

ARTnews

Swoon: Street Smart

What's Hot in
Latin American Art

The Degas
Controversy

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Video Game



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...specific...
...carefully crafted...
...selected...
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...WHOLE...
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TOP Swoon on the Hudson River for her 2008 piece *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*.

CENTER Graffiti in Berlin.

BOTTOM Woodblock print pasted on a Havana wall.

OPPOSITE Installation view at Deitch Studios of *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*, 2008.

ARTnews APRIL 2010

TAKING IT TO THE STREET

With carnivalesque flotillas, portraits pasted on crumbling walls, and manic impromptu performances, **Swoon** invests public art with playfulness, tenderness, and grit

Late last spring the artist known as Swoon made what may have been her biggest splash to date, when she sailed into Venice, uninvited, aboard a jerry-built craft that was part Rube Goldberg construction, part carnival float. Accompanied by two other boats, all powered by recycled Mercedes engines that ran on biofuel, the crafts carried

BY ANN LANDI a troupe of 30 ecologically conscious performers, artists, musicians, and various rabble-rousers. Although the trip coincided with the 53rd Venice Biennale, the aim was not to make some point about having been excluded from the official festivities, but rather, as Swoon puts it, to experience "the fantastic visual nature of the whole thing."

"I wanted to make something that felt like a mutant system that had floated away and come back home," she

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explains, clicking through photos of the event on a laptop in her tiny Brooklyn studio, a fourth-floor walk-up crammed with pots of glue and paint, books, lacy cutouts, and the other accoutrements of her printmaking processes, which she carries out more fully in a larger space nearby.

Venice officials refused the crew entry into the Grand Canal, the city's glorious main thoroughfare, but Swoon and her team stormed it anyway, at three in the morning. "We were there for three hours and exited at sunrise," Swoon recalls. "It was the most beautiful day."

A certain disdain for authority and a guerrilla grit have suffused most of Swoon's projects from the start. In 1999, two years before her graduation from Pratt Insti-

tinguished by a flourish of delicately filigreed cut-out paper, as ornate as a lace collar, pasted on as an almost absurdly tender and feminine embellishment to the works' tough surfaces.

Like many young artists, Swoon says she was rebelling against "the feeling that you were supposed to create work that had as its end place a life in an institution or a collector's home." Born Caledonia (Callie) Curry, Swoon was raised in Daytona Beach, Florida, by parents she describes as "hippies into the arts in some ways." (She got the moniker "Swoon" from an ex-boyfriend who, many years ago, had a dream in which she became a street artist with that name.) She knew from the age of ten that she wanted to be an artist, and started going to art classes with the local retirees. "I

went to this class for old ladies, and they were like, 'You're a genius,'" she recalls. "It gave me a lot of confidence, which a ten-year-old girl from the sticks doesn't necessarily get." When she was 17, she lived for a year in Prague as an exchange student. She remembers visiting Vienna and becoming infatuated with the work of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele.

Later, at Pratt, she began looking around New York, trying to determine her place as an artist. One early influence was Gordon Matta-Clark, whose "building cuts" she first discovered in a show at P.S.1 in Queens. "I knew

tute, the artist took to the streets of New York to make life-size prints of everyday people and paste them on crumbling, graffiti-festooned walls. "It seemed like the street was the only place where real beauty was occurring. As an illegal site for art, it's naturally unregulated," she wrote in a 2005 catalogue essay for a show at Deitch Projects in New York. "There was a lot of space for anger, for cutting out your own place in the world—like new plants breaking through soil."

The impetus for Swoon's interventions recalls the street art of the '80s, but the technical sophistication and expressive force of her graphic portraits are more reminiscent of German Expressionist Käthe Kollwitz than of Keith Haring with pots of glue and paint, books, lacy cutouts, and the other accoutrements of her printmaking processes, which she carries out more fully in a larger space nearby.

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that I wanted to make something that was part of the city, and that was temporary, and that wasn't going to be an object," she says. "And then I started to look at graffiti and that whole history."

Swoon, now 31, quickly became engaged in a lively underground Brooklyn culture, led by a group of dumpster-diving idealists who were recycling the city's detritus in an attempt to build a better (or at least a different) world. Although she looks scarcely older than a teenager, with a tangle of reddish brown hair and a cherubic face, Swoon has been a ringleader in these projects. At one point, she mobilized her friends to form a collective called Toyshop. The group replaced scarred billboards with vibrant drawings, surdly tender and feminine embellishment to the works' tough surfaces.

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ments out of trash. (Asked what these sounded like, she answers, "Like instruments made out of trash.") In one of their more audacious moves, Toyshop staged a brief bash in Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room*, at Dia Art Foundation in SoHo. While one of the gang distracted a guard with homemade cookies, the others jumped into the dirt and "mud wrestled," as Swoon calls it, though there was no water involved. "I didn't think De Maria would mind," she says. "It was a way of playfully and irreverently interacting with the artist."

Many of her recent projects, though, have had more serious political undertones, and have taken her to hotspots in Cuba, Mexico, Palestine, and Argentina. On a visit to Juárez, Mexico, she noticed pink wooden crosses, set up in the town and countryside, commemorating more than 1,000 young women who had turned up murdered in the desert over the previous 15 years. "The best explanation I heard is that this is some sort of blood sport involved with the drug trafficking," she says. "This is a crisis situation, and there's an intense cover-up on the part of the government." Her 2008 memorial to the victims is a portrait of one of them, Silvia Elena Rivera Morales, whose face and shoulders rise from a pattern of white cutouts, some in the shape of skulls. In the installation of that work at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, butterflies were wrapped around earbuds that allowed viewers to listen to the voices of women who had lost their daughters (a similar installation, accessed through a hole in the floor, was at the gallery Honey Space in Chelsea).

Swoon's earlier, highly accomplished street portraits led to invitations from commercial galleries and arts institutions. At Deitch Projects in 2005, she brought together an assemblage of characters—construction workers, kids on bikes, listless teenagers—in a helter-skelter environment defined by found wooden planks, barbed wire, and white cutouts of familiar landmarks, including the Cyclone, Coney Island's famous roller coaster. For the Black Floor Gallery in Philadelphia, in collaboration with two other artists, she filled a space with lacy confections of hanging cut paper—the installation conjured animals and demons in a weirdly bridal tñion in SoHo. While one of the gang distracted a guard with homemade cookies, the others jumped into the dirt and "mud wrestled," as Swoon calls it, though there was no water involved. "I didn't think De Maria would mind," she says. "It was a way of playfully and irreverently interacting with the artist."

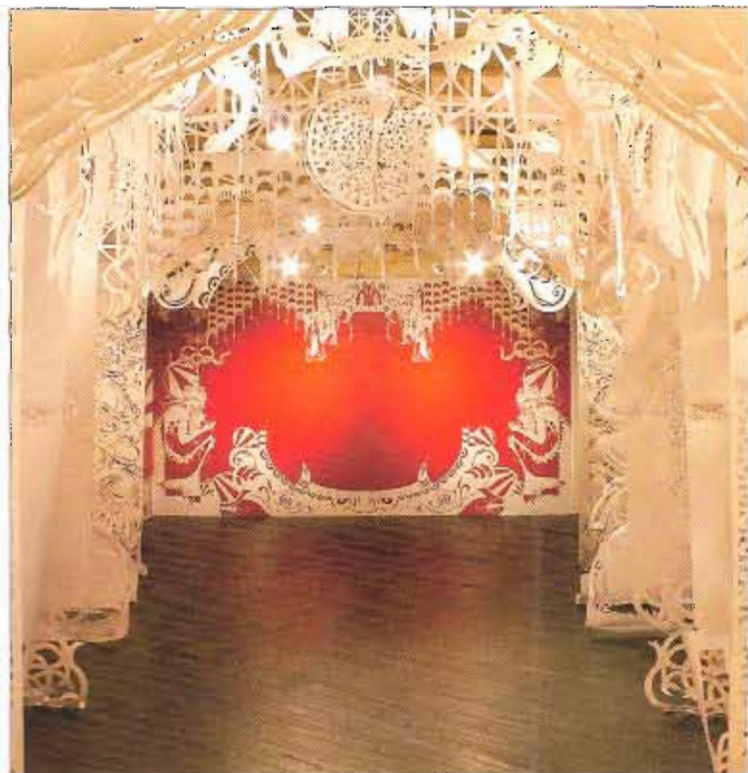
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TOP Installation at Deitch Projects, 2005. **CENTER** *La Boca del Lobo*, an installation by Swoon, Allison Corrie, and Solovei at Black Floor Gallery, Philadelphia, 2006.

BOTTOM *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*.

OPPOSITE Swoon and company sailing into Venice in *Swimming Cities of Serenissima*, June 2009.



nuclear annihilation, somehow the skeletons are vicious enough to pick themselves up and resume this ridiculous military-esque garb and keep on fighting.”

Swoon's involvement with nautical adventures dates from about 2005, and was an outgrowth, she says, “of the process of thinking about how to make art work in the world, how to meet people when they're not expecting to find you, and how to make things that navigate the world in a different way.” Her first boat consisted of six homemade rafts lashed together. It was christened the *Miss Rockaway Armada*, after a fictional story about a statue on Coney Island whose head floats out to sea. The rafts traveled down the Mississippi from the headwaters in Minnesota. “We had just started bombing Afghanistan,” Swoon recalls. “I was having this thought, ‘Do I leave this country, because it's not my country anymore, or do I try to create something

The expeditions were never entirely smooth sailing, of course. “There are tensions among the group constantly,” Swoon says, “and then you love each other all over again and it's euphoria.” When another of the artist's flotilla motored to a docking point in Queens, the police stopped one of the vessels under the Brooklyn Bridge. En route to Venice, Swoon and her crew often had to wait out the bora—the fierce wind that comes off the Alps. They once inadvertently ventured out on a day when the winds were sweeping down toward the canals. Fishermen circled the boat, waving frantically and warning them to get back to shore *prontissimo*. “They basically saved our lives,” she says. (The art establishment in Venice responded with little more than mild curiosity, except for critic Jerry Saltz, who motored by on a little speedboat and called out, “You guys are devils! But the demons have won!”)

For the time being, Swoon's ambitions are now firmly landlocked. In late January, the artist headed off to the mountains of Virginia with her boyfriend, the artist Ben Wolf, who collaborates with her on some projects. She spent several weeks there making drawings and studying the architecture for an arts center she's helping to build in Braddock, Pennsylvania, just outside Pittsburgh, in a community where jobs are scarce and the recession is deeply felt, as in much of small-town America. The centerpiece of the project is an abandoned church. “We're going to do some experiments to make the building more sustainable,” she says, like constructing an energy-generating playground that will “make the little buggers work,” she adds with a giggle. To raise money for this and other projects, Swoon sells editions of her work through several gal-

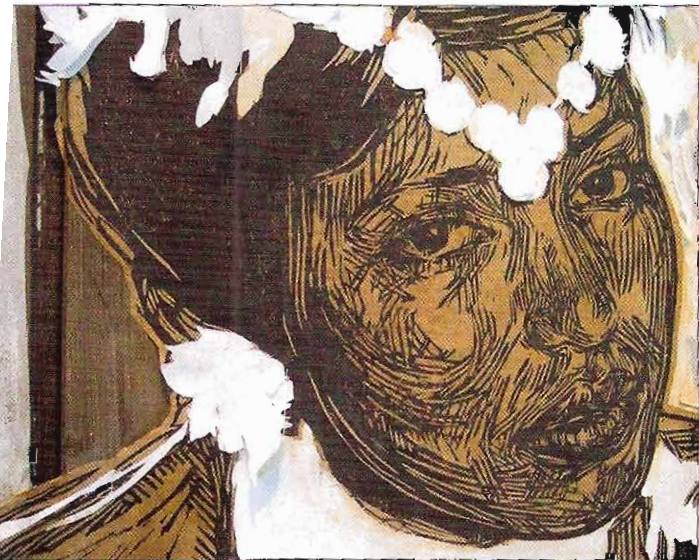
LEFT Portrait of Silvia Elena, from a collaborative installation with Tennessee Jane Watson at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2008.

OPPOSITE Installation view of *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea* at Deitch Studios.

leries, including Deitch Projects, New Image Art in Los Angeles, and Black Rat Projects in London, with prints and drawings priced from a rock-bottom \$100 up to \$30,000.

In her free time, Swoon loves to surf, though she confesses she's “terrible at it.” She's also an avid traveler; last year she took a motorcycle trip across India. When she's in a strange city, she likes to ride her bike and explore abandoned structures and tunnels. In the studio, she listens to low-key music, like that of Philip Glass and Tom Waits, but once outside, she goes for New Orleans “bounce,” as well as bands and musicians like Dirty Fingers, Girl Talk, and Mos Def—“basically music to dance to,” she says.

As with many of her endeavors, the Braddock center, called Transformazium, has a socially ambitious agenda, but the end result is as much esthetic as political. “For me,” Swoon says, the work “is about trying to understand the world, to gain a consciousness of what's happening, and then creating work that's a document of that process.”



that exists as a microcosm of a different sort of world and travel with it and communicate with people?”

The artist's team of volunteers included veterans from collectives like the Floating Neutrinos, Visual Resistance, and the Infernal Noise Brigade. The craft floated on Styrofoam salvaged from construction sites and ran on fry grease and biofuel. When members of the Coast Guard boarded to make an inspection before the launch, Swoon recounts, “they said, ‘Well, I wouldn't ride on this thing, but it looks like a helluva good time.’” At points along the river, the “armada” docked and gave live performances, to mixed reactions. “Every night people would bring us dinner or offer us showers, and of course some called the cops,” Swoon remembers. “When you do your work in various urban settings, you have an audience that has a certain education and expectations, but when you take it out on the Mississippi, it rips all that open, and suddenly you're interacting with people who are just amazed to see you there.”

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