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## **Behind Closed Doors**

### **An Interview with Tracey Snelling by Chuck Mobley**

Tracey Snelling's mash-up of mediums and genres culminate in a wildly diverse pastiche. Intricately assembled installations of vaguely familiar themes, places, and objects designed to elicit visceral response also disrupt the mainstream equilibrium. Audiences are obliged to consider their complicity in the communal voyeurism that is popular culture. To understand our relationship to contemporary American paparazzi news media and reality television culture, one can refer to the meta-narratives of the 20th century conventional film industry. In the following brief exchange, Tracey and I attempt to draw a broad outline of the conceptual drive that underlies her art practice.

Chuck Mobley: What drew you to the cinematic or more specifically film noir?

Tracey Snelling: I grew up on movies. When I was young, my father and I would watch horror films together. There was a television program called "Creature Features" that would play films such as "Count Yorga" and "Mothra". I would watch almost any movie that came on television, from "Midnight Cowboy" to Kung Fu in 3-D.

In university, I was able to take film history classes in place of some of my art history requirements. One of those classes was Film Noir. I found it fascinating that in all of these films, the hero or heroine always had some major flaw. I liked the idea that nothing was cut-and-dried, and the "good guy" was still bad. I also liked the power of the "femme fatale" figures. They seemed to show strength through making choices that broke the stereotype of the 1950s woman, who was often seen in films in a dress with an apron, bringing drinks to her husband and his business associates.

CM: Is this part of what allowed you the freedom to explore working with video, sculpture, installation, and performing for the camera?

TS: My view of the world as a complex place that doesn't fit into nice little boxes probably has an influence on how I work. There's a sense of freedom that comes from knowing that there are few, if any, absolutes in life. With my work, I feel that the different mediums are just tools that are available to an artist to express his/her viewpoint.

Sometimes I use different media out of necessity. When I used myself as the character in part of "Another Shocking Psychological Thriller" and some photographs, it was because I couldn't find the right film clip or image and had to come up with another way of making it happen. Conceptually, it wasn't important that the woman was me. I was the most available person, and since I knew what I wanted, I didn't have to direct someone else. Another reason I use different media is that I became more interested in immersing the viewer in my work. Visual aspects, with sound, movement, and even smell affect many more senses, and tend to affect people on different emotional levels.

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CM: Could you elaborate on your strategy of immersion—in particular the importance of verisimilitude with regard to the installations?

TS: With my work it's important that the sculptures have a sense that they are "real". Something has to separate them from being dollhouses or models. When I add video (usually clips from films) and sound (music, clips of conversations), it brings in another level of reality and context that takes the pieces even further from the idea of a dollhouse. For instance, in "Zaragoza y Obregon," a sculpture of a few blocks in Los Cabos, the top window in the hotel shows a clip from "Y Tu Mama Tambien" in which the older woman and younger man are having sex. The choice of film clips can change the idea of a whole piece, and adds another layer of meaning on top of the layers of sound and visual construction. By adding scenes and conversations that are part of daily life - from the mundane to the extreme - it seems to add contrast to the sometimes "sweet" idea of a miniature. The more layers of meaning that I can add to a sculpture or installation, the closer it comes to capturing the reality of life, which is never one-dimensional.

CM: How do you begin to form a narrative via your selection of appropriated film clips? Typically you install these within the sculptures and one gets the sense that they are not meant to be watched, but rather seen. Do they serve as a sort of punctuation to your overall idea?

TS: It really depends on the piece. For "Big El Mirador" a 7-foot tall hotel sculpture with 6 video windows, I wanted to use old Spanish language Bunuel films. So, I rented all the ones I could find, and started watching and saving clips on my computer that were interesting and dramatic. Since there were 6 different videos in the piece that would play at once, I make 6 video tracks in my video program on the computer, and start filling them in like a puzzle. It's really fun, and often a challenge. Sometimes, when starting to build a sculpture, I already have certain films in mind. Other times, I will know I want a certain type of scene, such as a bathtub scene, so I'll do a search on the internet movie database, rent lots of DVDs, and scan them for an appropriate scene. Depending upon the sculpture or installation, the films can act in one of two ways—sometimes there is a storyline, and other times the clip just shows a commonplace scene of everyday life, meant to add another layer to the whole piece.

For the most part, my work is about people and place. The addition of film clips and soundtracks helps add life and motion to the work. As for the sculptures and installations that relate more directly to film, it depends on the piece. They are usually more like explorations of film or a genre of film than critiques, although sometimes that works its way in.

CM: Would you allow then that your work is a critique of cinematic tropes?

In some aspect of "Another Shocking Psychological Thriller" the role of women in 1950s films is critiqued. Also, I recently did an installation in Brussels of 4 different houses from horror films. It's called "Last House on the Left". The houses line up along a street and look rather calm and serene. Yet, when looking in the houses, they are disturbing. Blood is everywhere in the "Nightmare on Elm Street" house, screams and an attack in the closet can be seen in the "Halloween" house, birds attack people in "The Birds" house, and the priest is swarmed by

bees in “The Amityville Horror” house. The installation is both a celebration of horror films and a critique on the over-the-top violence found in these films, and in our culture. It’s also about the idea that one can never be sure of what’s happening behind closed doors on a quiet, seemingly peaceful tree lined street.

Chuck Mobley Associate Director, SF Camerawork