ALLYSON MITCHELL: ARTIST, UTOPIANIST, LESBIAN FEMINIST

By Anne Swartz

Multimedia artist Allyson Mitchell is envisioning a lesbian feminist utopian future—with a genderqueer, intersectional twist. While her work is rooted in the theories of 1970s lesbian feminism, Mitchell came of age in the 1990s and 2000s, and, like many feminists of her generation, aims to engage people of various genders. Mitchell weaves together divergent strands of subversive political thought with action and artistic practice, exploring colonization, economics, fat acceptance, environmentalism, feminism, sexuality, and lesbianism with equal doses of aggression and playful subversion. Her messages are simultaneously accessible and intense.

Mitchell wants to “rescue older material of women’s culture,” while recognizing that it “is clunky in some ways, especially the exclusionism, lesbophobia, and racism.” She wants “to see how nuanced it is” and to learn from “useful politics of the past.” She also includes accumulations of the past in her work. Using recycled or rescued textiles, she creates soft objects with a welcoming kitsch aesthetic. A large-scale example is Hungry Purse: the vagina dentata in late capitalism (2006), a room-sized installation with shag carpet, a macramé planter, faux taxidermy, handmade afghans and throw pillows, and found hooked-rug squares, with an afghan-draped, vulva-shaped entrance. It’s a cozy, colorful room/vagina/womb space.

Mitchell was an academic steeped in early-’90s, riot-grrrl-inflected feminist theory before she became an artist. But she found in art “a way to deal with the reaction in my gut that things weren’t right and I didn’t fit in.” Further, she says, “I could engage people through art that makes them feel smart, [as opposed to] academic writing that makes you not feel smart.” Her art training was not academic but rather came from her childhood in a working-class area outside of Toronto, where her mother and grandmother coached Allyson and her sister in crafting and crocheting, knitting, and quilting. Like many other feminist artists, Mitchell honors the art of crafts traditionally done by women, exploring their visual and narrative possibilities.

Mitchell says, “My sexuality and my artistic awakening and my political voice all came at the same time” in the late 1990s. She moved to Toronto and got involved with queer arts and activist scenes, engaging in street-level interventions such as graffiti and stickers in bathroom stalls, and group performances about fat acceptance with the collective Pretty Porky and Pissed Off. In 2001, she coedited Turbo Chicks, an anthology of writing by young women about their experiences with feminism.

Starting in 2006, Mitchell constructed a set of six giant, soft, hairy sculptures, each about ten feet tall (roughly double her height), modeled on her own body. She offers the large, hairy bodies as a challenge to sanitized images of lesbians in popular culture. The positions of Mitchell’s creatures are anything but dainty; they are an imagined breed of Canadian amazons who exist in a wild space outside the city. Her next major body of work was Brainchild (2008), a series of ceramic sculptures that look like Holly Hobbie dolls, except the dolls have enormous heads to house their massive genius brains.

In Mitchell’s four-minute Super 8 film, Unca Trans (2007), codirected with Christina Zeidler, with a script cowritten by J. Bobby Noble and Vlad Wolanyk, a puppet made with recycled materials represents a trans man in the year 2054. He talks from his farm about how his move back to “the land” was central to his happiness in a utopian future where the burdens of binary gender no longer exist, and food justice and feminism flourish. For Mitchell, it is important that art make meaningful “connections around race, gender, and bodies—the real lived experiences we have through bodies,” rather than dealing in the abstract. Unca Trans visualizes a utopian future that’s happening here and now.

Today, in addition to her artistic practice, Mitchell teaches women’s studies at York University in Toronto, where she also manages an activist forum called Deep Lez and the Feminist Art Gallery (aka FAG) with her partner, artist Deirdre Logue. The gallery, which is part of The Centre for Fucking Patriarchy, has the motto “We host we fund we advocate we support we claim.” In a statement that has the urgency of a manifesto, Mitchell and Logue call for “a new kind of sisterhood that isn’t based on gender and privilege and a new kind of brotherhood that isn’t based on rape and pillage.”
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