

JUXTAPOZ



SWOON

INTERVIEW BY HANNAH STOUFFER WITH ASSISTANCE FROM LAURA HINES
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WHEN SWOON FIRST BEGAN TAKING HER ART TO THE STREETS, SHE KNEW SHE WANTED TO SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT. BY BRINGING HER ART OUT-OF-DOORS, SOCIAL CONVENTIONS OF ART MAKING AND VIEWING COULD BE REEXAMINED AND REFORMED. THROUGH THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HER CRAFT, SHE SET OUT TO GENERATE POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE WORLD, THROUGH AN INDIVIDUAL, A COMMUNITY, OR A PLACE ITSELF. AS HER CAREER HAS DEVELOPED, SWOON'S PUBLIC ART PROJECTS HAVE COMPLETELY REDEFINED THE ROLE OF ART IN OUR SOCIETAL SPHERE.

- 1 The artist formerly known as Caledonia Curry studied painting at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and started doing street art in 1999 at age 19.
- 2 The name Swoon came from a dream, where her ex-boyfriend dreamt she was a graffiti writer and wrote "Swoon." (This was before she was doing anything outside.)
- 3 Swoon has a studio in Braddock, Pennsylvania, where she and a group of other artists are working on "Points of Interest," a public art project where Braddock youths pick sites for the artists to create "out-stallations."

When viewers encounter her elaborate public art projects or wheat-pastes, the works on the street, there is an understanding that they are there for a reason, that they exist beyond the often self-serving motives that can characterize the private and exclusionary nature of the creative process. Swoon's exquisite work flourishes in gracing unsuspecting city walls and environments across the globe, as she continues to pursue her passion for public art—by bringing creative forces together, and embarking on endeavors that challenge and change the planet. —Hannah Stouffer

Hannah Stouffer: Hey Callie, where are you now?

Swoon: Hi! I'm in bed, in Brooklyn, it's 2pm,

I just slept one million hours and had the craziest dreams. I needed that.

Well, welcome back! Talk to me about your current project working with Equality Effect in Kenya. What are you creating with them, and what has the response been thus far?

I recently got back from spending a week at the Tumaini Center, which is a kind of a safe house in Kenya for girls who have been raped or suffered abuse and are not safe in their home situations. With my collaborators Dana Bishop Root and Paulie Anne Duke, we spent a week with about 20 girls, aged 6 to 18 at the center, drawing, singing, dancing and making masks and puppets. Our main focus was on teaching about how difficult or intense emotions

can be expressed through creativity, as well as how creativity can be used to access feelings of strength and positivity. The Tumaini center is a small part of an immense effort by an organization called Ripples, which is aimed at stopping the epidemic of sexual violence against women and children in Kenya. The organization was started by a Kenyan couple who are so inspiringly dedicated, and are fighting the problem on so many fronts. I came to be involved in the project when Mike Snelle from Black Rat Projects in London got to know a group of Canadian lawyers at an organization called The Equality Effect, who are helping Ripples in their legal battles to acquire justice for the girls. I immediately knew that I wanted to be involved. We came up with a project, which started with a week of arts therapy and





getting to know the girls, and what Ripples and the Equality Effect are doing, and their pledge to continue working with us to raise funds so that they can carry on their work. One thing that our work with Ripples affirmed for me is how powerful it is to be involved in the fight for something better. All of the people there, from the social workers to the girls at the center, to even those of us who spent only a week there, were given so much strength and sanity. By knowing that, although we were dealing with atrocities, and although we also were small, the important part was this massive effort to stop those atrocities and help build a more equal society.

Art is a powerful medium in activism. Are there any issues you would like to address or facilitate with future work? What do you feel most strongly about right now?

One of the things that I feel most strongly about but have not yet made the leap into is figuring out how to address effectively the global environmental crisis through art processes. It's something I tried to undertake in my work at the ICA in Boston, where I chose as my subject matter the Anthropocene Extinction—a term which refers to our total immersion in an extinction event, the size of which has not been seen since the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs, except that we are the cause this time. There used to be thousands of tree frogs singing outside my childhood home in Florida on a rainy night, and now there are none. Amphibians are the canary in the mineshaft. We're losing three species per hour. This unnecessary loss of biodiversity is tragic. That piece was just the beginning of trying to process even my own thinking and emotions about such a huge event. I feel that any really true and effective work on this issue is yet to come.

You do an incredible job using your work as a vehicle to create, engage, and improve communities. What would be a dream public art project for you?

Dream project... well, for some reason I can't put my finger on it, but I want to one day build a temple. In the meantime, I want to make temples out of our ordinary spaces. My dream would be to figure out how to create a place of learning to reconnect our cities to their natural environment. I am part of a collective called Transformazium in Braddock, Pennsylvania. We are slowly working to make a creative public space from an abandoned church and its empty parking lot. I see this as a space to realize a lot of dreams.

Do you believe your work is a collaboration with the environment or a separate element that you are bringing to the environment? What's the difference to you?

It's always a collaboration to some degree. Every project is different. The environment must always be considered. Even when I am just bringing a block print to a neighborhood I have never seen, I have to get into a state of observing and being sensitive to my surroundings to be able to see the right place for it to go. Other projects demand years of careful thought and planning and are a direct response to their place and its circumstance. I enjoy both ways of working.

It seems like your work is getting much more focused on specific projects or organizations than the street work you used to create.

Are you still interested in creating your elaborate wheat-pastes in urban settings? Are you still actively wheat-pasting?

I still wheat-paste, and almost everywhere I go I bring at least a few pieces. It is definitely still the thread that runs through everything, though no longer the main focus of my work. I am involved in so many other intensive projects, but I don't see that love ever going away.

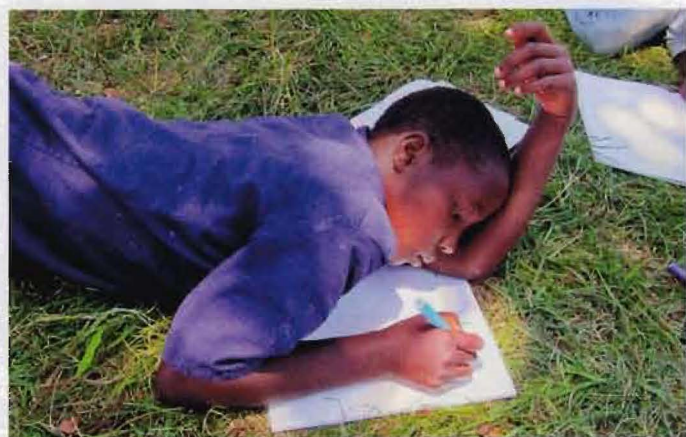
Are you creating any of your public art pieces solo or do you prefer engaging with your crew, performing work together?

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All of the huge projects need a team, and so there is always an element of collaboration whether it's a full open process of collaboration, or I am the team captain. No matter what though, it's impossible for one person to execute something of any scale by themselves, unless, like Sam Rodia of Watts Towers, you take a lifetime to do it. And if you have a team, their skills and understanding are always an invaluable contribution that shape the project as a whole; so each large scale project is a collaboration in some way. I find I need time doing both, time alone in the studio, and time having fun and making messes with a big gang of friends and conspirators.

What has been your most satisfying work of public art to date?

Totally unfair question! I love them all in different ways. But since it's my most recent work, I'll mention this one: I just got back from Tallahassee where I teamed up with some grad students to do work at the local homeless shelter. What I loved about this project was how clearly and concretely it joined two sets of needs. The students needed some real world experience, to be involved in things, and all of us as artists need to do work that matters and to feel that it is appreciated. The residents of the shelter required more places to sleep and store things where they could be up off the ground and away from rain, plus they had a



shelter band and wanted a stage. It was easy to see how joining together these two sets of needs could create a really good outcome. We spent a couple of weeks building at the shelter, which in itself is a remarkable place. We listened to what people there needed, got to hear amazing stories, and built some things where we creatively approached the problems that the shelter was having and came up with some solutions. It's the kind of situation where everybody goes away feeling happy, there is a simplicity and sense making-ness to it. I loved that.

What are the challenges you face when creating something for the public eye? Are you ever afraid of the reaction to it?

There are so many challenges. In New Orleans, we worry about whether our musical house will keep everyone up all night and drive the neighbors loony. In Haiti, there is the challenge of introducing a style of housing that people are very unaccustomed to and hoping that they will grow to love it. With the rafts, there were the constant police visits as people called to tell them that a band of criminal gypsies riding piles of garbage had just arrived in their town. Oh, there are challenges...

Can you talk to me about the Konbit Shelter in Haiti that you completed? It must have been a pretty incredible experience to be able to share knowledge and resources through the creation of homes and community spaces in post earthquake Haiti... you must have enough positive energy and karma to last you through the next twelve lifetimes, at least.

In Haiti, with the group Konbit Shelter, I participated in building a community center and a house. We hope to return in May to build two more houses. It was an incredible experience and what has come out of it for me is an intense feeling of commitment to the village we are working with. This is one of those moments where the engagement of one person showed me

what I was capable of. Ben Wolf first started insisting that we go to Haiti, and it never would have occurred to me that I could be useful in a situation like that. But as soon as I put my mind to it, I realized that, of course, myself and my community of artists, and builders, and architects, and people who are determined to make amazing things happen could have something to offer to this situation. It was just a matter of seeing the connections, and believing in ourselves enough to be confident we could help. The rest is a long humbling story involving lots of mud, and realizing how important it is to acknowledge what you don't know.

By creating these site-specific pieces in public places, are you endeavoring to create a community, make a voice or statement, or further develop your own personal work?

I would say it's always all three, even when I think it's just one or the other. Building in Haiti, even though I thought it was just to get structures built and jobs created after the earthquake, engaged my creative thinking intensely. Every time I take on a project like this, I think it's the intersection of all three of those things that makes the effort interesting. I am not a charity organization, or a housing NGO. I am an artist, and that means that my artistic voice will always pipe up and make some demands to be heard in the process. I try not to squelch that too much because I think that what we have to add in terms of beauty and soulfulness to our built environment is tremendous. I think that taking on real world challenges form an artist's perspective and using creative thinking principles to tackle big problems is what is special about each of these endeavors. I try to make each project a balance of being creatively satisfying for me, and being something that conscientiously contributes to the world.

Talk to me about the musical architecture piece in New Orleans, the Music Box village. Were you satisfied with the product and

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reaction to it? Was stepping into music something that felt new or comfortable to you?

The great thing about the Music Box is that what you see there now is just one step in a much larger process. Our big goal is to build a 3-story, local Victorian-architecture-influenced musical mansion. Well, a diminutive mansion. I'm teamed up with the New Orleans Airlift on this project, along with their very brilliant artist and organizer Delaney Martin. She took the lead on the construction of the music box phase as a way to introduce the project concretely to the neighborhood, as well as workshop the instrumentation, since the whole thing is a big experiment. Each artist involved built their own little house, and each musician built their instrumentation and then the whole thing was tied together when Quintron took on the role of conductor and made the village come to life. It was quite magical. We're gonna have an encore in the spring, and I'm excited to progress toward the building of the actual house.

Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea was a project in which you sailed a flotilla of handcrafted rafts and boats down the Hudson River from Troy to New York City, and as I understand, it was part art, part experiment in sustainable living. Also your incredible-looking *Swimming Cities of Serenissima* project, comprised of three rafts



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that floated through the Adriatic Sea from Slovenia was also a new venture for you. How did these seafaring adventures come about?

How I came to be obsessed by boats is a long story. The short version is that I wanted to make a space that could carry everything that was important to me about the culture I was a part of, that could be autonomous and that could travel; and life on water seemed the natural answer. It was many years of being obsessed about all forms of watercraft from Viking ships to Chinese junk boats before bringing together a crew and beginning to construct rafts. The floating neutrinos were a huge inspiration, teaching the actual raft design to the Miss Rockaway Armada, our first incarnation.

It seems as if a lot of your work is meant to be discovered, either by accident or knowingly by the audience. Does the element of unsuspecting surprise excite you? Do you ever wish you could see everyone's reaction to your work? What reactions have surprised you?

I love the element of surprise because I think that people are more open when they stumble upon something unsuspecting. Creating artworks for very specific places roots them

deeply in the world and gives them meaning, while adding to the environment in which they are created. Although I do enjoy working in galleries and museums sometimes, I still struggle with a deep sense of alienation that I feel in those spaces, as well as a sadness at the idea that so much time and love and effort goes into something which may never have a life in the outside world. My work wants to get in the mix, wants to be useful and help people's lives, or be loud and provocative and joyful. It wants to talk to people, all people, not just people who consider themselves art savvy, you know? One of my favorite responses is when people become invested in something, and protect its presence on their block, even though it may have appeared unexpectedly and illegally. I love it when something can become part of the neighborhood.

You have created many breathtaking feats of DIY engineering, and collaborative revelations that seamlessly weave architecture, sculpture, musical composition, folk art and installation into a living art form. What is the most difficult part of pulling this all together? The most satisfying?

OK, it's gonna sound dumb, but the most difficult part is the pulling it together part. You know? The logistics. The constant dealing

with broken cement mixers, exploded ball bearings, emotional meltdowns, red tape, bureaucratic lack of imagination, torrential rainstorms, PayPal, the police, lunchtime, sprained ankles and ruptured appendix, people trying to give us their daughters, people thinking we've stolen their daughters, broken stuff and more broken stuff, you name it, we've fucked it up! But hey wait, because, you name it and we've fixed it! That's the hard part.

The satisfying part? When you're sitting in the driver's seat of your junk raft in the middle of the Adriatic sea losing your mind because you can't believe you actually did it.

For more information about Swoon, visit Konbitshelter.org and Transformazium.org

THE MISSION SWOON

Wheat-paste cut with gesso and water flew through the air as eight volunteers worked furiously to get Brooklyn street artist Swoon's vibrant piece (printed and hand-painted from a giant linoleum block carving) adhered to the brick wall along Tony's Market on Hampshire Street at the corner of 24th in the Mission.

"Whew hoo hoo!" they cheered, as the 13-foot portrait of Thalassa, Greek goddess of the sea, began to emerge.

In a sweet process in which community heartache inspired activism and led to a group restoration, Swoon's work has returned to the spot from which it disappeared over six months ago. Her original wheat-pasting, which had been installed under cover of night four

years ago, had been destroyed by tagging, and power washed away after a citation from the city required that graffiti be removed. Admirers of the piece that memorialized Silvia Elena, a young victim of femicide in Juarez, Mexico, were shocked by the loss.

"When I noticed the blank wall, it was like a hole in the heart of the neighborhood," said Annice Jacoby, editor of "Street Art San Francisco: Mission Muralismo." She ran into Tony's Market and appealed to the owner, Kassa Mehari, who was devastated. For months, he told her, people had been asking where their mural had gone, and the wall had been tagged countless times. Things happened quickly from there.

A series of phone calls led to Swoon, who agreed without hesitation to send a piece to replace the one that had vanished. In a humorous restoration-that-wasn't, the first piece she sent had been erroneously printed in reverse, and could not be installed. But a small cardboard box containing Thalassa arrived two weeks later, and Swoon's friend Chicken John rallied the crew with an email that read, "we need hands for some art."

And so the piece that began illegally lives on in the form of a new piece—one that symbolizes the power of community to encourage, save and celebrate public art, and one that has people swooning. —Molly Oleson

