

Lucien Durey on Allyson Clay

03:37

Hello everyone, my name is Lucien Durey.

03:43

I'm walking through my neighborhood on the unceded territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam Nations, also known as Vancouver. On a cloudy afternoon in March 2022, well, moderately cloudy.

04:04

I'm talking about Allyson Clay's *Double Self Portrait* from 2001.

04:17

Allyson Clay was born in Vancouver, and grew up in Burnaby, as well as Scheveningen, Holland, and Rome, Italy. She received her BFA from NCSAD and her MFA from UBC.

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The material approaches in her practice have included painting, installation, photography, text works, and video.

04:43

I met Allyson when she was a professor at SFU, and I was an MFA student in 2013.

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Around that time, she was completing a series of paintings called *Ground Splat Pink*, which was about painting and language, about how abstract paintings are written about or described.

05:05

Each painting included text, sort of squished into coloured abstract shapes, upright, sideways, or upside down.

05:15

Phrases like "gawky matt slabs, luminescent nickel, yellow lemon," or "slam down squill blue," and I really liked this series.

05:27

This is just to say that I'm talking about a photograph today, but Allyson's work is really varied, and asks a lot of big questions that I also grapple with, such as how to use language to talk about something that escapes language.

05:47

For the 2004 exhibition, *Imaginary Standard Distance*, which was a survey of Allyson's work, since 1988, curated by Karen Henry for the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff.

06:00

Henry says, "the artworks explore the experience of a woman in the city and related issues of gender identity, the politics of the gaze, lived architecture, and the boundaries between public and private space." *Double Self-Portrait* was included in that show and exhibition catalogue.

06:26

The image shows two rows of windows on the side of an apartment building, we see about 24 window panels per row, side by side. Alternating between casement windows that open outward like saloon doors, and full pane windows.

06:43

Most of the blinds are drawn, apart from two sections equidistant apart. One on the left of the image and one on the right where the blinds are open.

06:53

Each allowing for a dim view of an apartment with plants and a lamp. It's actually the same apartment just doubled.

07:04

In the center of each of these two sections the artist Allyson, also doubled, is standing in an open window, wearing a white long sleeve shirt her arms in the air, as if mid throw while falling in front of her outside of the building, are a number of books fluttering open as they descend.

07:29

Her pose and each version of herself is slightly different, as are the books. There's no obvious break in the image, no collage two edges, no mirrored section that is too symmetrical.

07:42

At first glance they could be two separate figures in separate apartments. The image is a C-print on Dibond, so a colour photograph mounted to an aluminum substrate.

07:55

It is 76 by 354 centimeters or 30 inches high by 11 and a half feet long. So quite long.

08:08

One of the first things I was thinking about is that it's an inconvenient shape. You can imagine it being physically long in a space, sure, but even for seeing digital reproductions online, the way it opens on a computer, we're not used to JPEGs this shape.

08:26

We often look at long vertical images, scrolling through them from top to bottom, looking at narrow horizontal images is, is slightly more awkward.

08:38

Scrolling left to right, is unfamiliar and clunky, you risk triggering the back button on the browser and you have to resize the preview window etc.

08:50

In my own practice, I favor portrait orientation, and thinking about this work is making me realize I've been so conditioned by my computer and phone.

09:02

But I learned through chatting with Allyson via email, the work was commissioned by Presentation House Gallery. Now known as The Polygon Gallery, a public art gallery with a focus on photography and media-based art.

09:20

They're now located in Carrie Cates Court, right by the Lonsdale Quay, but they used to be up the hill a ways at Chesterfield and third.

09:33

Double Self-Portrait was commissioned to fit the long overhead advertising area... [car revving engine] [laughter]... inside the sea bus terminal in North Vancouver, part of the Presentation

House Galleries' *Facing History: Portraits from Vancouver* exhibition curated by Karen Love September 8th to October 28th in 2001.

09:59

I love this detail. I actually used to work for PHG from 2007 to 2011 and I took the sea bus to and from work. If you're not familiar, the sea bus is a passenger only ferry service that crosses Burrard Inlet in about 12 minutes.

07:18

Sorry, if you're not familiar with the sea bus is a passenger only ferry service that crosses Burrard Inlet about 12 minutes, connecting Waterfront Station in Vancouver to Lonsdale Quay in North Van.

10:33

In peak hours it departs every 15 minutes, and as you enter the station, there's a countdown clock telling you when the doors are closing. So, you often see people running for the last few minutes. On numerous occasions I've missed the sea bus by just a few seconds.

10:56

I think of that Gwyneth Paltrow movie *Sliding Doors* where she's running for the subway, and the narrative splits in one version, she misses the train, and then the other she catches it, sitting next to a guy who becomes her love interest.

11:11

When you miss the sea bus, you corral into a waiting area with a few benches that become increasingly more crowded as the 15-minute clock counts down. In 2001, if you weren't looking down at a book, or playing Snake on your Nokia phone, you were maybe looking up at Allyson Clay's *Double Self-Portrait*.

11:32

I liked the idea that this work was originally above our heads not hanging at gallery height, which seems to bring it closer to how we'd experienced the scene if we were actually walking by the building in the photo.

11:46

The books or maybe falling towards us, dropping on us. The dropping of something from a

private domestic space onto the public street with countless individuals finding themselves under the falling books on the sidewalk, or sea bus terminal below.

12:00

While the artist is in a privileged position above. I think about this boundary between public and private space. How certain boundaries are less directionally permeable.

12:14

There's a privilege in tossing something from one boundary to another. In this case, if we were to throw something back, we'd be fighting gravity. It makes me think of borders, the complexity of leaving one place to another.

12:31

In her email, Allyson pointed out that the show opened in September of 2001, and a sea bus passenger actually complained about this work, due to the fact that it reminded her of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in New York, which happened literally three days into the exhibition run.

12:50

Of course, this was a coincidence, but you can understand the association. The attacks were on everyone's mind at that time, and here was an industrial looking building could be the fourth or 40th floor.

13:03

In the photographs from that day of the debris of the falling towers, one of the materials you can identify that wasn't completely pulverized or turned to ash is paper, files, letters, invoices, maybe books, and there's something about the flailing of the books in *Double Self-Portrait* that hinted bodies.

13:21

Perhaps because they're paired with Allyson's pose, their front and back cover stretching upward like her arms.

13:30

There's a direct conversation between the artists and the books, how they move as they fall,

how they were thrown, perhaps in the stack, their titles, cover and dust jackets, or at this distance their vague hues.

13:45

I recognize this building confirmed through Allyson, that it's Highcroft Towers at 16th and Granville. This is the south side of the building across Marple Avenue from the Hycroft Manor.

13:59

A blurb from condopedia.com says that: Alexander Duncan McRae, a successful businessman and politician, moved to Vancouver in 1907 with his wife and three daughters, and began building Hycroft Manor for his family. He chose the top of the hill at 16th in Granville for the house and formal gardens and established kitchen gardens on a triangular piece of ground, now the site of Hycroft Towers. In 1942, since the family was spending most of their time on another estate. McRae sold the house and formal gardens to the government for the sum of one dollar. The Manor was used as a Veterans Hospital in 19... until 1960, and in 1962 was sold to the University Women's Club. Hycroft Towers was built in 1952. Marwell construction, Semmens & Simpson Architects, which was Harold Simmons and Douglas Simpson, and engineer Otto Safir were in charge of the construction. When built, Hycroft Towers stark Modernist design drew acclaim from the architectural community. Hycroft Towers was one of Vancouver's first high rise buildings and the apartments were very upscale. Some even included maid's quarters. By the 1970s, the Capozzi brothers owned Highcroft Towers... it was built as a rental property, but during the rise of strata titles in the 1970s the Capozzi brothers converted the building to condos and the units were sold. Today, rentals are not allowed in the building.

15:34

The blurb lists a number of men by name but only refers to women as wife, daughters, maids. A narrative of men taking what they want selling it for a dollar. The tower itself is a male monument, male design, male wealth.

15:48

By contrast, Allyson's *Double Self-Portrait* represents, as has been stated, the experience of

women in the city and related issues of gender identity, the politics of the gaze, lived architecture and the boundaries between public and private space.

16:02

Allyson says, "When I first moved in, Vikky Alexander lived there. She and I at different times changed apartments, but *Double Self-Portrait* was shot from across the street from my apartment on the fourth floor." Lorna Brown, Erin O'Brien and Helen Geddes were directors, videographers, and photographers.

16:25

Lorna Brown was the director-curator of Artspeak at the time the photo was taken and has continued to be a strong presence in the Vancouver art scene since then. One of the founding members of Other Sites for Artists' Projects, associate director-curator at the Belkin until very recently also, acting director there twice. Artspeak had purchased their building at 250 Carroll street in 1999 and Erin O'Brien and Helen Geddes had curated and exhibited respectively in previous years, at other Artspeak locations. Their names are listed in archives of exhibitions on the Artspeak website.

17:00

When I was at Hycroft towers for the first and last time, for a meeting with the Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society hosted in Maryon Adelaar's apartment there. She had just installed a mural by Vikky Alexander on a wall near the kitchen table. All this is to say same building but narratives less easily access not catalogued on condopedia anyway. Narratives about living or making versus owning or selling and about incredible women who have worked together to shape Vancouver's art history.

17:33

The Allyson's in Double Self... the Allyson's in *Double Self-Portrait* don't seem to care where the books are falling to, and the focus is on the way the books pose. If they were a basketball, we're seeing the moment of swish, not where the ball bounces to afterward.

17:48

And where are they falling from? Is there a library in the apartment? Have these books been culled from a collection? Are there better books still on the shelf? In a related sculptural video work, *Reading Machine*, which seems to have been shot at the same time from the same vantage point, the video itself plays from a screen embedded into a lectern, where in the shelf

below are several battered books. The collected essays of Marx and Engels is listed in descriptions I can find. In this video version, the books fall from Allyson's hand... Allyson's hands, but also return as the video loops forwards and backwards.

18:26

So, books not culled from the artist possession, singled out perhaps, but not discarded, caught in a loop. In the still photo version, the loop plays out through the doubled apartment, so we don't see the books return, but we are aware of a parallel universe or an infinite number of possibilities, or even just two that are slightly different, where instead of the collected essays of Marx and Engels, maybe she's throwing a Nietzsche book.

19:02

She says books have always been important to me, books and ideas. At first, I was thinking that I was setting the books free to fly away, and maybe multiply like ideas. Looking back, I think I was part of the gesture... looking back, I think part of the gesture was a response to the weightiness of academia, and my need to express my own subjectivity within those constrictions.

19:32

Again, this is 2001, which predates Kindle and other e-readers that threatened actual paper books. Before Google made cookbooks cute, before huge stacks of discarded Yellow Pages phone books became a regular sight, before big bookstore chains shifted to housewares. Before Vancouver Public Library expanded to include facilities, like recording booths, and digitization stations. Before galleries were giving away or shredding decades... decades old over printed publications by the hundreds, rather than store them for another 20 years.

20:10

There was more reverence for books in 2001, they were less separable from ideas. So maybe they were different assumptions when seeing someone throw a book out of a window. Maybe you'd see a scene like this and assume the thrower was going to walk down a few flights of stairs, collect the book off the sidewalk and stack it back inside their lectern.

20:35

Allyson tells me she accidentally dropped a book on the head of a guy walking by, a poet on his way to an open mic event in East Vancouver. She never got his name. The romantic in me latches onto this detail. There's the reality where she drops the book on the head of a poet

apologizes profusely, but he's on his way to an open mic event, forgives her and scurries away. Maybe she puts an "I Saw You" ad in The Georgia Straight paper. Let me buy you a beer stranger she writes.

21:11

He never sees it, but he writes a poem about getting literally hit in the head with the collected essays of Marx and Engels. Later the poem appears in a chat book he self publishes and dedicates to his sister.

21:30

And there's the version where the book is the *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. It falls but instead of hitting him, square on the head, it graces the poet's face, knocking his glasses into the street, which get run over. She apologizes. He forgives her but with fuzzy vision, he skips the open mic event, goes home and calls his sister. "I had a rough day. Vancouver has been tough. I miss you and mom. I'm not meeting any guys. My glasses got run over."

22:03

She hears the defeat in his voice books a week off in September from her job as a server at Windows on the World in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. And on the morning of September 11, she's laying on her brother's couch in Vancouver, jet lagged, reading the draft of a poetry book he's planning to self-publish.

22:25

Later that week... days. They take a bus to the Capilano suspension bridge, then go to the Lonsdale Quay. Decided to take the sea bus back. In the waiting area, he's playing Snake on his new Nokia phone, sporting contact lenses. She taps him on the shoulder points up stunned to an image of a woman throwing books out of a window, and says someone should complain about that.

23:02

And that's what I have to say about Allyson Clay's *Double Self-Portrait*. Thanks.