

la Fondation andré forestier pour l'art contemporain

Mindy Yan Miller

seeing and not seeing [and other recent works]

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seeing and not seeing **A Conversation between Amber Andersen and Mindy Yan Miller**

Interview conducted via email for the exhibition of *seeing and not seeing* at the Estevan Art Gallery and Museum, Estevan, Saskatchewan, November 22, 2019 – January 10, 2020. Amber Andersen is the director/curator of the Estevan Art Gallery and Museum. © 2019 Amber Andersen, Mindy Yan Miller, Estevan Art Gallery and Museum.

01 Q) What is this exhibition about?

This work is about materials, about things being there and not being there – about mortality. It's about taking things that we buy in stores – packaged and ready to go, and thinking about their sources – especially animals as living beings, but even in-animate things like rocks and apparently obdurate materials.

This is what's important to me and gives me the logic for making decisions on how to handle my materials and manipulate them.

I'm interested in systems – numerical systems – like weaving, social systems, counting systems...

In fact, I'm most interested in highlighting the hide: the cow itself – I want whatever I do as an artist to be in the background – I don't want to draw attention to myself as the maker. I want people to notice the similarities in the hides – and their differences: in the same way as human beings are all similar, and at the same time – have endless and undulating differences.

My operations on the hides are very mechanical and dispassionate – they're quite violent really: I cut skins. I'm always hoping through these actions, to show up what actually happened. There are scars on the hides that record what happened to the animals: their histories: their biographies – of how they were processed.

When I see an intact cowhide – a rug for example, it's very difficult for me to see what it is. I think of my cutting as a way of making a gap that enables me to see what the cowhide really is.

Things exist in time and space – then they break down and don't exist anymore. Cows live and die – then they're turned into objects. How can we take living beings and turn them into objects?

There are complexities and contradictions in this work. As a vegetarian – I have friends who ask how I can work with skins. The answer is because the cowhides are so beautiful – I love to pet them just like my cat

and dog. Sometimes though, because of this work, when I look at my dog, I momentarily see her as a hide. At times when I am working, images of slaughterhouses fill my mind and it becomes scary, but most of the time I can choose not to see that, just as I assume people choose not to see where their meat comes from. What would happen and how would the world change if we all chose to see?

seeing and not seeing is comprised of two materials (hides and Plexiglass): one is opaque and visceral (natural), the other is Modern (e.g.: glass towers, see-through). These give the work its dynamic: one set against the other. Ultimately, I'm interested in the body: how we use things, where things come from and all the processes involved in their use.

02 Q) There is an interesting moment with the works, by using Plexiglas slats and cowhide, two non-traditional mediums for weaving, that really accentuate the labour and beauty of weaving. Was this your intention?

I teach Fibre Structures at Concordia University in Montreal and this includes an introduction to weaving. I do not consider myself a weaver, but I'm interested in the structure of weaving and this has found its way into many of my cowhide works. I was trained artistically to work with ready-mades: things that already exist and carry meaning with them, rather than simply using materials to create art I work to make art to reveal the materials. I'm interested in grids and weaving but we are so surrounded by cloth that nobody notices it. My first-year fibre students cannot tell the difference between a knit and woven cloth even after I've talked about it.

Woven cloth supersedes the use of skins in the history of clothing. Weaving, the intersection of threads at right angles, is essentially a grid. Weaving patterns are designed on grids, with squares left white or black, depending on whether a warp thread is below or above a weft thread. Much of the patterning for my cowhide work is based on this. For instance, the width of cut strips in the middle piece is based on a broken-twill weaving structure. I assigned each warp thread a different width and calculated the width of the strips accordingly. Weavings are made up of lines of interwoven vertical and horizontal threads. My 'warp' begins as a solid skin which I carefully grid off and slice into, making openings through which I insert my weft: the Plexiglas slats. Turning the slats literally creates space in the hides and it is these openings, which for me, allow us to think about the hides from more multifaceted perspectives.

03 Q) The plywood tables, constructed of sheets of oiled plywood on sawhorses, speak to an industrial aesthetic. Why this choice of material?

Part of my goal in this work is to show how the lives of cattle are fully integrated into a consumptive system and I think that the industrial aesthetic of the tables speaks to this.

Artists have to think of practical concerns too, like shipping and storing and plywood and folding – sawhorses are a good solution. The tables were oiled simply to help protect the wood.

I like using commercial products. The 4' X 8' sheets of plywood are the same but different, as the wood comes from living trees. The same goes for the Hereford cowhides. They are all one breed and some look almost identical, yet they are all unique individuals.

I'm interested in showing the work on tables because I want to inhabit space. Cows are big animals and I want the hides to take up room – as if giving the cows back their bodies. At first, I conceived the installation as a herd and originally imagined arranging the tables organically, like cattle grazing in a field. In this configuration, they're all lined up – as if in their stalls.

04 Q) You have used cowhide with frequency in your artistic practice. What is your draw to cowhide and why cowhide?

When I lived out east I made a lot of work about the body and absence using human hair or masses of used clothes. I am affected by my environment and I when I moved to North Battleford, SK which is the smallest and most rural place I've ever lived, I started working with cowhides. It seemed like a natural progression. I had always been interested in working with leather but wasn't sure how. I started with a veg-tan kit from Tandy Leather – the kind where you tool the leather and lace together a wallet. Of course, I didn't get that far but I became interested in how the leather was decorated. All the flowers and foliage ornamentation felt like a kind of obfuscation – as if cattle are a part of nature rather than capital. I want to find a way of working with cowhides that would be critical and would not be consumed by the decorative arts or design.

05 Q) There are moments of optical illusion, where you cannot see the Plexiglas slats, so the cowhides seem to be defying gravity. It certainly brings reference to the title of the exhibition. Were you wanting to explore optics?

You're right to ask about optics – I am interested in opticality and op art in particular. I start with this question: can the op art genre, which has been championed as purely 'retinal' be reformulated with materials that are real, particular and visceral? Or better: what happens when the optical play and confusion of op is embedded across a visceral ground? Can the viscosity of the skin add a bodily dimension to the optical play?

06 Q) In your practice you have referenced the making of clothing, of stitching, the labour of putting textile-based things together. You have also discussed the waste culture that is also part of the clothing industry. Materiality has always been a focus. Does this particular exhibition exist within that conversation as well?

Labour is important for me and I always try to make things as well as I can as a way of respecting and honouring the material – in this case the animal, even though it is dead. The hides themselves come from retail leather craft shops, a secondary industry to meat and dairy production that makes up about 10% of the total "value" of the cow. In working with the cowhides, I try to reference the ways in which we utilize cow leather. This work actually started from thinking, not about clothes, but interior design and window coverings. I started by trying to make calfskin blinds. These were woven with used wood or vinyl blind slats purchased from Habitat for Humanity. I do hope to also reference clothing but imagine this will happen tangentially by working with images from fashion magazines or working with models.

07 Q) What are you exploring next in your practice? Will you continue on with this particular focus or explore something new?

In my studio I continue to be excited about working with cowhides. I could work on them a really long time. These pieces, with Plexi slats woven through – remind me of architectural space: roadways, overpasses...

I'm currently working on a piece called *Corridor*: a large installation of hanging, sliced cowhides (opaque and open, layered) in the form of a long, funnelled corridor that people can actually pass through. With this piece, I'm thinking of social behaviour and how architecture modulates and reflects our bodily relations with one another – how Modern space, with its freeways, shopping malls and open-concept design, reinforces individual autonomy at the expense of herd-like proximity. Like the cows, whose hides I work with, human beings are herd animals. We shouldn't lose touch with that aspect of our nature.