

# mouthtomouth

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Deva Maitland, *My Parents Had Sex with Animals and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt*, vintage Stussy t-shirt, wax, wood, 2002. Courtesy the artist.

Deva Maitland, Mindy Rose Schwartz, and I met at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where they were students in UIC's MFA program. Visiting Deva and Mindy in their graduate studios, I always thought of my relationship to them as that of a collaborator--someone who understood intuitively where their interests came from. They might not agree with me on this, but I felt we shared a kinship in implying the unorthodox, and in the use of a vernacular that takes on the spaces between camp, kitsch, and the precious.

One of the most important aspects of our relationship, to me, was our dynamic of give and take. While their time as students did not overlap--Deva graduated in 2002 and Mindy in 1996--I could see we had a lot of similar agendas and ideas, as well as some interesting conceptual differences, mostly simply generational. So it seemed appropriate to bring Mindy and Deva together for this conversation. Our discussion took place on December 28, 2002.--phyllis bramson

We should probably start by introducing ourselves, and our work, a bit. First of all, it's interesting that we connected at UIC, because I believe I was brought into their studio arts program as someone whose thinking was different from everyone else teaching there. I have always operated under a different set of principles that often produce discomfort, and I have consistently reacted against art that's conceived with an emphasis on theory. I'm more intuition-based and interested in the "margins," meaning I have a very quirky outlook about many aspects of theory and practice. To me, the "wrong" is just as important as what's right. Plus, I come from the school of disorientation and the overload of materiality, meaning, and images. My mixed-media paintings and works on paper reflect parody strategies, arbitrariness, and ephemeral counteractions. I use motifs based on the co-presence of memory and fiction, to suggest a miniaturized and eroticized fairy-tale illusionary life that offers up all sorts of cosmic possibilities. The work becomes a site for sexual discourse, often pushed into a precarious state. And I enjoy that decorative excess--ostentatious ornament, extravagant materiality, and an unbridled fascination with artifice. Which I find means the viewer is either with me or against me; I doubt there's a middle ground!



Phyllis Bramson, *The Pleasuring Life (Monkey)*

Mindy Rose Schwartz: Well, Phyllis, I'm glad you brought all of us together for this conversation, and I'm really glad I got a chance to know you in graduate

See *Monkey Do*, mixed media on canvas,  
72x60 in., 2001. Courtesy the artist.



Mindy Rose Schwartz, *Mushroom/Eyeball*  
Lamp, ceramic, plastic, 8x7x3 in., 1997.  
Courtesy the artist.

*I need to operate under a certain amount of doubt. I don't sit in my studio knowing every move I'm going to make. In fact, I could say that even after all these years, when I start a new body of work, it's as if I've never made the work before. It's a total mystery to me--almost everything about it.*  
--phyllis bramson

school. I always felt you knew where I was coming from aesthetically and conceptually, and because of that you were always very challenging. When I was in school, and since then, I've been interested in configuring images that incorporate experiences from different times in my life. I often refer to my past through my work, but I am trying to show something about what it's like to be in the here and now. Certain aspects of my subjectivity are evident to me: my gender, my religion, my class. The style of my work, the materials and processes I use, are meant to incorporate and magnify, or break down and dissipate, the lessons from these larger institutional influences. Lately, I've been interested in the negative and the positive shape of objects, representing a contrast between a symbolic or cultural meaning and a pre-symbolic or subconscious meaning.

Deva Maitland: I work in a variety of media including drawing, video, performance, and book-making, but my practice is based primarily in sculpture. I play with formal conventions of pedestal and early modernist sculpture, and within this tradition, I work with human form--figure and figurines. The people I make are human hybrids; they exist between human and not-human. They're half-humans who have too much or too little to be whole. Through them, I'm exploring both a cultural and personal history, and looking at the rapid recirculation of ideas and styles. Recently I've become interested in the future--I'm curious about the idea of a futuristic body and the biological potential of the human. I should also mention I'm from Pheonix, Arizona, because it was kind of a freaky place to grow up. It's eerily empty and hot. Someone once told me that Arizona is a vacation ground for aliens; on top of that, it's a retirement destination for old people, and a state with one of the highest suicide rates in the country. It's a very strange place, and that strangeness has had a definite influence on my work.

I suspect that while we each work with a different set of justifications, we all share a crucial interest in formal and expressive content--which I would refer to as "psychic animation." Part of our agenda is dealing with humanism, albeit a troubled humanism. Our work projects living in an ambiguous world, and we all have a resistance to certain givens of appropriateness. Another way of saying this might be, "Here comes the snake, eating the apple to the core, worm and all." I sometimes think of myself as a contaminator; I contaminate theory and practice. I look at the apple as a wonderful formal and conceptual shape, which I consume almost to the core. But the apple is still there in its truncated form; it's still part of my mode of operation. So, in terms of this idea, Deva, do you think of yourself as somebody who works against a certain formal and conceptual agenda?

Deva: I do, but I also think that position has become so prevalent that it's like an alternative space that isn't really alternative anymore. Working against almost seems like the same thing as working *for* something. At a time when there are so many aesthetics, and everything is so multifaceted, it's hard to be working against *anything*--it almost doesn't make sense to work that way.

Do you think it means the artist is either with something, or not with something? Sometimes, when I'm talking to artists, their disdain for other types of work can be quite dogmatic and off-putting. In other words, it's the end of a discussion and the beginning of an argument.

Deva: Well, I think you're in a camp. You can have 30 camps, and maybe this camp isn't so excited about what that camp does, so yes, in some sense, I can be opposed to what another group is doing. But I also love what happens in certain disciplines and mindsets that I don't fully embrace. I take a little bit from this, a little bit from that, and a little bit from something else. I like being an aesthetic gleaner--just figuring out which things are working.

What about you, Mindy? Do you take the same position as Deva, that this idea of working in the margins isn't such an eccentric position these days?

Mindy: Yes, I agree with Deva on that point. But in terms of working against something, I feel in some ways that I work against myself. I'll be working in a certain way for a while and then I'll sort of lose faith in it, or in a particular material, and then I'll flip and work in a different way. Sometimes I do sculpture, or painting, and then I'll either get tired of it or not be convinced that it's going to help me express what I want to express. So I'll switch and work in video, or try to do something time-based.



Deva Maitland, *Princess A. (detail)*, porcelain, wood, 98x6x6 in., 2001. Courtesy the artist.

Among the three of us, Mindy, you probably have, at the moment, the largest range. I really stick mostly to painting or drawing, and you represent that other type of artist who's project-driven. That shifting among media might have to do with what you're trying, artistically, to express. I sense you're saying that doubt pushes you to make those shifts, but I'm wondering if it's also *need*. A lot of artists have a certain kind of idea, and it doesn't matter if they've painted before, sculpted before, or done photography or video before; they simply *do* it. It's become a very contemporary way of working. It can also remove habit and signature style, which are two of the problems I think painting, in particular, has. But do you feel this is also a way of staying in the margins?

Mindy: Not really. What's central in the art world, and what's in the margins, shifts all the time. Switching media or style has more to do with trying to respond to different ideas, and being flexible about where and how I show work. I try not to repeat myself too much, although there are definite conceptual ideas that I feel unify things. I guess I haven't been able to decide on one particular look for my art, but I don't know if I want to, either. I like to mix-and-match pieces that look really different from each other so they can relate in a more tangential way, and open up how the work is read.

That idea of making project-based work was predominant among Chicago's not-for-profit spaces, and has since been taken over by smaller galleries, like the ones we now see in the Stray Show. As a painter who operates mostly off of the gallery system, my notions of being in the margins may sound odd, because I think my work probably reflects a certain narrative way of working--of using figuration and complex composing--that Chicago was once known for. Still, in the present climate, I do feel more like an outsider. When I come back to my studio it seems like I'm doing something in a different space than a lot of artists--my thinking is just different, or what I read is different. It may be that I just *like* that positioning; it makes things more interesting. But I also agree with you--and probably Deva feels the same way--that I need to operate under a certain amount of doubt. I don't sit in my studio knowing every move I'm going to make. In fact, I could say that even after all these years, when I start a new body of work, it's as if I've never made the work before. It's a total mystery to me--almost everything about it. How strange that



Phyllis Bramson, *A Blink and a Nod in the Garden*, mixed media on canvas, 60x72 in., 2002. Courtesy the artist.

at my age, I'm *still* dealing with what to do next! Whatever that next *is* seems so deeply internalized and unknown. We've talked before about the idea of the uncanny, and I'm wondering if that--the sort of mystery that surrounds working from a position of the unknown--plays a similar role in your creative process.

Deva: I think the uncanny is a funny term that gets thrown around a lot and doesn't always get strongly defined. It probably fits into the idea of the unknown, but I think of the uncanny as something much closer to Freud's idea: this thing that returns from the past with an odd sort of euphoria. The unknown can *accompany* the uncanny. My own work does become like an archeological dig--the past is constantly reemerging, which is, in a sense, the unknown constantly emerging.

When you talk about the past--

Deva: I mean in terms of history--art history, and somewhat my own history, but more in terms of cultural history. I'm particularly interested in the past revisiting the present, because culturally, right now, we seem fascinated by the retro, in pop culture, visual art, and literature. It's as if the past is constantly reemerging and reemerging and reemerging to the point where all these different pasts are here and now.

You're talking about the uncanny culturally, rather than personally.

Deva: But I think within my own practice they're constantly being tied together, because I'm interested in my own personal issues, but I'm not interested in them enough to make them my practice. I always want to look at myself, and how that directly corresponds to something much larger than myself.

What about you, Mindy?

Mindy: I guess I would agree with Deva, in that what's interesting to me about certain cultural references isn't so much the reference in itself as my personal history with it, or how my personal experiences with certain mass-produced images and objects become very individual and specific. But in terms of the uncanny, I think of it in relation to where the figure is in my work. An idea I've been concerned with lately is how to show or represent something that's absent--to represent a figure or memory without actually showing it directly. When I made paintings, a long time ago, I had a very hard time doing this. Somehow, sculpture and installation have really freed me up in that way. I've used the image of ghosts or aliens, or the idea of being haunted, to show the presence and absence of the figure at the same time.

So what is the uncanny?

Mindy: When I think of the uncanny, I think of Zizek's idea--that examples of the undead appear in popular culture to symbolize when loss hasn't been properly dealt with. The dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt. I don't think all memories, or all things that resurface from the past, have an uncanniness about them. Sometimes, there seems to be an excess, a distortion, or something formless that has attached itself to a memory, and that's when I've been interested in using memory as a source for art--when I



Deva Maitland, *Untitled*, wax, athletic sock, aluminum, 24x18 in., 2002. Courtesy the artist.

*I love that I could actually be subversive, somehow--if subversive could mean more than*



*being against a sort of a bourgeois sensibility about things. But so many conservative value systems in our culture have been under attack that I don't really know what it would be to be truly subversive. I mean, Jerry Springer is a lot more subversive than my art!--deva maitland*

can't quite put my finger on it. I also notice myself trying to look within the past for a point when I had a strong reaction to something.

Once, when I was trying to get a student to read something, to pay attention to a particular aspect of her practice, she said, "Well, Phyllis, I'm not going to, because I believe in the 'glue theory.'" I said, "What do you mean, the glue theory?" And she said, "If it sticks, then it means something to me; it's what I'm going to retain." I took that to mean that her visual thinking was pretty internalized. So for me, the uncanny--and I've found it described by a lot of different writers--is something you're not able to speak about directly. It has a believability about it, but it's coming from the inside out. It's destabilized; it's not really a fixed position. Personally, when I make my work, there has to be that element of the uncanny attached, like her "glue theory," to the work. There needs to be a way in which something unexpected has appeared or made itself known to me, giving me back something that I might not understand or have. Is there another way, Deva, that you would express the uncanny?

Deva: Well, I guess I always go back to this definition of its being a return of familiar phenomena made strange by repression--whether it's cultural repression or personal repression. It doesn't even have to be any kind of bad repression. I think that word has a weird connotation attached to it--like something terrible has to have happened that you've repressed, and it comes back in this horrible way. That's not necessarily the case; even the most pleasant things can become repressed and forgotten and then reemerge at some other point. That's where the uncanny lies.

So how do you get that back into your work? Can you express it materially? For example, is it why you mix these very unusual materials together--to surprise the viewer?

Deva: I think it's like what Mindy was saying--I'm exploring these very familiar things that I have a peculiar relationship to. Like the *Untitled* piece with the tube sock--it's an orb on the floor, with a tube sock appendage, resting on a shiny aluminum pedestal. Although that's a hard one to even talk about.



Mindy Rose Schwartz, *Self-Portrait as Aromatherapy Candle*, wax, essential oils, wicks, 40x13x13 in., 1999. Courtesy the

I remember that sculpture in your show at Joymore. The sock looked like an attempt at decorum--to cover up that inexplicable, unmentionable appendage. It was quite an "un-modernist" attachment! I think that piece is a perfect example of how the past and present come together in your work in an uncanny way. It seemed modernist but also--and I know you don't like to use this word--surreal.

Deva: Yeah, I don't really like the word "surreal"--it has too many bad things attached to it right now, like the subconscious. Working from the "subconscious mind" and losing one's rational control in the process of creation is at the heart of the surrealist practice, and I don't know how to feel about the subconscious mind, or if I believe it even exists. I *do* believe in somehow losing control; I just don't know if there's a subconscious underneath that takes over. Also, surrealism has a reputation for being plain weird. I don't discount it as an important movement or influence; I just don't recognize myself as a surrealist. But, yes: to respond to your question, the past and present do meet in this work. The orb/egg shape is one of those modernist ideals of wholeness, and my orb is *extra* whole--it's excessive, with

artist.

that contemporary tube sock and appendage. Although the tube sock dates back to the '70's--it's actually hard to find--so it seems contemporary, but again, it's also retro.

My husband has a whole drawer full of them, and I cringe whenever he wears them--on his feet, I might add! But as soon as you began to make those unorthodox figures in graduate school, I sensed you were on your way. I particularly remember the large bust on top of the pedestal, with the arm dangling from a piece of string. I had to peer up at it because it was so much taller than I am. Your work began to project a powerful eeriness, and there was a particular materiality that seemed both right and, as I spoke about earlier, *wrong*. I felt we shared the same interest in that "disagreeable beauty" Dave Hickey has written about. You know, Deva, I still remember every single piece in your thesis show. Where would the uncanny reside in the work that you make, Mindy?



Phyllis Bramson, *Perpetual Offerings*, mixed media on canvas, 68x56 in., 2002. Courtesy the artist.

Mindy: Well, I think I was going for a kind of uncanniness in an installation I did called *Pinning Stage*, which used a lot of different elements. There was an arrangement of five different-sized dirt and compost islands, with mushrooms that grew on them from their pinning stage to full maturity and beyond. Some mushrooms were harvested and made into soup, and some dropped their spores and withered. I think mushrooms are really strange: we eat them, but they're also a fungus--they're the vultures of the food kingdom, growing off of decay. I also embedded plastic eyes, lit from behind, in the soil, dispersed among the mushrooms, so the work could look back at the viewer and create a kind of mirroring. Then I made a four-track recording of various vocal and musical sources--my mother's old records, camp recordings, and family conversations recorded when I was about 6. You couldn't identify the sources specifically, so the sound became a kind of song or disembodied voice. It created a background rhythm against which to view the installation.



Mindy Rose Schwartz, *Pinning Stage* (detail), soil, mushrooms, plastic eyeballs, lights, 1997. Courtesy the artist.

I get the sense we're talking about a desire for an attached narrative. The work itself is not narrative--there's really not a story--but there's the *idea* of narration attached to it. You also talk about mirroring, Mindy, and I find that in almost all the paintings I create, the images are looking out and acknowledging the viewer. That's always been important to me. There's this notion of: where does the eye reside? And the eye might be a nipple, an orifice, or, as Bataille said, the dangerous sun. There's a continual disruption, with the use of allegory as a bridge to enable passage from one world to another. I'm the first viewer of the work; it's talking to me, and I'm talking back to it. It's manipulating me, and I'm manipulating it. There's a capriciousness in that--a whim, a sudden change of mind without apparent motive, a susceptibility to varying and freakish impulses. Again, it may partly be my age or my background, but I think my work is really attached to an intensified relationship with the natural world, addressing the rift between here and now. It's value-infused and it's about behavior--sexuality, and a form of yin/yang or male/female dichotomy. It's sometimes alluded to as being feminist work--which I'd like to get to later--but to me, it's really about the sparks or the charge between male and female, that site of inappropriateness and the taboo. How that taboo attaches itself to gender issues, and ideas of love and the erotic, is really important to me, and that's also where the uncanny lies for me.

So far, you've both been less specific about what's influenced you from your

past, and I do believe that, as artists, we go back to something that happened to us, or ways we operated in the world when we were younger. Some of my influences appear to be my love of dark fairy tales when I was a child; my parents' house, which was filled with erotic Asian statues; and over-charged emotion in the home. My father had a ribald sense of decorating--he was definitely in charge--and a sort of sexualized sense of the world. Would either of you cite something specific from your past as stimulating your work, or is it not stimulating the work at all?

*I've tried to pay attention to art or craft processes I learned growing up in the 1960s and '70s, before I went to art school, to assess what kind of skills I came away with, and figure out how that type of socialization could be useful to me. I want to frame materials and processes that are seemingly useless or insignificant in a better light. What does it mean to be able to weave a really good potholder or make a really cool key chain? Where could knowing how to do papier-mâché or macramé take me in life?--mindy rose schwartz*

Deva: My experience of pop culture as a kid really informs my work, and I think the tube sock specifically fits into that. I decided to use it because of two things. I found this photograph once on the street, of these guys who looked like they were doing some sort of frat prank. They were naked, and they all had tube socks on their penises. It was a weird image, and I still have it. Then there was the Red Hot Chili Peppers album where the band wore tube socks on their penises. That was actually my original inspiration--I remembered seeing that image as a kid and knowing that they were these rowdy boys who would come onstage and play with nothing on but a tube sock. That was an exciting and horrifying thought to me as a young girl. Not that I wanted the piece to talk back to the Red Hot Chili Peppers or anything like that. I just knew that the tube sock had elicited a strong reaction in me at a certain point. Another example would be my bunny pieces--*My Parents Had Sex with Animals* and *All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt*. The head of this bunny is covered in a Stussy t-shirt, which is an interesting brand because it co-opted or created the idea of streetwear and made clothes for alternative people, like skaters or surfers. I was so infatuated with that brand.

That's interesting, because in my paintings, how I clothe my figures can be difficult and troubling. I don't *want* to clothe them, but there's such a stereotype about female nudity. Maybe that's why I've often chosen fairies, for example, because I can put wings on them and other exotic accouterments. I think the dressing--what the piece is wearing--is a really important component in your work.

Deva: The clothes almost become another appendage--they become a growth. The clothing is also important because it enables me to make more cultural references and get outside of just the figure, whether it's a boy, a girl, or a bunny. It's an opportunity to start picking from the world.

What about you, Mindy?

Mindy: A lot of the work I've done has its origin in something from my past, although there's no one specific event I've tried to illustrate. For example, I made *Self-Portrait as Aromatherapy Candle*, which was my weight in layers of colored wax scented with essential oils. When I was growing up, it was a popular girl's-room thing to have a few stripes painted along the top edge of the walls all the way around the room. The colors were very design-y, like maroon or rust and blue, or tan with brown and lavender. I never had this in my room but was jealous of friends who did. So I was going for that type of style with the candle. The process of making candles in the kitchen was also from this era. I've tried to pay attention to art or craft processes I learned growing up in the 1960s and '70s, before I went to art school, to assess what kind of skills I came away with, and figure out how that type of socialization

could be useful to me. I want to frame materials and processes that are seemingly useless or insignificant in a better light. What does it mean to be able to weave a really good potholder or make a really cool key chain? Where could knowing how to do papier-mâché or macramé take me in life? I guess I'm trying to be critical and sincere about this at the same time.

I guess my location is probably more "fantastical"--referencing the *Arabian Nights*, the *Kama Sutra*, and fairy tales. Your work seems to be located in the kinds of things one would do or relate to in the home or at the kitchen table--giant potholders, or super-big bunny slippers, for example. It has very eccentric and ambivalent ways of talking about the domestic. Then yours, Deva, is almost like this strange couture of your past; the notion of clothing as not just an accouterment, but also a psychological attachment, is quite subversive. I wonder if this idea of the "subversive"--how we skew things, using sometimes disreputable tactics--is also something we share.

Mindy: I might have a problem thinking about my work as being subversive, because it doesn't really feel that way to me. I don't think that is necessarily my intention.

Really? I have a hard time agreeing with that! However, you once said "cute" was a word you liked.

Mindy: Well, I'm trying to express a balance or variety of moods and emotions. I'm not really trying to talk about domesticity or cuteness *per se*; I'm interested in *using* cuteness as a vehicle to express other ideas. What I find great about cuteness is that it can be so appealing and also so repellent, or scary or depressing, all at once. Like humor, cuteness can initially seem really inviting or harmless, but then somehow it always has a more complicated undercurrent.

Deva: I also have a problem with the idea of being subversive. I think opening up spaces that are easily overlooked or not seen is a little bit more my intention. I love that I could actually *be* subversive, somehow--if subversive could mean more than being against a sort of a bourgeois sensibility about things. But so many conservative value systems in our culture have been under attack that I don't really know what it would be to be truly subversive.

That's a valid point. It's certainly the way the world appears, now.

Deva: Yeah. I mean, *Jerry Springer* is a lot more subversive than my art!

Sometimes I feel that the art world is becoming slightly wobbly and toothless, because the world itself has become so peculiar and so off-the-chart *inexplicable* that whatever we're making seems like just a tiny little projection that doesn't affect the world at large.

Deva: Now that we're talking about it, I think I'm pretty conservative, actually, in that I make work within the very conservative tradition of figurative pedestal sculpture. Granted, I usually set up that system to mess around with it, and destroy it a bit.

On the whole, artists are much more conservative than they'd like to imagine.



That's why oftentimes I'll read a fabulous book, or go to an amazing movie or play, and kind of limp home, because suddenly I don't think I'm actually that interesting, or that I've found something to paint that reverberates. I want to see art that destabilizes me, that makes me more conscious of myself and, therefore, of my relationship to the world. I want to see art that transforms me, and I think that's getting harder and harder to do. I sometimes find myself being more affected by literature and movies--and I always know when it happens, because it makes me want to become a better artist. It sends me right back to the studio, humbly. Certainly once in a while an exhibition I've seen will do the same; I just wish that happened more often! But it seems we have to put ourselves in a bubble, in some sense: we have to accept the idea that we, and our art, *do* matter, but that seems more difficult right now. You two are at one stage of that development, and I'm at another stage. I think we would probably agree that both of you are working into your careers, and I'm just trying to *keep* my career! But they're both really difficult positions to be in. So I want to ask, how do you operate in the world in terms of your art? What matters to you? Does it matter that you show, and where you show? Do you need to be visible?

Mindy: It's sort of a give and take. I think the most important thing is sustaining artmaking over as long a period of time as you possibly can--however that gets done. There are a million different strategies; sometimes it means showing work, but then it can also mean just thinking about work and making it on your own. It's different for every artist. I do think it's important to have relationships with other artists, whether that happens through a show, or through school, or just by being out in the world. It helps to have some people who are paying attention to your work, or somebody you can bring into your studio. It is definitely easier for me to make work if I'm going to show it, because I'm very motivated by deadlines. But I like making things, and that motivates me, too.

And you can't operate only because you're getting ready for a show. I know artists who do that--they only come alive under those circumstances--and I think it's a real mistake. But I also feel that I work too hard in terms of trying to get the attention of curators and museums that matter to me professionally. In some sense, I *owe* the work this attention; it's like sending it to the right college, or giving it the right kind of life. I feel I have a responsibility to this work to do something with it. But it's very, very tricky, because when things don't work out, there's the danger of becoming bitter or disappointed. I always say you should operate as if you have this amazing career, whether it's there or not. Think of yourself as a long-distance runner. Work as an opportunity for growth, to pursue your own thoughts and interests. Many artists feel they have to be continually working on finding opportunities, but you also never know when someone is going to come to your studio and offer you something. There's this great story--and I believe I first heard this from James Yood--about an artist who is working in the studio, making fantastic things, when there's a very loud car crash right outside. An important curator knocks on the door and says, "I've had an accident; I need to use your phone." And before the curator can say anything more his eyes open wide and he says, "My *god*, I've never seen work like this! It's so fantastic that I've *got* to do something for you. As soon as I finish calling for a tow truck, I'm going to work on your career!" Don't we all wish!

Deva: Yeah. I would like to think that I could maintain my own practice without a lot of interest, but I need to have some sort of interaction with the world to keep my practice interesting. Exhibiting the work is part of that public interaction, so I do consider it important for my personal development. The idea that artists can tuck themselves away and create things is nice, but it seems really romantic and sort of unattainable to me.

I want to talk a little bit about feminism, because I referred to it earlier. In some ways, we might have a harder time talking about feminism now, but it also seems it's being revived. What are your thoughts on that, Mindy?

Mindy: I think feminist ideas and feminist art have been an influence on me, but maybe not in a direct way. As I mentioned, I grew up in the '60s and '70s, but by the time I got to art school in the '80s, I ended up feeling like I'd really missed out. I think I have a romantic idea about both the politics and the art from then; when I consider how radical and confrontational some feminist artists were, it's kind of unimaginable. They were really questioning roles of women in art and society. Recently, I've become more curious about feminist art, because it seems to have been missing from a lot of artworld dialogue, and I wonder what happened to it.

Just to interject, I wonder sometimes if it got co-opted by men, in the sense that postmodernism enlarged the language. The word "feminism" doesn't resonate like it did in the early 1960s in particular, when it was generating a more open-ended idea about materiality for everyone. What do you think about this issue, Deva?

Deva: Feminism does seem less of an issue now, because I think the world has become feminized by both feminism *and* postmodernism. Feminism made possible a lot of the questioning that happened in postmodernism; some really strict ideas about art were blown apart, and now we're in this wide-open space. There are still issues I think are very important, but it's so much more complicated now than it was. For example, I think early on in feminism there was an "us against them" feeling. Now we don't have that; we have a more complex, odd terrain to deal with. It's hard to know whom to be against, even if you want to be.

Mindy: I think in all of our work there's definitely a certain voice--

--maybe a genderized voice.

Mindy: Yes.

But you were recently in a show Hamza Walker curated at The Renaissance Society, called *Watery Domestic*, and he was certainly alluding to some principles like feminism. Or would you word it differently?

Mindy: Well, I think that topic was brought up, in that context, through nostalgia. I guess what I'm experiencing, in a way, is a feeling of nostalgia for feminist art. I have more of an appreciation for the women artists who were working then than I ever have. It seems like so much of the focus today is on getting a gallery and gaining fame, money, or personal recognition. My curiosity about that earlier feminist work lies not so much in the aesthetics or

the essentialism of it, but in the fact that it seemed to operate within a more political and social milieu.

Deva: For me, nostalgia fits in with feminist art, and with so much of art history--like modernism. There's that feeling of what you mentioned in the beginning--the uncanny--and a feeling of lack. It almost seems there's a desire for all the power that feminism, and a lot of past practices, had.

Maybe there's a longing for that sense that you're beginning something really clear, and that the world is sort of agitating against you--that you have a mission, and you know exactly what your path is going to be. There have been periods of time in art when people were unified in some way, and always the complaint about postmodernism is that we're split apart.

Deva: It's weird, though. The freedom is fantastic, but then the non-clarity is confusing--it's like a double-edged sword.

I had a tough conversation with an older friend of mine who had helped generate the women's cooperatives. She was part of an East Coast organization called W.E.B., and she's very interested in feminist history: how this happened and that happened, and *with*o made it happen. And I just kept saying to her, "I'm not interested in any of that. I'm just interested in the materiality and visual pleasure it produced; how it opened up the idea of where a narrative could go and where a dialogue could be, and how it opened up conceptual linkages"--for example, in the way that men entered into it. For a while, the irony was that the only artists who could really take on specific feminist practices, like knitting or embroidering, were men. There's a conceptual reason behind that, and we need to look at it, because it had a lot to do with gender-bending.

Mindy: You know, I think the politics right now are also making me think more about the activism of feminism, because I cannot believe the world is so frightening. This whole mounting for war is so disturbing. Again, it makes me curious about a time when artists, and people in general, were more directly politicized.

You could also look at it another way: that, as artists, we're the canary in the coal mine. We're part of a greater society, yet sometimes we're right ahead of what's going to happen, and sometimes we're reflective. One thing a lot of people are saying is that, as a country, we're paralyzed. We can't figure out what to do, and we are being led by a patriarchy of some sort. Also, some of the politics outside this country are dangerously dismissive of women. So I wonder if that's also what you're speaking about: how we operate from the site of being artists and women, and how we see the fragility of those positions.

Mindy: Well, as far as feeling paralyzed as a country, there are many people who are very politically active, and I wonder what it will take for more people to get that way. People all over the world are protesting against an impending war, and it doesn't seem like our government is listening. The political climate is more conservative than I can ever remember it, and I worry about rights in this country that I've always taken for granted. Things seem to be going backward, not forward, in that regard.

**We seem to be in a place where no one is able to change things. But then why do we remain artists?**

**Deva:** Well, "changing the world" is a huge idea. If you can influence the way a few people think, that would be changing the world as much as anything large.

**Mindy:** Politically, things are swinging hard in one direction, and hopefully they'll swing back soon. My art is not about politics, though. For me, I can only express my personal experience, and hope that something else--a larger picture--is embedded there.

Ultimately, I think being an artist stems from the belief that our individual efforts can attach themselves to the bigger picture. That's the hope we have in making art--that we're participating in the world and not removing ourselves from it. That's why touch, I think, is still an important issue for all of us--there might be some fabrication involved in our processes, but we're mostly working with our hands. Perhaps we want to keep reminding the world what it means to be human...even if it *is* that troubled humanism. In a recent graduate critique, a student quoted a phrase from a k.d. lang song that seems to fit: "I worship the tenacity of this beautiful struggle we are in."

Phyllis Bramson is represented by Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago; Printworks, Chicago; and Littlejohn Contemporary, New York. Upcoming solo exhibitions (2003-04) include Carl Hammer Gallery, Littlejohn Contemporary, Printworks, and University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. Deva Maitland is an independent artist who has recently exhibited in Chicago at Joymore, Deluxe Projects, and the Ukrainian Institute for Modern Art. Mindy Rose Schwartz is an independent artist whose works may be viewed at [www.joymore.org](http://www.joymore.org). She recently appeared in a solo exhibition at Joymore and the group show *Slab* at University Galleries at Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois, and will be featured in the *WhiteWalls* booth at Art Chicago 2003.