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GALLERY

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# For Amanda Ross-Ho, Losing Her Studio Was a Creative Gain

BY SCOTT INDRISEK



Portrait of Amanda Ross-Ho. Courtesy of the artist.



Amanda Ross-Ho, *Untitled Timepiece (HEAVY THREAD/PRIMITIVE TOOL)*, 2017. © Amanda Ross-Ho. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

Los Angeles-based artist Amanda Ross-Ho is that rare thing: a conceptual artist with a sense of humor. Moving across media, from sculpture to textiles and painting, her work often hides a strange complexity within what seems absurd, comic, or easily accessible.

A case in point is her most recent exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, on view through October 14th. It bears the wink-wink title “MY PEN IS HUGE,” and includes a dozen large paintings of clocks, as well as a set of work tables covered in art supplies and oversized novelty objects that Ross-Ho purchased on the internet. For the

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month of August, she set up shop within the gallery itself, setting herself the “athletic” goal of completing everything on-site.

I spoke with the artist about her latest installation, the influence of her family, and the upside of losing the lease on her long-time studio.

**Scott Indrisek: Clocks are an important motif in your most recent show. I’m curious: What’s your own relationship to time?**

Amanda Ross-Ho: I’m always thinking about time management both in literal and poetic ways. I wouldn’t say I’m altogether *punctual*. But I’m definitely a person who is thinking about time as an ecology, trying to Tetris all of the little components that fit into the day, being a little bit obsessive-compulsive in terms of stacking my own efficiencies.

But also, the reason for my meditation on time as of late is this larger thinking about time as a material. That partially comes from thinking about the longer arc of how you age, as an artist, how you develop a long-term relationship with the components of your practice. I’m having that diagnostic moment—thinking about where I am in my career, where I am as a human being. There’s a bridge between those two metabolisms of thinking of time as a subject: that day-to-day murkiness, but then also the longer, slower grind of time’s more geological pace.



Installation view of *MY PEN IS HUGE* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY, 2017. © Amanda Ross-Ho.  
Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

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**SI: You've long worked with oversized objects, including comically large articles of clothing. But recently you've brought in novelty readymades you bought online, things like giant pencils, scissors, forks, and wine glasses.**

ARH: A long time ago, in another universe, before having an identity as an artist, I worked for a textile company in Chicago. Everything was under one roof, from design to production and shipping. We made these very kitschy pillows embroidered with phrases. The phrases would swing from total grandma-driven language to something that was suggestive or even bawdy, with sexual overtones, or kind of nasty. So this universe of the novelty or the gag has always been something I'm interested in playing with, because it has this darkness to it.

The world of novelty production looks at everyday things that you already have a relationship with as a human in contemporary culture: a glass, or a pencil sharpener, or a pencil. These monoliths of our everyday. And I felt that there was something really interesting about combining those with things that I myself have already processed and made. What happens when those get confused and braided together, creating this unclassifiable landscape of objects, whereby you can't necessarily untangle the found versus the made?

The novelty object is this useless vehicle but the humor of it is extremely universal. They're things that have been considered in a boardroom somewhere and then made on a mass scale. Culturally, everyone can understand a giant wine glass.

**SI: Who is the intended customer for an enormous wine glass, ordinarily? A giant pencil makes sense to me, if you're a preschool teacher. But other than the clowning community, I can't think of who would be buying giant wine glasses.**

ARH: I think it's supposed to be this very open, populist audience, right? The giant wine glasses are used mostly in an entertaining or party scenario, so you would see it at an event—like a wedding—or maybe in a wine shop. But it's a piece of cultural vocabulary that anyone can enter. I think these objects function as irreducible placeholders for the idea of just being a person. And I'm trying to poke holes and create some complication—and maybe reclaim some of this stuff from its base classification. Because it's really just trash you'd get at the mall, or at Spencer's Gifts.

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Installation view of MY PEN IS HUGE at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY, 2017. © Amanda Ross-Ho.  
Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

**SI: Done the wrong way, incorporating these kind of oversized objects into an installation could have an *Alice in Wonderland* feeling that might earn the most damning word for an artist: *whimsical*.**

ARH: There's a quiet risk to using this material, and you just named it. That risk is something I'm interested in teetering close to because it triggers these automatic responses that the viewer is asked to confront. The goofiness or the whimsicality—that is a death sentence, of course. But I'm also interested in getting *close* to that moment and having to look that in the face. I want there to be an analytic sensation when you're moving through that landscape. And hopefully some of the other tones that are struck throughout, some of the more paranoid, darker ribbons that run through the show, those will be embedded alongside that feeling of, "Oh, a big wine glass."

**SI: There's definitely a tension in this show. You could walk in for two minutes and Instagram a giant object, and leave. But the accompanying paintings have a density that's really not easy in the same way.**

ARH: There is an aspect of quickness that is intended. The photogenic quality of the show—"snap a pic and post it"—that is a little baiting. I'm thinking in terms of the DNA of the show, and its afterlife. Photography plays a big role [for me]; some of the public

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projects I've done have specifically anticipated the gaze of the viewer, and the way they're going to consume the work with their phone.

**SI: I guess I have the sense of humor of a 13-year-old boy, because I simply loved your show's title, "MY PEN IS HUGE." Can we talk about it?**

ARH: It comes from a t-shirt from the early '80s, the stuff you'd see on Venice Beach or a boardwalk. When a person wears a shirt like that, the message is not straightforward; it's super complex. And I love that, the twists and turns that you start to get your head in when you try to take it apart.

"MY PEN IS HUGE" was absolutely perfect as a title because it did about 15 things at the same time. Language has this ability to do what I want my work to always be able to do, which is to have an elasticity and mutability. I loved the redundancy of naming what was actually happening in the show—which is about scaling my own mark-making larger. Also it's obviously a piece of wordplay that's supposed to fool you, this quick joke. And then it's specifically about male arrogance, and the fallibility of it.



**Amanda Ross-Ho**

THE CHARACTER AND SHAPE OF ILLUMINATED THINGS (FACIAL RECOGNITION), , 2015  
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And *also*, the show is a bit about myth-making. I had to work my ass off to make these paintings in this crazy way. So I am congratulating myself on this athletic thing, but I'm trying to tear that down and talk about myth-making. I'm also a woman, so to make a dick joke is ridiculous. I'm very grateful that everyone was willing to go along with a dick joke as the title.

**SI: You moved out of your longtime studio in Los Angeles about a year ago. How did that change your practice, which has always been so tuned into the idea of your workspace?**

ARH: We lost the lease on that space, which I'd had for almost a decade. That presented this interesting disruption—and I think a good one, ultimately, although stressful. I did a project at the Vleeshal Markt in the Netherlands right after [moving out of my studio]. I was in the museum space for a month. I imported a textile production system, just because it's part of my skill set. I brought an industrial sewing machine and I taught myself how to tailor a pair of pants at large scale. And then I made 12 pairs of these large-scale, very basic, black trousers with the pockets turned out—the classic symbol of a deficit or bankruptcy. The idea was to create a hyperproductive situation, a sweatshop-of-one.

**SI: And this led to the show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, where you were also working within the gallery space for about two months?**

ARH: This whole year I've been in a head space of being untethered, a post-studio moment. That idea of taking the production space and the display space, and literally pushing them together into this situation where the recursive loop is so much tighter—it becomes performative, I would say.

**SI: But you weren't on display as the "artist at work"...**

ARH: No, no, God, no. That was very important, I wasn't interested in that at all. It wasn't about being viewed. I had some visitors, but I was pretty much by myself.

**SI: What's your dream scenario for your next studio?**

ARH: I'm still trying to figure that out. There are some logistical things that my partner and I both need—like, right now we have a whole woodshop in storage. And I also have to factor in these realities about Los Angeles, which has become a very different place than when I first moved here in 2004. Gentrification, and real estate, and the sensitivity of how things are shifting here is a topic that a lot of people are contentiously debating. I would like to find a studio that becomes generative, not just in size or scope, but that also ends up impacting the work.

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Amanda Ross-Ho, Installation view of *UNTITLED PERIOD PIECE* at Vleeshal Markt, Middelburg, Netherlands, 2016. © Amanda Ross-Ho. Courtesy of the artist; Vleeshal Markt, Middelburg; and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

**SI: Do you think you'll stay in L.A.?**

ARH: We live here, we have a house here; we're pretty rooted. I also started a new role as a professor at UC Irvine down in Orange County. So I'm married to this region, at least for now—and happily. The self-starting community here is incredibly active and inspiring. There are so many artist-run spaces here that I literally can't keep up because otherwise I would get nothing done. I get a text message every two days about a new space opening in L.A. That's the good, healthy part: seeing people make their own venues and mechanisms. It's something I'm used to from my hometown of Chicago, which has a long history of alternative and artist-run spaces.

**SI: Have the changes in the city come with many positive effects?**

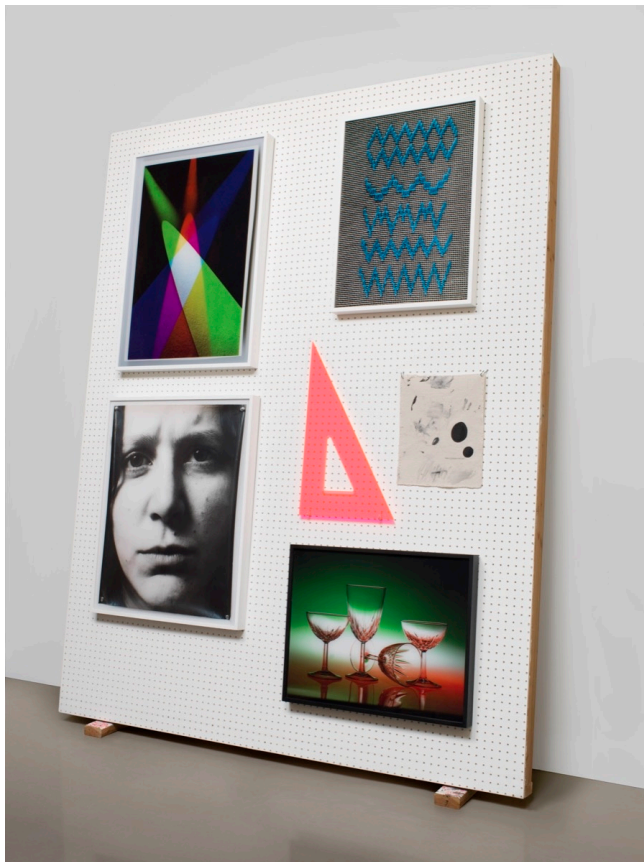
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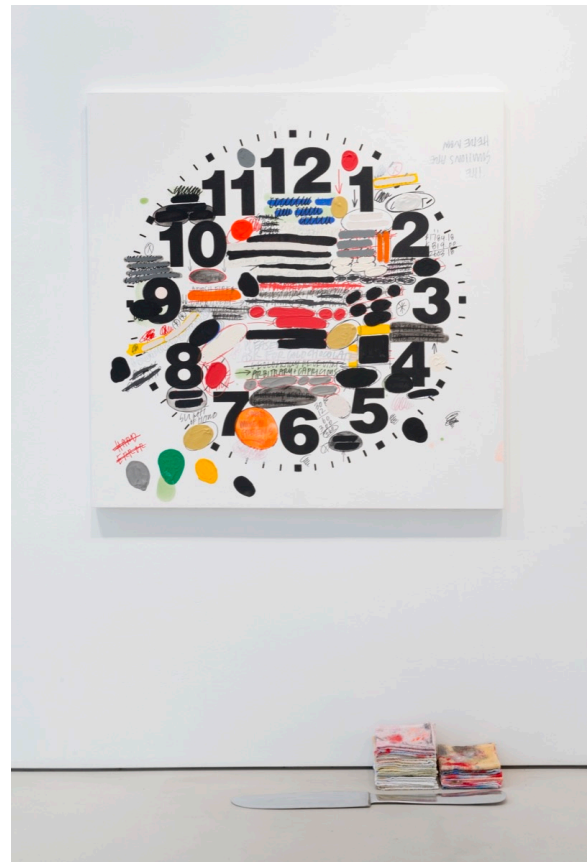
ARH: Los Angeles has this feeling, an apocalyptic baseline. That's kind of why I came here. I liked that: how fucked-up it is. It's starting to be a little less fucked-up, and I guess that's sad.

**SI: In what sense?**

ARH: The shakiness of certain aspects of the city's infrastructure was always interesting. There were these bleak, dystopian, rattly parts about L.A. that felt like there was a lot of possibility. Those are getting polished up a bit.



Amanda Ross-Ho, *Expose for the Shadows, Develop for the Highlights (Perforated Sampler)*, 2010. © Amanda Ross-Ho. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.



Installation view of *MY PEN IS HUGE AT* Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY, 2017. © Amanda Ross-Ho. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

**SI: Can you tell me about one artwork that you own and live with?**

ARH: We do have a couple of things by friends. But we don't have an incredible amount of stuff, partially because we live in an A-frame house without any straight walls, which is a hilarious architectural inconvenience to art collecting. But I can tell you about a photograph that is hanging in my kitchen—because we do have some straight walls in there—that was taken by my mom.

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It's a silver gelatin print from 1972 or maybe '73. My mom did a lot of street photography and architectural, formal photography. This picture is a selfie—it's her and, in the background, these two women wearing plaid bell bottoms. She's holding the camera, and the perspective is one you're super familiar with in a contemporary way—the arm's-length perspective. She's kind of spying on these ladies with their funny outfits. She wanted to get these gals on camera.

**SI: Are you burying the lede here? Did your mom invent the selfie?**

ARH: She always put herself in things—even if it wasn't a selfie, there would be ways in which she would be projected into her images. I've inherited a little thread of that, of course. You'd see her camera in reflective surfaces, you'd see her, the apparatus was always revealed a bit. There's something there that I've borrowed, or was an influence, for sure.

**SI: Have you ever directly incorporated any of her photographs into your own work?**

ARH: I have. And my dad was a painter, but also a commercial photographer who worked at a studio for a while doing product photography. We had a darkroom in our house. For the "New Photography 2010" show at MoMA I made a wall-based tableau that incorporated a self-portrait by my mom, and a photograph of my dad's: a product image of wine glasses, actually, illuminated with gels. He made all these beautiful photos that I actually want to use in the future. They're very non-specific: One of them is an earring on an apple.

**SI: Did your parents stop making work?**

ARH: My dad still does. He's 82, in Chicago, and now he's making ceramics. He's right on top of the contemporary mediums! My mom stopped making work when I was 10 or 11 years old, and she went back to school and became a scientist. She just retired, but she was a conservation ecologist. She stopped a daily studio practice, but she lives really artfully.

My parents have always presented these archetypes of ways to process making things. They're very different, and they both have different ways of still enacting their creative lives. My dad has stayed dedicated to making things daily; my mom enacts poetic gestures in different ways. She still takes a lot of pictures, they're just mostly of plants and animals.

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