

Totokaelo

# Libby Rothfeld



Interview:  
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Libby Rothfeld is obsessed with the idea of time, which is understandable, as it is quite possibly the most grandiose system ever devised by humankind. When one enters one of her shows, it's impossible for that obsession not to immediately take hold. The work is highly organized, yet still disorienting — combining strange components that make one feel equal parts drunk outside the Celsus Library in Ephesus, bored at a strip mall, and delighted at finding alien instruments at Bondi Beach. The more deeply one contemplates, the more patterns begin to emerge. These act not only as anchors to reality, but also as systems to help the viewer decode her beautiful and dense language of creation. Her pieces are gorgeous, transportive, and highly thought-provoking, a rare combination that has made her work a consistent critic's pick in *Artforum*, and has led to shows in some of the most well-respected galleries in New York and beyond.

Can you tell us a little about what one day working in your studio might entail?



LIBBY:

I usually get to my studio in the beginning of the afternoon. Often I have multiple projects going on and go back and forth between working on different pieces, some of which I never finish, unintentional rough drafts of something else. Or they become an element of an entirely different thing. I have a cabinet full of objects I've collected, some things that I've had for years which just inform the work I'm making — lots of stacks of images and piles of materials lying around. I pull everything out and move it around and then usually put it all back again so I can see what I'm doing.

N:

Walking into one of your solo shows feels to me like entering a small Mediterranean town that time forgot, yet it is littered with small examples of globalization: a pile of dusty potatoes in a shopping cart with Japanese writing on it, a picture of Brutalist buildings placed on old tile floors, and empty plastic water bottles strewn all over worn concrete furniture. Does your emphasis on this dichotomy come simply out of a fascination, or is this meant as a call to action against the changing way of the world?

L:

I don't think my work is inherently political. I'm often creating a context or a compression of a context, whether that be the extent of the table in front of me, or, from that, the world outside of myself. A lot of the objects and materials I think about or use tend to be sort of "secondary" — they are relatively ubiquitous but also subconscious in a way, or do their job just enough so that we don't stop and consider them. I think the globalization element is a result of my questioning why I use the objects I use; what is it that these objects, in this combination of each other, start to say? If I only used the objects in front of me, I would only ever be talking about my immediate context. In order for the work to function conceptually, I have to obliterate time and place, and, in turn, end up pulling from elements of any kind of industrialist or capitalist society — addressing the idea of "societies" without being specific about which one.

N:

I think beyond dealing with globalization, your work also gives the feeling of an escape. Many of your pieces look to be sections of old hotels — stained glass towel racks, stone bath tubs, a concrete block for hanging aging suits, et cetera — alongside more obvious indicators like pictures of airports and the strange addition of things like ads for Holland.com. Is that feeling of breaking out of your day-to-day existence something you actively try to stir in the mind of the viewer?

L:

I want them to think about everywhere all at once. The piece I think you're referencing is *Springtime, 2017*, which includes an embedded UV-printed image on plexi. The image has a logo, a Craigslist image of a bathroom, and a boy holding a jar of Nutella and a machine gun. These images have no obvious relationship to each other, but by forcing them into the same plane they start to work together, or shift in and out of one another, deconstructing each image's isolated meaning. It's the act of breaking down "why this and not that" that I am interested in and taking away a subconscious reading in order to really consider the everyday.

N:

There are many elements in your work that remind me of ancient Roman art, but none more so than your use of tile and tiny clay masks, which you often have protruding out of the sides of walls. Would you say that the work of that period had a large impact on you and your process? What other periods or artists have inspired you?



L:

The ceramic has a lot to do with artifact — which brings up ideas about authorship and authenticity. There is an intentional irresponsibility in the way I directly reference and don't reference actual historical artworks and objects. The masks are made by me, but I also think of them as appropriated objects, as if I am making my own found objects for a specific context. In this way, the objects I make are no more important than the base or plane they are embedded in. Ceramic just has an inherent relationship with History (with a capital H) and the historical beginning of object-making. My use of ceramic is about the authenticity that history gives an object — at what point is an object endowed with a sense of preciousness or ineffability, and when does that object have the ability to represent its own history?

I don't know if periods of art specifically inspire me. There are artists that I feel connected to, a lot of filmmakers and writers maybe more so. When I've referenced artworks or specific periods, it's about using them as an idea rather than thinking about it as an aesthetic choice.

N:

Clothing (wrapped in plastic and made to look like it just was picked up from the dry cleaner) played a big role in your latest show at Bureau Gallery. Can you explain their significance to these strange decaying environments?

L:

The "dry cleaning" had a lot to do with use and reuse. The object as unusable in the bag, or that the bag itself gave a kind of weight to the objects that turned them into ideas of themselves. The clothing, for me, had a lot to do with addressing identity and choice. How we define ourselves, or choose to define ourselves, and then, placing those ideas away in our closet. I often think there is a collective set of rules that make up each thing. For example, John might wear shirt B, C, and D, and Joe might wear C, D, and A, but John would never wear A. So BCD = John and CDA = Joe, and the more options you give Joe and John, the greater we can specifically define someone or something through a construction of objects.

In this show in particular, I was thinking a lot about the idea of Man. I had read *2001: A Space Odyssey* and thought about the way Arthur C. Clarke compressed and expanded time. I reinterpreted that into multiple ways of performing our history and self into artifacts. The show for me was talking about both Man as an idea, and then Man's choices of identity shifting in and out of one another.

N:

I've noticed that there are almost no hues used in your work that can't be seen in human skin, even if a lot of those hues would likely be present while someone is on their death bed. Is this a conscious decision in order to make the pieces feel more organic, or more of an aesthetic preference?

L:

The tones of grey in my work have a lot to do with avoiding color, almost as if the work is covered in a layer of dust, or that it's faded in time. That idea goes along with thinking about the inherent belief and trust we have with artifacts, how time endows things with truth.

N:

Your studio is in Ridgewood, Queens, which is a relatively quiet neighborhood comparatively. Do you think that tiny buffer from New York's normal chaos is essential to making work that is focused on creating new environments in and of themselves?





L:

It's actually in Maspeth, not Ridgewood — a bit different, very industrial. It's hard to get there if you don't bike or drive since there aren't really any trains and the particular bus that stops nearby is incredibly unreliable. My studio is down a long alley across from an import company that is constantly importing what seems to be a range of things from toilet paper to children's toys and then recycling tons of cardboard boxes at the end of the day, or even just throwing out what they just imported without even opening the boxes. When it snows or rains, the alley floods almost a foot. It feels like a pocket in the city where all the trash and rain collects. It's very dirty. All of this seems to influence me, I take a lot of their trash and boxes.

N:

What do you have coming up?

L:

I'm participating in a show affiliated with Glasgow International at the end of April, as well as Condo New York in May.