



SWOON

Still Waters

One of the world's most sought-after artists, Caledonia Curry is better known by her other moniker: Swoon. Growing up in Daytona Beach, she somehow avoided getting sucked into the NASCAR racing scene and pursued an altogether more altruistic path. We dig a little deeper and uncover the larger social projects that she drives forward.

Creating installation-based exhibitions, Swoon constructs artificial environments, transforming spaces into shimmering, chimerical worlds. Echoes of her travels and the characters she meets are contained in the delicate, intricately detailed wheat-pastes and paper cuts she spends so long preparing. She has exhibited across the globe

and her work is also represented in acclaimed institutions such as London's Tate Modern and New York's MoMa.

Swoon spent her early years in Connecticut but later moved and was raised during a pre-internet era in an ocean-side town in Florida. Surrounded by stockcars and petrol heads, she sounds almost surprised as she looks back at her pursuit of such a comparatively superfluous artistic career. "I mean, honestly, I should have learned T-shirt airbrushing," she begins. "I'm going to go home and I'm going to go to a car race and I'm going to do an apprenticeship with a T-shirt air-brusher, because, let's be real, he has more skills than I do on quite a few levels."

*Words. Roland Henry
Images. Swoon, Roland Henry, Zoe Weber, Tod Seelie*

Motorsport didn't ignite any passion for Swoon, but a lust for adventure did lead her to experiment with other motorised forms of transport. Although she admits she's still never made it to a car race, her travels have taken her across Asia on two wheels: "I did have a motorcycle moment where I was like, 'Maybe this is 'cause I'm from Daytona.' I drove a Royal Enfield across India. They still make them out there. They're way too big for me; I'm tiny. I tipped the thing into ditches and had various crashes, but it was okay. I went from Mumbai – actually, we arrived and the next day there was that massive terrorist attack. We got to the end of town, eventually, bought motorbikes and left. We rode to Bhopal, put the bikes on a train for a minute and then rode from Varanasi to Calcutta – so, all the way across. You know what? I wouldn't recommend it – it's so crazy, the driving is so nuts. I've never seen less fear of head-on collision in any driving population in the world."

Swoon's wide-eyed view of the world may have begun in Florida, but she maintains she hasn't always had the sense of childhood innocence and wonder that she seems to harbour now. "I was always drawing, obviously, I think all artists are like that. Then when I was 10 I went to this painting class for elderly retired people and they were so awesome to me, this little kid. They just took me in and taught me how to paint and I thought I was the shit, because I was making these oil paintings on canvas. So that was definitely my start. I think when I was really little, I was so realistic. I remember when I was seven I was like, 'I'm going to drop out of high school and work at Burger King,' that was pretty much all I could dream of, and it was a fallacy to dream of anything else. Then, I think I got less and less of that state of mind as I got older. When I was 10 or 12, I was still like, oh, you can't really be an artist. It was only later, I started to realise, oh wait, I think I can."

In her late teens, Swoon moved abroad to study in Prague, and then

applied for art school at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Pursuing her dream to move to New York, she began a series of interactions with her environment. At the time, she felt dislocated and unable to have any impact on her surroundings, but she found solace in the fact she was able to transform small sections of wall with wheat pastes. A series of increasingly large-scale projects followed, reaching out to the local community as she went.

Lovingly methodical in her production, she describes her artistic process: "I think it's been one step at a time. First, I started thinking about public spaces and I wanted to do these street posters, and that sort of put me on this path where every single step took me further and further afield. So then I started thinking about public space in all these different ways, and then I began working collectively and drawing people into things. I think that was quite pivotal. Actually, when I was still in college, I started organising people to cover a lot of the low-hanging billboards in our neighbourhood and the experience of organising people and of changing the entire street in one afternoon and doing all this work with all these different people and the way that that felt – to see that change happen, and to see all these people come together and do it in a single morning – that was really powerful for me."

From the simple acts of pasting up her artwork around the neighbourhood, Swoon's over-active imagination soon conjured up the idea of the Swimming Cities of Serenissima. "That project actually sort of had two phases. At the beginning it was called The Miss Rockaway Armada, which was a collective living experience on the Mississippi River. That was about this process of thinking collectively and asking that question, what can we create if we start making things together?"

She continues: "I started to meet different collectives and groups in





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Brooklyn and further abroad that were creating really intentional communities together. From there I knew that I wanted to continue in that vein. I started to talk to my friends about making these boats, travelling with them and sharing something. Growing up in this small cultural sinkhole of a town – anything that came to me when I was that age was so foundational and so important that I felt if I could create something that was a little microcosm of everything that had been important to me, and travel with it, showing up where people weren’t expecting to find it, that it could be really meaningful, and it really was. So, that was the beginning of the Swimming Cities; the raft projects.”

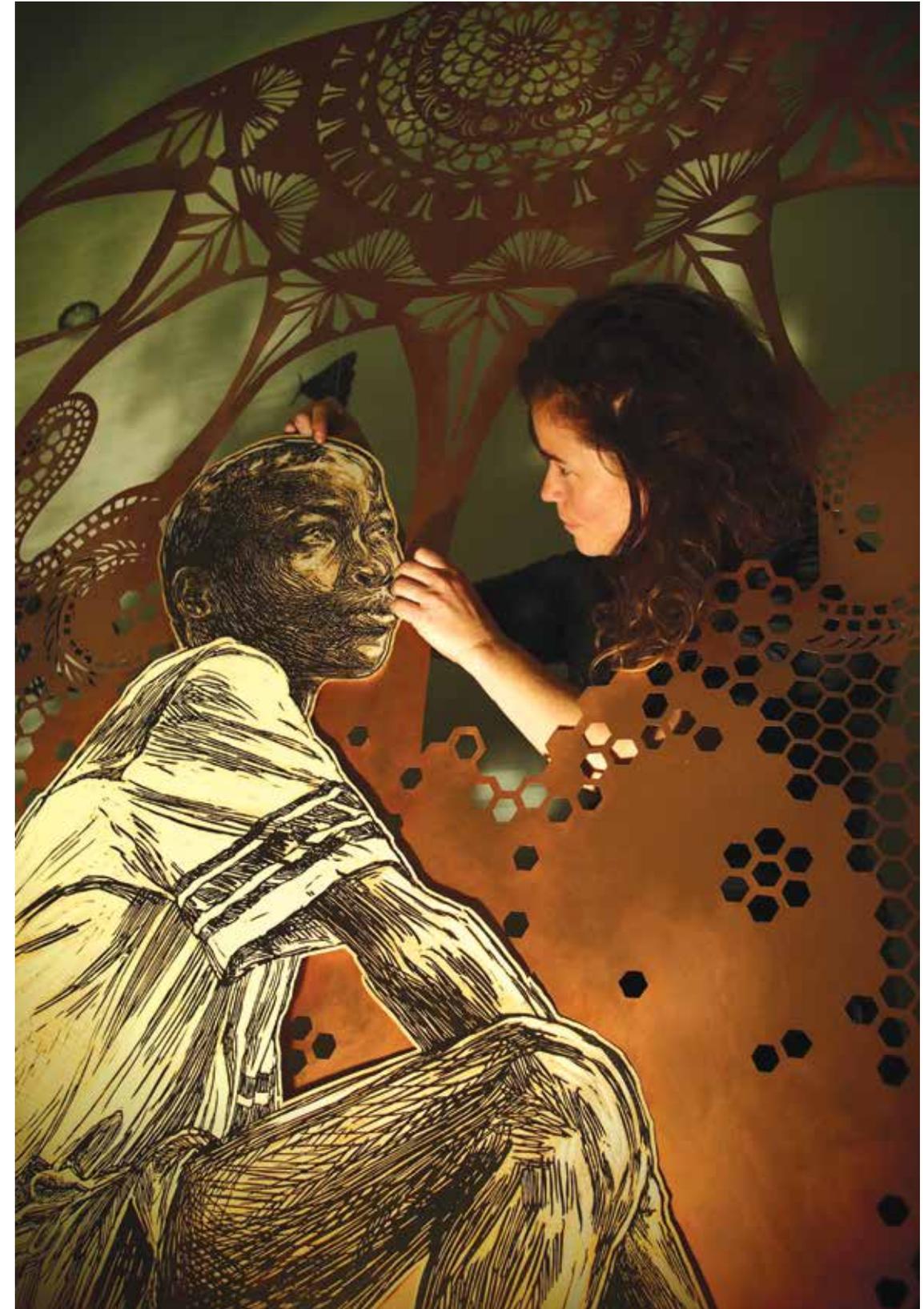
From the Rockaway collective projects, Swoon developed more sculptural ideas, switching from the commune to a more artistically conceptual venture: “I went on to create the Swimming Cities, which was initially seven vessels that came from Troy down to NYC, then we took a couple of them further east, skirting the Adriatic Coast and sailing to Venice. It was really incredible. It was one of those projects that I still feel intensely sentimental about.”

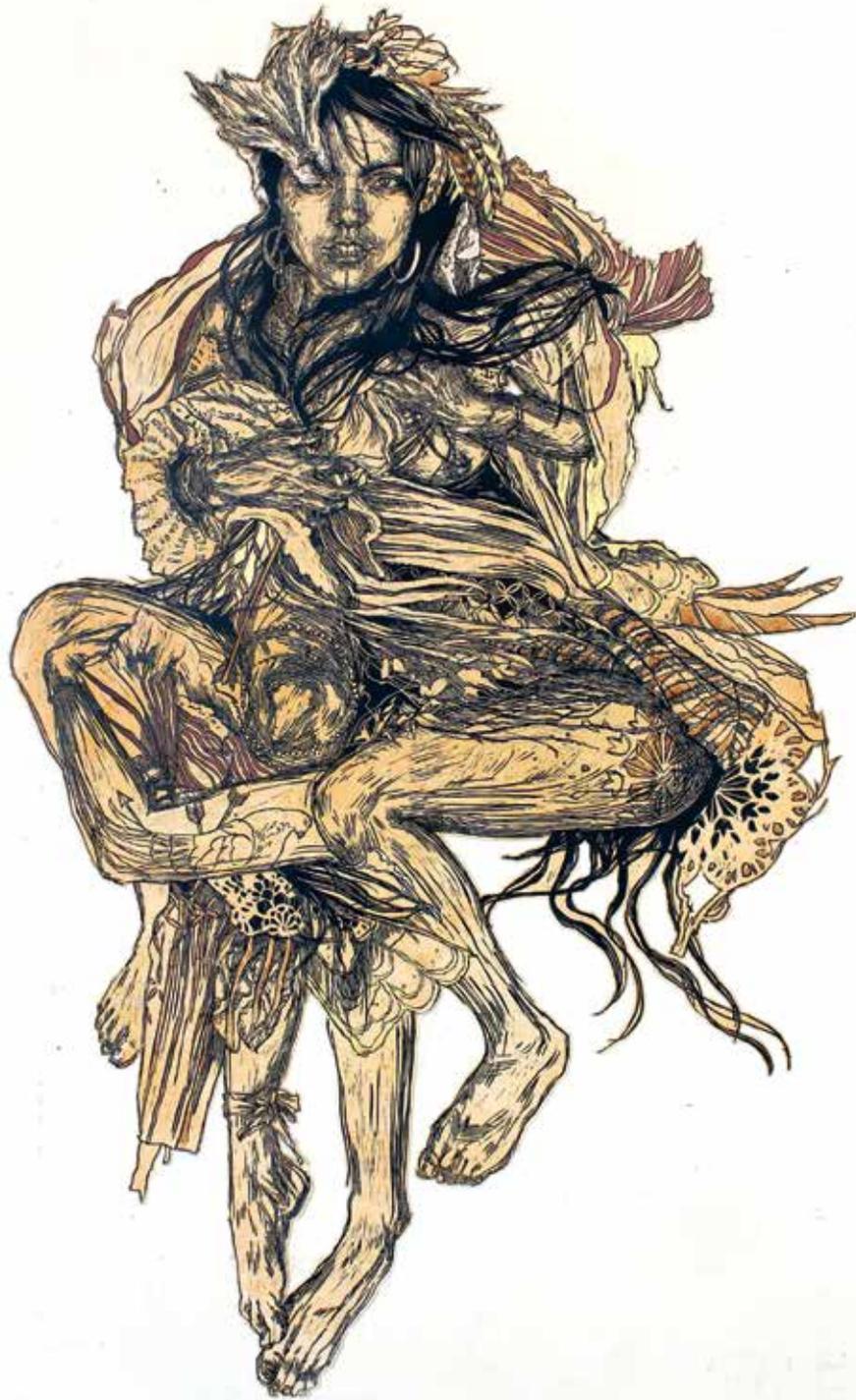
Although, perhaps unsurprisingly, the venture met with a fairly

apathetic response in New York, it triggered an altogether more heartfelt reaction in Europe: “It was this incredibly warm and kind of astonished response, you know? I still hear a lot of reactions from people who encountered the boats and talk about ways that it shifted their reality for a moment, and I really appreciate that.”

Swoon is keen to maintain the community aspect of her work, both inside and outside of the art sphere. Interestingly, she sits on the fence somewhat about sponsors for community projects. “I think that it gets really complicated. When I was India, for example, I visited this clinic in Bhopal and the guy that runs it was a doctor that heard the reports on the radio that there was noxious gas in the air killing people, so he got on a train and stayed there for 20 years. He explained that they don’t take sponsorship, because they’re dealing with a disaster that was created by corporate irresponsibility. To accept corporate funds and to lend their legitimacy to these corporations that are still committing the same practices is really irresponsible. I feel like he had a really good point and such a good reason for maintaining that position.”

She continues: “By and large, I have a similar outlook, but I feel





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like the economics are a little bit complicated. So, I've never really worked directly with corporate sponsorship, but we've gotten grants that have been funded by corporations. I think it's a little bit fuzzy."

In context, the isolation she experiences creating her artwork is an interesting contrast against the connectedness Swoon strives to achieve in communities. Making sense of the world through her artwork, she goes through a cycle of interaction, immersion and an almost reclusive retreat: "There's a sort of pendulum that swings between needing to have the isolation to really think things through and letting that intuitive thought process take hold, which is so central to so much of making art; it's also not only isolating but quite 'un-grounding', psychologically. I feel the need to reconnect with the world and to feel grounded mentally. I need to know that the work I do is going to matter in the world and to just feel that sense of being part of something larger than myself that happens when you work in different contexts. So, for me, they're equal and opposing needs - I need to make sure I balance them and make room for both of them in my life."

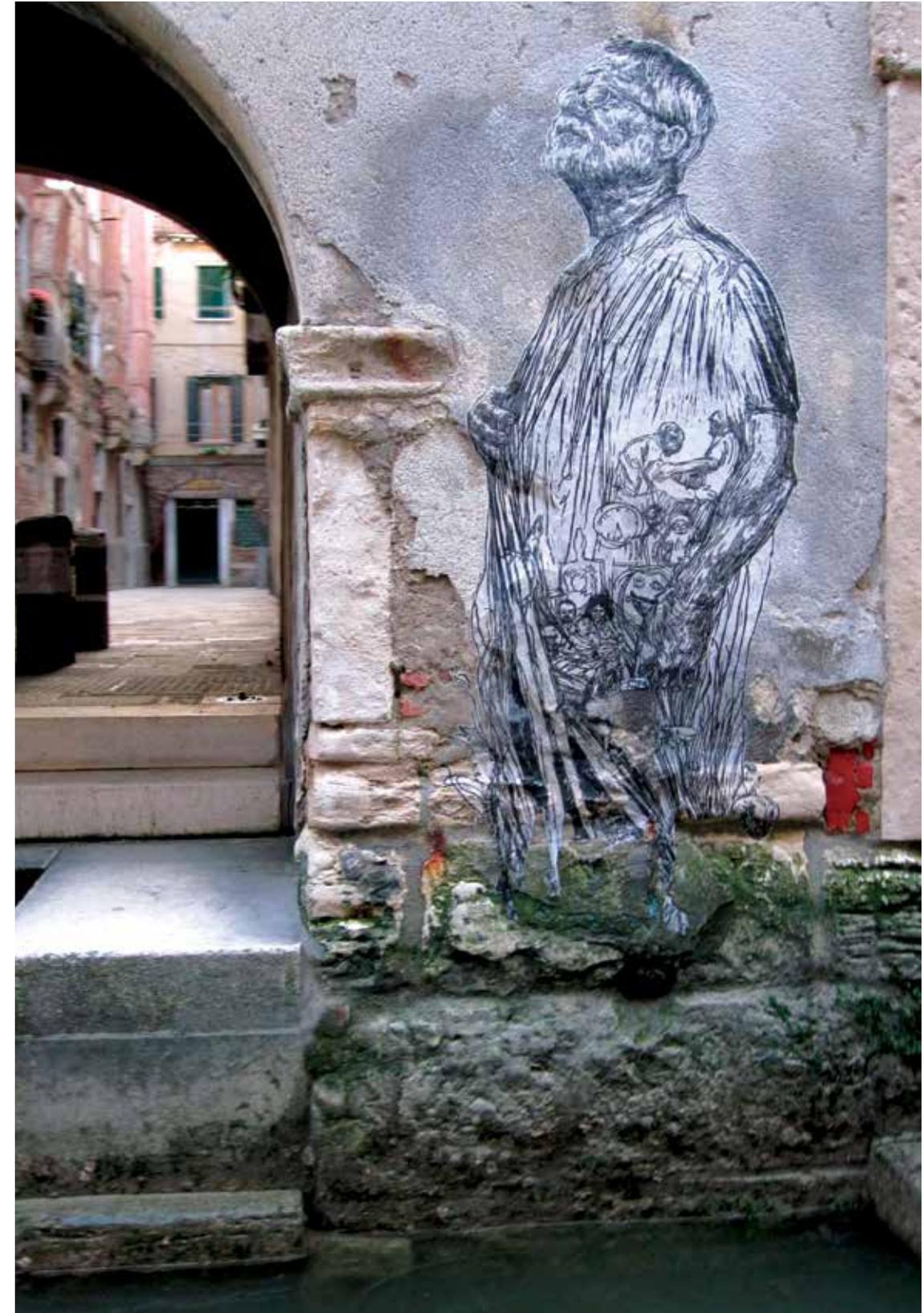
Meting out her time between the connection she feels with the world and the periods she needs to step back and process thoughts and information, Swoon sees her artwork itself as a very slow, organic process: "The drawings themselves are always the seed of everything else, so that's where it's almost in the muck the most. I feel there's a lot that rises to the surface while that's happening and you really are getting down into your own mind and trying to open up certain sensitivities that aren't there when you're out there in the world. You're trying to open your ears and eyes and listen in a different way to when you're just out in the street, moving around. I give myself as much time as possible to dive into that space and then there's a lot of researching; letting different narratives form

organically, at the same time as choosing narratives consciously.

"Then there's the process of choosing the figure, which is quite central. I feel like that development is really unique unto itself, where I try to draw something through that is as close to a living thing as possible, through the eye of a very small needle. It's like you're trying to pull something through that is essentially impossible. For me, that's the part that I chase; the part that I'm always hunting for - you'll never get it, but you never stop chasing it."

Swoon seems to be forever searching for a connection in her artwork to the outside world. This connection is something that she experienced when she was younger: "As much as creating artwork can be an isolating experience for me, there is an attempt at connection. I remember being a teenager and seeing a Van Gogh painting, and feeling the way that the light kind of stuttered through the painting, and feeling that connection with a state of mind that I knew very intimately, and I felt 'I understand this person, and this person understands me, in some fundamental way'. Meanwhile, this person has been dead 300 years, we didn't speak the same language, he was mentally unstable and he shot himself in the face, and yet - I hear you right now, I feel you. I connect with you. I think that I felt a deep sense of comfort from that. It's like hearing a call and feeling connected with that and feeling that you want to pass that on. You want to send that call back out."

Her artwork and projects certainly reflect the call of different voices and principles, so it is no surprise that feminism is something that resonates with Swoon in her artwork and conscience. Initially resisting any identification with the feminist movement in her early twenties, it has only been relatively recently that she has begun to strike up discourse on the subject with her peers. Feminism, she explains, is still a valid public discussion: "I've been having a lot of conversations





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with Judy Chicago, who basically coined the term ‘feminist art’. Before we started this dialogue, I came to understand that the work that she, and others before me, did meant I could say, ‘I need you to hear me as a person. I need you to not constantly identify me only as a woman.’”

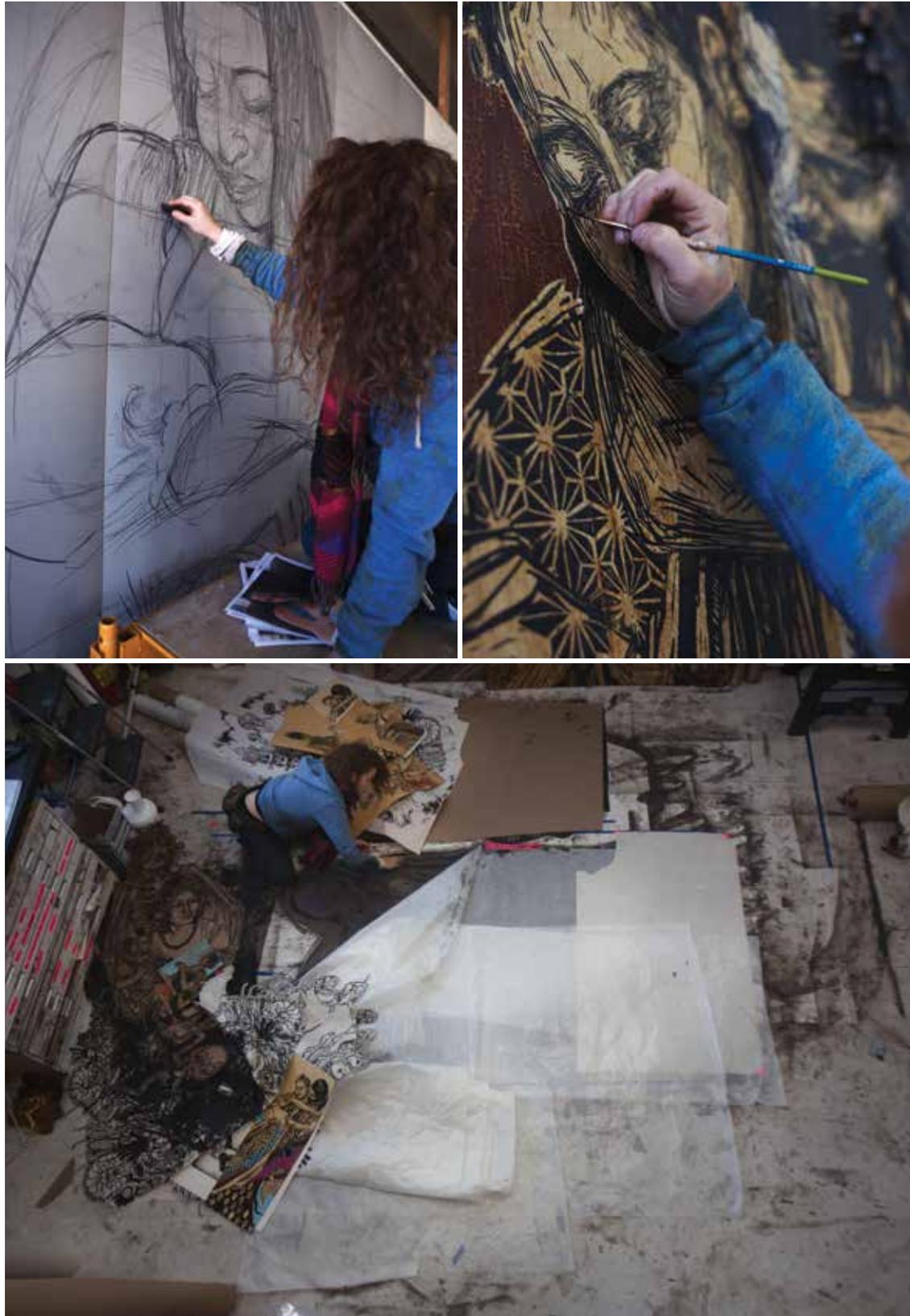
She continues: “I did a project that was around the femicides in Mexico, which was a situation where thousands of women were being murdered at the US border region of Juárez. The epidemic has actually spread all the way through South America, and it’s tied in with the drug trade, so the US has its own role in that too. For me, that really ties into a larger context of violence against women around the world. I think that there still is not really any justification for saying that the conversation is over. It’s not over at all. There are racial and gender inequalities throughout the globe that are just as vicious as they ever have been. I feel aware that, in some sense, we’re on a great path, where, particularly in this generation, women are being recognised intellectually and artistically and that we’re at a different place from where we’ve ever been.”

Having the trail blazed before

her may have laid the way for a little more freedom, but the battle for equality is far from won. However, Swoon feels it’s imperative that people remain aware of divisive labels that create discord and resentment within society: “I think that some of the paths toward solving inequality do lie in things that are more universal to the human spirit, no matter who you are. I know that the socioeconomic and political conditions that create sexism and racism need to be addressed, but for me personally, I’m most curious about the language of the heart. I was in this prison two weeks ago, talking to the guys about violence and compassion and trauma, and I was like ‘how can we start a public dialogue about this whereby we’re able to just listen to each other in a more connected way?’ I would love to do that in a women’s prison as well, but I felt like in a men’s prison, this conversation feels just as relevant to me, because there’s something that is totally universal and about every individual.

“The thing that is important to me is the recognition that sometimes you have to create a safe space for people who haven’t had a certain kind of privilege, to bring their ideas





to fruition. A space that is a little bit protected from the mainstream. I think there is a real value to that, and I am lucky enough to be in a generation that has received the benefits of a lot of that hard work.”

Swoon has a huge humanitarian propensity and her drive and personal mission to reconnect with and rebuild societies almost eclipses her personal artwork when viewed alongside it. Amongst her work with disenfranchised communities, her experiences in Mexico with the Zapatistas and Mexican migrants are of particular significance. “I have always been a student of how movements for autonomy and independence make space for people to survive in a more nourishing and sustaining way than people would otherwise have the option to do. I’ve spent a lot of time in places where people are self-organising, just studying and just trying to take some inspiration. I think, when they visit the Zapatistas, people feel ‘we have to go help these people.’ But I think you get the gift of being able to see what’s going on there. They very generously give that. I’ve spent time in those places just trying to understand that.

“The Brazilian government is trying to build a dam on the Xingu River, which is connected to the Amazon, it’s on indigenous land and they never got the permission of the indigenous people. A lot of people believe that this dam is actually just the first in what will be a large series of dams, and it’s going to destroy the ecosystem and the culture of the region. These are people that are one of the few civilisations left on this planet that have a relationship with their land base that continues indefinitely. That isn’t destroying everything under its feet. That has a culture and a family life that is intact. For me, it’s so important to not let that happen. So when I was in Brazil, I visited these guys and was like, ‘what do you need?’ And they said ‘the more ways that people can tell our story, the better’. So, Faile actually helped me sell that print and do some fundraising for

those guys, as well as just providing a place to talk more about that story. Primarily, I recognise that what I’m doing is learning, and, secondarily, what I’m doing is sharing what I’m coming to understand and trying to just be a medium to share those stories.”

Just seeing the story of these people play out before her has been a huge struggle for Swoon. As well as creating an enormous sense of impotence, the factors involved in the Amazonian people’s dilemmas have also been a massive source of motivation for her. “I’ve been able to mitigate some of my sense of helplessness simply by working on things like the projects in Haiti, where you work to build concretely alternative situations, trying to create the kind of world that you would like to see. That is part of the process of connecting you with solutions. But at the same time, we are in the middle of the sixth extinction.

“You can do some touchy-feeling, happy-go-whatever projects all day long, but the catastrophic thing that is happening to this planet is as large as the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs, and it’s human beings. I’m flying all over the globe, and that’s not helping. So I still feel just as helpless as anyone else, and I’m still trying to figure out what the best ways are to apply our energies, and it ends up being a question of what you are personally willing to do, and what you are willing to sacrifice.”

Reaching out to nature has always been close to Swoon’s heart. Growing up as a beach kid, she developed a strong relationship with the ocean. She recalls the impact of the big BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico: “I cried every day of that summer. I was like ‘am I losing my mind? What’s going on?’ I just have a really strong, intuitive relationship with the sea. In Haiti, all you need is a snorkel mask and you’re in another world. The thing that kept me sane, doing that initial work, post-earthquake in Haiti, was that every



Sunday we would go down, and get under the water, and just be in this totally different world.”

Part of Swoon’s huge connection with her environment has always been her commitment to sustainability. Championing a return to small-batch production methods and the rebuilding of communities. The Braddock Tiles project – that VNA readers helped support through the sale of special editions of VNA 23 – has been another big step towards taking things back to a local level.

“We got invited to work on this building years ago,” she explains. “So I got together with a group of local artists, Transformasium, who do a lot of great community-based practises – for example, they just started an art-lending library. I’m like the ping-pong ball, that’s just in and out, but I’m still really interested in those philosophies. I think of the building as an artwork, so I’m trying to address each step of trying to bring the building back into being a useable space as a project. With Braddock Tiles, we deconstructed part of the building, because deconstruction is a sustainable alternative to demolition. Then we did a workshop in town to discuss the differences between deconstruction and demolition to connect with people locally over this issue.

“You get into a situation where each part of the puzzle becomes a strong, conceptual piece. My thought with wanting to hand-make the tiles is feeling that the building is a work of art, created by hand. I think that my experiences building in the community with people in Haiti really reconnected me with the pride that you feel when you make the thing. It’s there, and you built it, and you protect it; it’s for you and it’s by you. I want to see that building become something that people regard in that way.”

In much of Swoon’s work, there exists a crossover between the creation of internal environments in her artwork and the shaping

of actual, external environments. The Braddock Tiles project is no exception and Swoon applied meticulous consideration to every detail: “I think that the crossover point comes when I’m creating the installations; I want to create this dream-like environment that you can enter. When I start an installation, I’m thinking about every aspect of the space, so when I walk into a building, I start thinking about the light switches and pipes. I’m thinking about every aspect of the architecture, because I’m thinking of it all as a piece of this installation. So with a project like Braddock Tiles, I’m taking that same approach to the building and trying to think of the building as an artwork really thoroughly in that same way.”

Bringing it all the way back to her current hometown, Swoon has worked with community organisation, Groundswell, on the Bowery wall in Manhattan, to create a testament to the destruction that Hurricane Sandy wreaked on the East Coast of the United States: “Our thought was to create something post-Sandy that gave people a moment to reflect on that experience and create some expression out of it. So, the Groundswell folks, working with a youth team, went and did a lot of interviews, speaking with people in the hardest-hit neighbourhoods after Sandy, and then created a mural in each of those neighbourhoods. The Bowery wall was the synthesis of all of that work. All these stories from Rockaway, from Red Hook and beyond, came together on the Bowery wall.”

Swoon continues to work on projects at home and abroad from her Brooklyn base. The Braddock Tiles project is due for another push, with a fresh batch of prints set to drop later this year, and her work on a sustainable building project, Konbit Shelter, in Haiti, is about to enter the next phase of community workshops and residential reconstruction. For more information on the latest developments, check out the Konbit Shelter and Braddock Tiles websites.