some insane and amazing sticker collages made by another aunt, and the quilt, which was sewn by my aunt Gina Ross-Childers, who produced it lovingly by hand from a photograph I had made years earlier. The original photograph was a digital collage combining a vintage quilt and a tabloid headline. My initial intent was to conflate two constructs that had very specific yet disparate relationships to time—all while acknowledging a formal parallel. By having the image recreated, this time through the actual formal language of the quilt, I hoped to present a new evolution of the same work, adding to its history and to the conversation the photo had already started about permanence versus the rapid fluctuation of information.

I guess what you call hands-on could also be described as a sensibility extending from navigating immediate surroundings—or embedded with an immediacy. I wanted to articulate the motives behind this approach, to clarify that, on some level, this sensibility stems from a compulsion to produce a kind of radial map that inevitably originates at the self—and out of a sense of urgency—not out of an aesthetic fetishization of the quotidian.

In a really basic sense, I wanted to produce an exhibition that was frontloaded with familiarity but in the end proposed a completely different legibility. To say something different with the same terms. Or to say something the same with different terms.

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*Pregnant Again and Again*, 2008, quilt: cotton, linen, nylon, thread; cotton batting hand-sewn by Gina Ross-Childers. 85 × 75 inches.

**EL** I agree that you manage to escape the nostalgic, which is remarkable considering that in *Composite* the photograph is of you at 11 and the camera was made for you by your father. I think an interesting characteristic of your practice is how you somehow make the personal generic, almost as if your personal life becomes one more tool within the studio. Yet there's something so fantastic about your story of how this image came to be; I can't help but be drawn into your family folklore. Your way of handling this is a complicated strategy: by evacuating the content you allow the viewer to dive straight back in. So I guess my question is whether your resistance to nostalgia is a ploy to actually allow it back in?

**ARH** I guess in a really simple way, my interest is in opening seemingly closed systems. Nostalgia is one of them, in the sense that it has the potential to overwhelm any other possible content. Figuring out how to open this up into something more universal, or how to puncture its unilateral read, is for me where things get interesting. At the same time, it is a natural human impulse to develop sentimentality and attachment to artifacts from our history, and it would be disingenuous for me to claim this isn't part of my motivation in using family photos and evidence from my upbringing. Navigating this stuff allows me to investigate my own creative origins; and also creates an objective system for me to manage and file away my own slippery sentimental baggage. But that really just describes how the work functions holistically for me as a person, not how it functions as work. These are two really different things. My relationship to the material becomes integral to how I use it as visual vocabulary. It's important that it has that loaded personal index, but accessing the specifics isn't important. Personal elements become stand-ins to diagram complex relationships

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between objects and images and their various polarized charges. The perspective of the viewer becomes an important variable within the equation as well. Presuming general unfamiliarity with the imagery, the piece initiates an ideal sensation: an unindexable personal echo rattling inside the architecture of a construction. This creates space for both association and the specificities of one's own personal "folklore" (or whatever) to reside.

So, to answer your question another way, maybe my relationship to nostalgia is about reclaiming it as a viable language and liberating it from its trappings.

**EL** You mentioned diagramming, which seems like a central component in your practice. It's so fucking intriguing how you use diagrams and yet it always cracks me up. I think it's because of how logical they are in contrast to the emotional tendencies within your work. Maybe, conservatively, I intuitively separate science from art, but I think you bring the fantastic nonsense of the diagram home. The idea of creating a somewhat linear system of the core of your practice is super complicated and so humorous. I know they're stand-ins, yet the fundamental notion of getting guidance from the scientific—not to say the mathematical—is both smart and absurd.

**ARH** Right, it's a kind of invented logic, or science, that is totally fair to label nonsense. Hopefully there's some awkward tension there resulting from human gestures straining against the rigidity of objective observation. I think some of the humor or absurdity comes out of the impossibility of systematizing fugitive things like emotional matter, but also from the fact that despite this, it somehow adds up to some kind of sense. Even still, the logic that emerges is fractured and filled with holes and questionable motives or undefined variables. What I like about gestures within science and math is the proposal aspect—the isolation of relationship structures as opposed to specified sums. I also don't know shit about either, and it is specifically through the perspective of my relative ignorance that makes it resonate formally as abstraction. I like vacancy of an equation; nothin (fuckin) matters (a phrase once used as an exhibition title) but the activity of maneuvering through the information.

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*Window Series (For Pei-Lee)*, 1977-2008, mixed media, reproduction of Laurel M. Ross photograph. 96 × 54 ½ × 13 ½ inches.

**EL** An aside: can you talk more about your relationship to objects and pictures? I know this is a gigantic, probably not-fair, question, but you reference this relationship often. How does this interplay function within your practice?

**ARH** For me, objects speak in the present tense, occupying a shared space with the body. They maneuver within the immediacy of direct interface. Pictures insert a useful delay, the mediation allowing for objectivity or extreme subjectivity.

It is crucial to my practice to negotiate the two simultaneously, to cross-pollinate their tendencies in order to expand the reach of each. I'm looking to find objecthood, physicality, or dimension within the space of a picture, and inversely, imagistic qualities in an object as ways to expand the parameters of how we experience visual information. A lot of times I make photographs on the flatbed scanner because it is a sculptural and immediate way of making a picture. Something about the apparatus pressing directly against the subject is intimate in a way I like. Sometimes I make objects that attempt to actualize things like resolution, scale, and close focus through their physicality. This is about mediating the experience of viewing an object through sculptural means—creating that delay. I use scale-shifting as an analog for close focus within my own sculptural visual vocabulary. Having an object reside within the same scale as your body is not dissimilar to pressing your eyeball up against it and absorbing every detail.

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One thing about pictures that I return to over and over is the idea of access —what you can and cannot access through the limitations of the image. Many of my works are meant to translate this limited space into real space. Lately I have been obsessed with another engine that negotiates image and object beautifully: eBay. This is an annoyingly predictable archive to be infatuated with, yet there are crucial structures within it that are pertinent to my work. I watch it like a spectator sport. eBay collapses the space between decontextualized object and objectless context. Access to the fragments is granted through images and language of varying quality, detail and fidelity, and the marriage of these forms coupled with the potential for actual access is fascinating to me. For someone who is interested in deconstructing the mechanics of a picture, eBay is a cornucopia of innovative and economic compositional strategies. I compulsively trove this constantly fluctuating network, collecting images and language. I recently made a sculpture that recreated a presentation strategy borrowed from an eBay photo in which someone displayed a large assortment of gold chains on the rungs of a ladder.

Craigslist is equally fascinating, and more lawless. The free Craigslist section is like a concrete poetry forum or a conceptual exercise message board. I have folders and documents filled with genius language stolen from these posts.

*...There is a rather motley assemblage of pieces of wood leaning against a garage door in the alley behind Vernon Ave in Venice.*

Maybe it's the activity of talking about things that are only purportedly there. Maybe it's the attempt to unite fugitive, unwanted garbage with loving homes. The total uselessness is exhilarating.



Detail of *Untitled Retail Sculpture*, 2009, gallery ladder, gold plated chains, dimensions variable. Photo: Amanda Ross-Ho.

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**EL** I'm haunted by your dad's artwork. It's fascinating in and of itself, but it also demonstrates a connection to you. You gave me lots of wine once and sat me down to watch his videos, followed by a recording of Obama's inauguration concert ... it was fantastic. Thinking about your dad's analog videos—and about your use of eBay, Craigslist, and Google—I can't help but bring up the generational aspect of your work. Is there a tension that comes from having grown up in a creative house that was creative pre-internet?

**ARH** Yes, that was a magical evening, I remember it well. What a screening! In an effort to entertain you I pulled out the two most loaded pieces of media I had at hand.

My dad's specific brand of problem-solving and translation in his work and his life has been a huge influence in my thinking and how I consider details. He approaches technology in a really interesting way, which is to circumvent engineered purpose in favor of more direct methods. For example, the videos we watched that night were made with a VHS-C camera, handheld and narrated in real time. In one of the videos, *ART IS JUST MY EXCUSE*, he rigged a setup in which he literally focuses the camera on a small portable slide viewer and changes the slides by hand in order to produce a slide show. He played classical music on an adjacent boombox in order to produce the soundtrack, and would pause the recording to change the slide, causing the music to abruptly cut and resume with each new image. The effect is jarring, funny, and totally abstract, indexing a thinking process that is theatrical and at the same time doesn't give a shit about illusion.

I grew up in an environment in which these kinds of elaborate and flimsy theatrics were taking place all the time. This applied to both the art endeavors of my parents, their invented attempts at domesticity and parenting, and my own creative programming as a child. The bedroom across the hall from my bedroom was a darkroom, and I remember hanging out with my mother in there while she worked, playing around in the dark. She had this really specific way of agitating her stainless steel film processing cans: she would shake them three times and then bang them on the edge of the table. It was her signature. The base of her nail beds were always brown and her hands smelled like developer. We had a black cat that lived exclusively in there until she died. The house had been a hippie commune and there was way too much space for just the three of us. Some of the windows were spray-painted black when we moved in and there was an entire floor where we each had an extra room. My dad had a woodshop in the basement and built me a playhouse down there. It had a vintage chemistry set that had belonged to my uncle John, linoleum flooring, and a fully articulated window, outside of which my parents hung a large painting my mother had made of psychedelic imaginary fish in the ocean. I guess they thought it would be cool if the playhouse felt as if it were underwater.

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*Me/Lucy, Unframed*, 2008, light jet print, framed, 25 × 36 inches.

I was a figure skater as a kid, and so there were constant occasions for costumes, props, and other laboriously overblown productions. One time my dad made me a life-sized tree and park bench with a male mannequin sitting on it, dressed in a crumpled suit and a fucked up woman's wig. It was a prop for an ice competition. I serenaded it, dressed as Betty Boop, in a number called "I Wanna Be Loved By You." Another time my mom came to my school and shot black and white headshots of everyone in the class. There were always resources to do these things in my house. I remember understanding this and also understanding that not all houses had these resources.

The pervasive ethic in my home was an economy of means, accessibility, and immediacy. It was an ecology that valued an eye for the found and a hand for the made. And so it's a logical evolution that I now gravitate to archives like the internet and other public domains. Digital garbage is linked to the same real garbage that was always on the curb, we just used to go through it by hand.

*Amanda Ross-Ho's solo project at the Pomona College Museum of Art will be on view through April 11. She will have a solo exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York in April, 2010.*

**Elad Lassry lives and works in Los Angeles. His upcoming solo exhibitions include Kunsthalle Zurich and Massimo De Carlo, Milan.**

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