ARTSEEN

TRACKS: ALLYSON MITCHELL, RADICAL CRAFT

by Anne Swartz

Plush, crafty, lezzy, freaky, fun—that’s the work of artist Allyson Mitchell, who recently spent six months in Brooklyn on a residency at the International Curatorial and Studio Program ICSP on a Canada Council for the Arts Grant. I spoke with her once she’d returned to her home base in Toronto.

The Third Wave’s embrace of craft as a DIY subculture is more than a decade strong. Major museums, such as The Museum of Arts and Design, have had important exhibits about things like radical lace and subversive knitting. Mitchell’s focus on making lesbian feminist statements with her art—she’s particular about her brand of feminism being informed by her lesbianism—uses a craft kitsch lens to showcase her worldview of gender and gender social justice.

While in Brooklyn, Mitchell did research at Prospect Park’s Lesbian Herstory Archive and saw lots of art. She also did “regular kinds of New York stuff” and made new work, which went on view in January and February at the David Nolan Gallery as part of the massive, two-gallery show, The Visible Vagina, a collaboration with Francis M. Naumann Gallery, both in Manhattan. Though the show should have more properly been called The Visible Vulva, Mitchell contributed a large, funky installation of a super-sized labia-shaped installation.

Her time at the Lesbian Herstory Archive was a significant catalyst in the concept of her upcoming work, an installation at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. It will be a large storefront window project featuring two life-size sculptures of women with vibrating, lit electronic brains. She’s calling it “Lesbian Feminist Back-to-School Windows.” Backing the installation will be wallpaper with drawings of the bookshelves at the Archive.

“The scale is growing with each installation and each realization,” Mitchell explained, “I can feel it growing and the energy is increasing.”