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Elizabeth Alexander speaks

“I feel like nobody really feels comfortable in their class.” —Elizabeth Alexander



Elizabeth Alexander, who grew up in Hopedale, Massachusetts, and now lives in Gloucester, spoke Nov. 9, 2011, at Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Massachusetts, where she teaches and her art is on display in the group exhibit “Home Sweet Home” through Jan. 21, 2012. Below are excerpts from her talk.

“My father is an iron worker. He has his own steel working business. I spent almost my entire childhood in his office looking through architectural books. ... That decorative steelwork, I’m very nostalgic about it.”



On “Faux Piano” (pictured above): “I used contact paper to turn a three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional space and used pattern to do that.”



While bedridden by an illness during grad school at Cranbrook, she made cut paper works from a garden book (pictured above): “I decided to see what would happen if I removed all the flowers in the book ... and remove the most important part of these formal gardens and change your idea of space. ... It changed the way I looked at my work and how I looked at decoration and how our ideas of a space can change because all that makes these spaces really magical and beautiful was removed and left as voids.”



On her installation “Keeping Up Appearances” (pictured above): “I was thinking of what would happen if I cut out all the patterns from real objects. ... I really began with this chair and kept going. I did my dress and the curtains. ... The piece is about the lengths you go to look okay and fit in. ... It just sort of alludes to feeling like you don’t fit in, feeling like you don’t measure up, and trying everything you can to get to where you do. ... The person is going through all these things without realizing how crazy it is. ... You’re actually exposing yourself, not hiding.”

“All the objects in the room, the wallpaper is completely compromised. You’re left with something totally useless.”

“In a way this is a very extreme self-portrait, talking about obsession and ... not really fitting in.”



On her sculpture “Upward Mobility” (pictured above): “In Detroit, I found a Firebird at a junkyard and they actually donated it to me to do what I’d do with it. And I turned it into this Victorian chariot.”

“It’s not really fixing it. It’s making it more useless and more ridiculous.”

On “Welder’s Daughter” series: “I started drawings of tools and I started using patterns to cover the tools and it was a very simple way of sort of feminizing the tools.”

She had worked as a commercial welder before attending grad school: “It was very strange for me to feel like I don’t fit into the world I grew up in. ... Working as a commercial welder, I had to do a lot of work on site and that’s when I felt really alien. People always treated me as a damsel in distress.”

“I was rendering these objects completely useless by sort of feminizing them—sort of how I felt people saw me in these environments.”

“Part of my what my work is about is these stereotypes that say who we are before we do. They make us an outsider before we’re even there.”



Disclosure: We also teach at Montserrat and Alexander was included in the “Best of Boston 40-ennial” (aka the MFA bathroom show) in June 2011, which we organized.

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