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THE MISS ROCKAWAY ARMADA
AND SWOON FLOAT DOWN THE
MISSISSIPPI RIVER.



It has been a little over a week since she left the Miss Rockaway Armada, a 110-foot floating art exhibit of rafts on the Mississippi River, somewhere near the Quad Cities in Iowa. Caledonia Curry, aka Swoon, has dreamed about the trip every night since the experience, over and over again in her mind.

"It changed my life," states the Daytona Beach native.

After a successful show last summer at the Deitch Gallery in New York City, more questions arise about why Swoon would take on a project so seemingly random as rafting

down the Mississippi River when the major contemporary art-hubs around the world aren't quite near, well, Mississippi.

"Galleries were dead to me, and though I am figuring out how to work in them, they are not my thing," she declares. "Basically, the idea of galleries and museums is that they are the textbook to what has already happened. They are the afterthought for a work of art that has already been a part of our lives, has had its life cycle, and now the museum is documenting it at rest."

Installation
2006

(Courtesy of the Deitch Gallery, NY)

Following project

Brooklyn
2006

"Everybody talks about the work you're making as though you are making it for the gallery, which for me is a disconnect. I'm definitely not making it for the gallery. I'm making it for all the reasons that I'm making it. If it happens to pass through the gallery or need a gallery for some reason, then that's fine." Swoon continues, "I'd walk outside [a gallery] and see this incredible wall with 15 things going on, and it all will change by tomorrow. That's where I wanted to be."

One doesn't have to look far to see evidence of Swoon's mark upon the constantly changing urban canvas in most major cities around the world. Alley walls and building fronts from North America to Cuba are peppered with a population of pasted-up Swoonfolk. These figures, the

majority of them working-class men, heart-strong women, and rugged playful children, carry their stories of beauty and strength etched into their chests, or spilling out of their hair. Some look as if they stepped out of a Walker Evans photograph from the Great Depression. Only the occasional dooky earring or fly hoodie brings it back to the present. Like Geppetto carving life into wooden puppets, Swoon peels people out of wooden boards or sheets of thick vinyl. She brings out the beautiful and hardened emotions of life from her figures with simple carving tools, and pulls prints off the figures like lace shadows from a giant storybook. But in an effort to go big, Swoon found her work couldn't fit in a press. Born out of necessity in her small Brooklyn apartment, she devised a

process in which she became the press. "I cut the image out, lay it on the floor, roll out the ink with this big roller, lay the paper on top and then I walk on it for a long time. I rub it with my feet and dance around on it and then pull the paper off."

Once on the street, Swoon will intertwine her paste-up with the tags, throw ups, and general wear of a building's exterior. The more the piece deteriorates due to weather and time, the closer to perfection it gets.

Her indoor gallery work is testament to her dedication to the outdoors. Recorded subway noises, elevated rafters, bridges of discarded wood and doors, concrete dust, and gravel serving as a makeshift playground allow the show to carry

an all-encompassing city spirit. For Swoon, all is happening right now above us, around us, and across the street. Portraits of the city you can read and feel at a glance envelop. Many of these same people on the walls can be visited again as they stand pasted next to you while waiting for the bus.

What connects the river project to her street and print projects is Swoon's desire to participate and communicate in new and different ways.

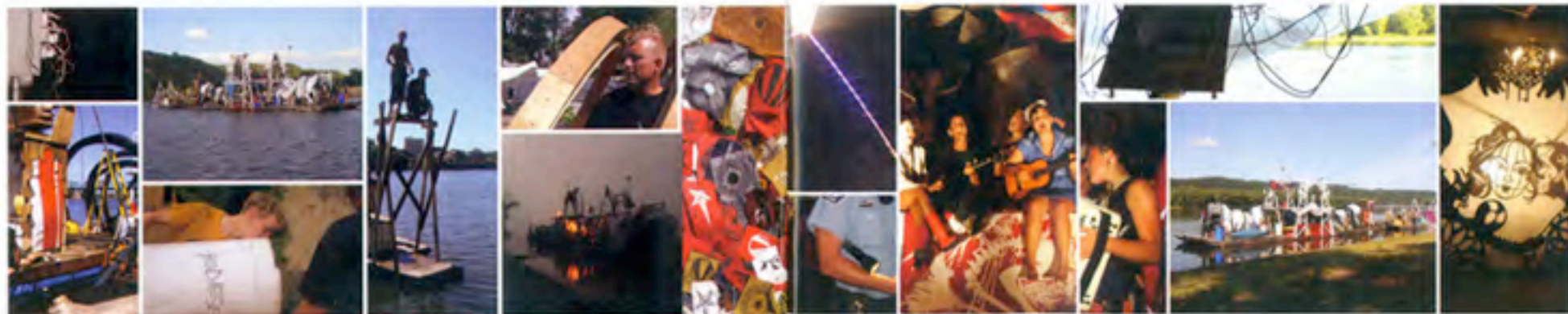
"It's part of the American consciousness to raft down the Mississippi. There is almost nothing else that is as archetypically part of our idea about what it means to be an American than when you say I'm







The Miss Workcamp Agency
 2010
 Photo courtesy of Inland







rafting down the Mississippi River. People are like, 'Oh, of course.' " Swoon has the natural desire not only to give the art life, but also to share that life with others. While her street paste-ups mix with the elements and blend successfully into the urban landscape, so to, hopefully, her Armada will assimilate into our American heartland.

THE PLAN

Artwork is a process that can start at one point and journey to an uncertain destination. The concept was to build a boat in New York City by recycling the wood used at the Deitch show. Then the plan was to drive the wood to Minnesota, and assemble it on the banks of the Mississippi River. Once the piece was constructed it pushed off to float down the Mississippi and

dock at certain ports along the way. Once docked, the crew began a parade around town, alerting locals of the fleet's presence. Then, art workshops were provided for the townspeople, and in the evenings the Armada would act as a stage to hold performances. Float, dock, parade, workshop, show, sleep, repeat ... until New Orleans.

"One of our main thoughts was to try and make a vessel that reduced our footprint ecologically, but also was a symbol of an effort to try and not use one of the most contested resources on the planet," Swoon says. "One that happens to have a war being fought over it."

"By myself, I am utterly unqualified to organize a project like this. So I called my friend Jeff Stark, and he

told me, 'There isn't anything that I feel is impossible for me to lend my skills to.' He is the kind of person whose gift, whose art, is organizing insane things and making them happen. At that point I knew if Jeff signs on, this will happen." By sending word out to several artist collectives, such as the Barnstormers, Beehive Collective, and other inspiring people, a crew of 30 people was quickly formed, with the hope that it was enough to carry out the project.

With builders, welders, painters, and performers all in place, the one missing element was that no one knew how to make a floatable vessel, let alone actually navigate it upon the Mississippi River.

"I'm really stupidly optimistic," says

Swoon. "[But] there were so many different minds signed on. Chicken John, an ex-member of the Murder Junkies, built propellers and motors, Paul the Plumber welded the Ferris wheel and designed the steering. [There was] so much problem solving and dedication to the project that I was like 'Hell yeah, it's happening.' "

THE JOURNEY

"Just getting on the water was hard," Swoon recalls. "The physical labor and engineering that goes into building 110 feet of a sea worthy boat that will float up to 30 people, and to figure out your toilet, kitchen, fuel systems, and your electricity, plus your motor's storage, took up so much energy and time we didn't plan the show until we were on the water."

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San Francisco
2006

I'D WALK OUTSIDE [A GALLERY] AND SEE THIS INCREDIBLE WALL WITH 15 THINGS GOING ON. THAT'S WHERE I WANTED TO BE.

Sometimes embarking upon such a grand terrain as the Mississippi leaves open observation of the artistic process. The dynamic of a culture of community was itself a piece art. To have everyone commit to the same goals, become family, and brew a unique identity doesn't happen often. "Being able to create an organism of culture and watch it grow was intense," Swoon says. There was no leader, no captain, and everyone had a voice with different people rising to challenges at various points. But the crucial goal for the crew of the Armada was maneuvering a chain of seven rafts as one.

"It was all experimental," Swoon says. "We got on the water and had a total and complete breakdown. We had to pull over to an island and restrain ourselves. It was utter chaos.

We were breaking down and crashing into shit, screaming at each other and fighting. People were flipping out—and we were only three or four days in."

As the Armada began its trek down river, it soon became apparent that they would not make it to New Orleans. After a few more days even St Louis was questionable. At that point, the journey became the destination. "The river has its own time, that's all there is to it," Swoon says. Rivertime: a concept few people have the chance to experience. There was no hiding the fact that they were a floating art project. The Coast Guard, police, right-wing radio, and the charter boats all knew. Folks approached them with a big Mid-western handshake; open, yet skeptical. "People were always calling the cops on us. I mean, if the

cops are being called, we must be doing something right." Every time the Miss Rockaway docked, people would come to the boat offering fresh vegetables, fish, coffee, and spare bicycles. Cool mayors, drunk ninjas, weird cowboys, and other unexplainable people appeared as if characters in the lost chapter of the *Odyssey*.

"What I'm ultimately trying to say with this artwork is, look, we are trying to build a new way of living," Swoon says.

Is this such a new concept? Or an old one to be relearned and adapted for today. Either way, what is most needed is the example.

"People are waiting and bored," Swoon states. "The ones who came to our boat, they understand or feel

something is amiss in our country, and they are searching for alternatives. We pull up into a town with a bunch of freaks and hope that they somehow understand that we actually created this with an insane amount of love. This isn't about being adventurers. We are doing this because we are trying to find alternative models for the ways we live."

As for the Miss Rockaway Armada, it is now safely docked under the watchful eye of a biker gang in Andalusia, Illinois, waiting for the journey to continue next year.