

## ARTCARDS Review

### Interview with Claudia Altman-Siegel of Altman Siegel, San Francisco

by Aaron Harbour on June 15, 2012

*For the first in a random series of interviews with galleries in the Bay Area, Aaron Harbour interviewed Claudia Altman-Siegel of Altman Siegel in San Francisco. They show a wide ranging roster of artists, including Matt Keegan, Emily Wardill, Trevor Paglen and Will Rogan. Their current exhibition of Nate Boyce, 'Knockdown Texture', closes this week. Their next show features guest curator David Berezin with work by Nicolas Ceccaldi, Kate Owens, Jonathan Horowitz, Eric Sidner and Kirsten Pieroth. It opens June 28th. The conversation began with a particular exhibition and then expanded to examine her practice, both as an aesthetic/conceptual enterprise and as business.*

AH: Curating has been something that I stumbled into within the last couple of years. I curate with my partner – who was in the Curatorial Practice program at CCA. We don't really see ourselves as dealers, [so] I don't really know much about that end of the profession. I see this interview as helping me learn something but also to create a sort of dialogue and shed some light on what gallerists do.

I have been coming here for a while now and I've liked a lot of the exhibitions here. A while back I wrote a review on the Fran Herndon show –

CAS: Yeah, I saw that. Thank you.

AH: I was curious as to how that show came about.

CAS: I was approached to do that exhibition by Lee Plested and Kevin Killian. Kevin and Fran have been friends for many, many years. He's a poet and she's been involved in the poetry scene in the Bay Area for a long time – they had gotten to know each other through a Jack Spicer biography that Kevin had written, which Fran had a big part in. Both Lee and Kevin know that Fran has a huge archive of works from the '60s all the way to now and were looking for a place to exhibit them. They had put together a proposal and asked me if I was interested in her work.

AH: It felt like a bit of an outlier in the schedule but in a good way.

CAS: Well, yes and no. I did a Charley Harper show around the time that I first opened.

AH: I didn't see that one.

CAS: I quite enjoy doing something historical every now and then, to exhibit works that still have a resonance today. While I do show a lot of younger artists, many of whom are working with new ideas, I think it's important to show a kind of lineage, that in fact they're influenced by history and show that moments that were radical in the '60s are still influential now.

For example, Charley Harper's works have moments and patterns that look exactly like some artists that are working in Photoshop today. It gives these recent works a little bit of academic depth.

In Fran's show, I wanted to do something that delved into the history of this place. Fran is local and very much comes from a Bay Area history, and considering that the gallery isn't necessarily focused on San Francisco specifically, I was interested in exploring that.

AH: It's a very vital place for that. There's a tightly-knit history, especially involving poetry and art. Kevin's amazing. He's like the living, breathing then-and-now person; teaching students while also promoting or speaking to a history, on top of having his own practice.

CAS: Right, and his wife, Dodie Bellamy, hosts writing workshops for young writers at their apartment every month. They just really built a community that keeps this whole thing alive. It was really fun to work with Kevin. We had really only known each other in passing previously, and so this was when we really got to know each other better.

AH: How would you describe your title? Would you describe yourself as a gallerist, a curator, or a dealer?

CAS: I guess it's all of those things, it just depends on who I'm talking to. [laughs]

AH: Definitely.

CAS: I would like to say that I'm a dealer, because that's the way I make a living. But perhaps gallerist is more accurate – it's quite a wide range of jobs. I think the fun thing about this job is that you sort of have to be good at all of those things.

AH: Definitely if you're going to run it in a space like this. To have a nice space, you can't just be purely creative with no sense of how it's going to operate on a long-term basis, business-wise.

CAS: There are different models for galleries.

Sometimes the owner is really like a dealer, someone who doesn't necessarily have a curatorial tendency and might hire people who can program the space for them. But in my opinion, the best galleries are the ones where the owner of the gallery actually has a specific artistic vision that colors the programs.

AH: I think there's definitely a theme that shows through the shows here – well, not a theme per se but an aesthetic.

How long has Altman Siegel been operating?

CAS: A little over three years.

AH: And then prior to that, were you at a gallery?

CAS: Yes, I worked at Luhring Augustine in New York for ten years and I was a senior director there. I started there as a security guard.

AH: Oh, wow!

CAS: Yeah. I had gone to school for art history and I was a fine artist in school, painting.

AH: I was going to ask if you ever made work.

CAS: Yeah, I had a senior thesis show that consisted of paintings, in addition to an art history thesis on postmodernism. I graduated during a bad recession in the early '90s and I just got my foot in the door at the

gallery by being a security guard. Eventually I worked my way up and was a director within two years, and by the time I left I was the senior director.

AH: Did you stop your practice altogether?

CAS: Painting? Pretty much.

AH: My partner Jackie has a similar experience of getting out of undergrad, having done a lot of painting and thinking, 'I think I'm done with that for now.'

CAS: It's not that I don't like painting, it's just that when I started working at a big competitive gallery and I saw what it actually takes to be a professional artist – how your studio becomes the 9-5 job that you go into. At Luhning Augustine I was working with artists of a certain caliber who all have studios with studio assistants and bookkeepers. They have businesses running out of their studios and it just felt, to me like I didn't necessarily have that much to say within my own practice. That being said, I felt like I did have a lot to say in terms of promoting other artists. So this suited me better.

AH: What do you look for when you're looking for artists? Or I guess a preliminary question is how do you go about looking for an artist? What are you looking for in a practice or an individual?

CAS: There is a bunch of things. Number one, it just has to appeal to me. I have to have a gut reaction to it. I want the program to be diverse in a certain way, so if I'm going to bring an artist into the program I want to have someone who is doing something different than what the other artists on the roster are doing, to show a different dimension. I don't look with a specific medium in mind. What I'm really looking for are people who are working with new ideas and are adding to an art historical or art world dialogue in a way that I think is really unique.

For example, there are forms in Nate Boyce's work that look like something that you feel you should have seen before. Yet I'd never seen anything like what he's doing with video, in how he's working with the medium. He's using the materiality of the video, utilizing technology from the '70s to now and mixing them together almost in a painterly way. It's different from other video artists who might discard more outdated technology and only use the new. He's really mining the history of this medium and to me it feels really exciting and interesting.

I suppose I also look for artists who are working really hard because I will too. I want them to be serious about it because I work really hard and I can do what I do, but if they're not going to pull their own weight – not only in terms of being in the studio, but also in terms of wanting to be a successful artist. There's a lot of work that goes into that – travel, networking, etc – and it's not that I need them to be selling themselves, but I need them to be willing to be in the world with me.

AH: And willing to engage in a dialogue about their work.

CAS: Yeah, and want to be in the art world and want to be in engaged in something. They need to be someone who is serious, who isn't just doing it

because they got out of school and they have one successful body of work and then they lose interest after a year or something.

AH: Definitely.

CAS: Which sounds kind of irrelevant but sometimes with young artists, you never know.

AH: Oh absolutely.

CAS: People's priorities change.

AH: Being close to Jackie and that particular class of CCA graduates, it's been interesting to watch and see which people keep going to events two years later and which people have just disappeared. There's a definite quality to someone who is like, 'no this is what I do. I'm going to be in the studio every week as much as I can, around whatever job I have and I'm going to go to events and be social and be in the art world and look. Keep my eyes open.' It susses itself out over time, but there's definitely a difference between those people that come out of their experience in art school and they're just done.

CAS: I'm interested in young artists but I don't necessarily want to work with someone who is right out of school because I want them to be able to make their career themselves a little bit. I can help maybe take them to the next level but I can't make them do it to begin with.

AH: What do you feel your responsibility is to your artists? I think you kind of spoke to what their responsibility is, what you're looking for them to bring to you. What do you feel your responsibility is to the artists that you represent?

CAS: Well, I feel like there's a lot of responsibilities. There are mundane things like paying them.

AH: Even the mundane things like that can fall through the cracks.

CAS: Definitely.

AH: I hear stories all of the time...

CAS: There are certain dealers who don't pay. I'm really honest and I would rather pay them before I pay myself. I don't know if that's always the case.

My goal is that the more successful they become, the more successful I become and so I try to seek out opportunities for them. One of my goals is that they can stay in the studio and work all of the time and I can do all of the business side of things. I don't want them to worry about that side and just focus on their practice.

AH: Like the kind of nuts and bolts logistics?

CAS: So say, if a curator or a collector or a critic is interested in a particular artist's work, they would come to me and then I would give them the information they need. If it's a situation where they would need to contact the artist directly, it can be arranged through me so that these kinds of requests can be vetted in a way, so the artist are free to just do their work.

AH: Do you offer the artists advice for like non-Altman Siegel specific projects that they can be involved in?

CAS: I would say that almost everything that we do is not even Altman Siegel specific.

I have this show with Nate up now but I'm also working on a million other projects outside of the gallery. An exhibition here is like 1% of what the gallery actually does. Right now we're doing the art fair in Basel and Liam Everett will have a solo show there. At the same time, Trevor Paglen has show at Haus der Kunst in Munich and Sarah VanDerBeek has a show in London with her gallery there and everyone has a million things going on outside of the gallery, whether we are directly or indirectly involved in organizing. For example, Trevor has a show at a gallery in Beijing right now that's closing, and I'm sending the work there directly to a triennial in Guangzhou. I'm on the phone with Trevor everyday sorting out the logistics.

That's really what my job is. We'll have a big rush here when we're installing a show and I'm promoting this show and this work, but I'm also doing the same thing for all of the artists, everywhere else all of the time.

AH: Definitely. You're here in the Bay Area and I know that you were in New York for a while. What made you come here of all places? I know a lot of these artists aren't necessarily from here and are showing a lot elsewhere.

CAS: I don't know why I came here. [Laughs] My sister got transferred here for work and I wanted to try a different place from New York, and San Francisco seemed like a good place to be. When I got here, I really liked it and I also felt that no one here was really doing what I know how to do. I mean, there are a few places here, but in comparison to what New York has. I just thought that either no one else is doing it because it's impossible or because no one has tried. So we'll just see.

AH: It feels possible at least so far.

CAS: Yeah. Well, the jury's still out but I'm working on it.

AH: Do you consider the other galleries in the Bay Area – like do you have like a peer group here? Like do you communicate with them?

CAS: Mostly with Ratio 3, with Chris Perez and Jessica Silverman, in terms of people I communicate with the most.

AH: There's a perception that gallerists/dealers guide artists in the production of sellable work. What role does that play in your dialogue between you and your artists?

CAS: I don't think that we demand artists to make work that is explicitly sellable. It's more like a dialogue, conversation on what works for the piece. Take photography for example, we talk about the different sizes and figure out which is the best for that print, and we'll take it to a framer and figure out the best options for it, and then we'll talk about edition size and the pricing, things like that. My role is definitely to bring things from the studio to market, but I don't necessarily say don't make something because I can't sell it.

AH: I think I get that impression here. It's an answer that would vary from gallery to gallery. I think some

galleries and some artists would have a different relationship to it.

CAS: Of course. There are certainly times where we're organizing an exhibition and it's like let's bring this piece, but let's also bring in these smaller works that are more likely to sell. I feel that if the artist cares, I can tell them what I think will be an easier or harder sale but I definitely do not want to interrupt their creative vision.

For example, Liam's performances currently have no sellable option. Performances don't have the same value on the market as objects and maybe one day they will have a greater financial value. But it feels to me that there is something about these performances that are really inherent to who Liam is and that he needs to get these out there. I want to encourage that and help him develop this aspect of his practice because it will likely raise the standard across his entire practice.

<http://artcards.cc/review/interview-with-claudia-altman-siegel-of-altman-siegel-gallery-sf/5416/>

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