

Lantana Projects: An Interview with John Weeden

John Weeden graduated from Rhodes College with a BA in Art History in 1997. Upon graduation he worked as the curator for Delta Axis @ Marshall Arts until he left for the MA program in Contemporary Art Studies at the Sotheby's Institute of Art in London. After that John worked with the UrbanArt Commission before going on to study at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. He moved back to Memphis after a brief tenure as assistant curator at the Dundee Contemporary Arts Center in Dundee, Scotland, and has recently served the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art as interim exhibitions manager.

Hamlett Dobbins: The first question people usually have after someone's gone away to study or work and then comes back to Memphis is, "why did you come back to Memphis? Why not London or Paris or NYC?"

John Weeden: I returned to Memphis for a number of reasons, primarily because it is my home. Throughout my studies and life away I repeatedly heard the laments of artists who dealt with a feeling of dislocation in their work, of not feeling truly a part of any unique place, and it made me realize how fortunate I was to know a place so intrinsically in a way others apparently felt they could not. My parents, sister and dear friends are in Memphis, and it means a great deal to me to feel connected to a sense of place and community. That feeling is often tough to find in New York, London, and Paris, all cities in which I've spent extended periods of time. No matter how accustomed to a different town I became, I would often still feel like just another face in the crowd. Often, there may have been the enjoyable factor of being the man from Memphis, which is always a good thing in Europe, but with those places it's a matter of fond admiration, whereas with Memphis it's a much deeper and binding draw. I love it here. It didn't make sense any longer to be 4,000 miles across an ocean from those that matter most to me. I had the idea for some time to develop a project in Memphis involving the experiences encountered and people befriended around the world from my activity within the international contemporary art circuit. Now seemed the right moment to make that happen in the form of Lantana Projects, where my Memphis community and international circle of friends might join forces to create something truly intriguing. **What exactly is Lantana Projects and where are you now in its development?**

Lantana Projects is a non-profit residency program for international visual artists to spend time in Memphis and

develop new art work. Its mission is to bring international contemporary art to Memphis and to export Memphis hospitality to the world through the experience of artists' visits. Initially, we'll be hosting people in the fall and spring for periods of up to a month. Visitors are selected by a process of application and proposal. It's been my experience that Memphis holds an almost mythic place in the imagination of artists beyond the city limits. We've already had submissions from South America and Europe from word of mouth alone. Currently, we're still developing the infrastructure of how the administration shall work, and what the program is able to offer its visitors, as well as its outreach possibilities. We've built a board of directors from artists, curators, scholars and museum professionals in the U.S. and 11 other countries who have all contributed towards its initial development, both financially and in terms of pragmatic operational advice. The website went live on February 1st at www.lantanaprojects.org. Our next project visitor will arrive in Autumn 2005. We're in the process of decisions on who that will be now. I say 'next,' visitor because we assisted in the project coordination for a group of Scottish artists from Dundee in September 2004. They stayed three weeks working on a video piece later shown at P.S.1 Contemporary in New York and slated to be shown at several venues in the U.K. during 2005. They're in talks now with a local gallery about showing the final edit in Memphis sometime this summer. It was fun to have them and they really loved the town and all the people they met here. They finished their visit with a talk at the Brooks Museum. Right now, we're working on grants and raising funds for the next project, and getting the groundwork done to make Lantana a strong organization.

Can you give us some specifics on the project? Where will the artists work? Where will their work be displayed? Who is eligible to submit? Running this project is certain to be expensive, what are the sources of funding?

Until a designated all-in-one space is secured, artists' studio, living and exhibition spaces have been arranged through local supporters. Guest houses, galleries and workshops have all been volunteered on a project to project basis while we find the right home for the organization. Any international artist is eligible for consideration. Funding is a mixture of private donations, foundation support and government grants, domestic and foreign. Travel, for example is often easily covered through designated career development programs by artists' home governments. Artists are responsible for their own production and material costs

while here, as well as any shipping of completed works. Each artist receives a stipend for daily expenses, not to exceed a total of \$1,000 depending on the length of stay. Artists are responsible for at least one public meeting in the form of gallery talk, class visit or presentation of their work. They must also donate one work produced in Memphis to the organization.

I could imagine that an international residency program in Memphis would draw some heat from the community, as in, "Here's another one, raising money to bring people in from away, what about Memphis artists?" I wonder how you respond to that kind of criticism and what steps Lantana Projects would take to try to be inclusive to the community?

I've encountered such scenarios to varying degrees in Scotland and upstate New York; a new organization tries to include more participants into the local scene than the scene is used to, and some folks get agitated that outsiders have been invited to the party. While I understand the reasons behind such mindsets, especially financial ones, those attitudes are ultimately self-defeating, both to an individual and to the community. Artists working in Memphis are neither xenophobic nor protectionist. They understand the value of knowing as many other working artists as possible. As demonstrated by the earlier Scottish project, this is a town of artists eager to know what their fellow artists from different cultures are up to with their work, and more than happy to engage something new, contributing to the discourse of how that work is regarded in the process. The guests of Lantana are coming to Memphis for inspiration, not to subtract subsidies available to local artists. Lantana Projects can be of great benefit to local artists that choose to take an interest. It will act as an opportunity to converse with other working artists from around the globe and exchange information on how to get work shown in different markets worldwide. From such encounters, relationships develop and personal networks expand, allowing local artists to collaborate on plans for their work in a global community of their own making. The opportunities for career development with such a forum are only limited by what artists themselves choose to make of them. A fundamental mission of Lantana is enabling these connections to occur. Besides the kinds of opportunities that can blossom from these informal discussions between artists, as an organization we're also in talks with a number of similar residency programs in Europe about dedicated exchange programs, where local Memphis artists would go and spend time working as the guest of Lantana partner institutions. If we can help local artists get featured in exhibitions abroad in this manner, we will. As I said earlier, we love this town and want the rest of the world to see why.

Hamlett Dobbins

Hamlett Dobbins is a painter represented by David Lusk Gallery. He is curator of the Clough-Hanson Gallery at Rhodes College.

Atta

Carol LaFayette

The University of the South

December 3, 2004-February 11, 2005

Carol LaFayette's *Atta* at The University of the South, Sewanee, Art Gallery looked like an experiential science exhibit. Entering the darkened gallery, viewers were drawn to a centrally lit floor installation. A group of flat stones on the floor was animated by video playing across it. The arrangement of rocks was echoed in size and shape by a perpendicular projection screen showing a different set of moving images. At right, a flat stainless steel stand held a console tilted for comfortable standing access. The console knobs were arranged in a diamond-shaped diagram, with no clear operative direction indicated, no color code, no instructions. Viewers left to their own devices soon learned that the upper projection could be changed to different video channels by dialing the knobs.

On the floor was what looked like speeded-up shots of an organism in a Petrie dish. The screen above was filled with long exposures of scenes in nature—fields of grasses

growing, leaves on and then off trees—as if the artist had planted a camera in different locations with its shutter propped open, which in fact turned out to be the case. The most fascinating were long exposure scenes of nighttime animal behavior:

buzzards tearing at a carcass, an inquisitive cow distorted by its closeness to the lens, a Barred owl, and a rare glimpse of an elusive bobcat. LaFayette admits to baiting the buzzards with dead animals and setting off bird distress calls to attract the owl. Nevertheless, her intrusion into nature's privacy was worthy of National Geographic, and viewers had the privilege of watching things usually only available through very powerful zoom lenses. Watching these scenes, we recognize our own ignorance of the vast range of animal behavior and language.

But, one might ask, where is the art? It is only by reading the artist's statement that we learn that the slowly growing image in the projection over the rocks on the floor is in fact the nest of a large "atta Texana" colony, and that "atta" is a species of ant found on the artist's own ranch. LaFayette has used infrared videography and ground penetrating radar to map a 3-D section of the colony, which we then see floating in front of our eyes, made visible by enhanced orange and

green hues. What at first seemed to be fairly straightforward nature observation, with the films on screen and the accompanying still photographs in the balcony gallery above, becomes instead a commentary on what is unseen.

LaFayette's endeavor has become transformed. Using the tools at her disposal in the digital imaging lab at Texas A & M University, she is now making connections between the natural and digital worlds in order to extend the realm of the visible. When she encountered the ant colony whose fungus-like nest was the size of a minivan and whose residents carry an antibiotic on their backs to keep the fungus in check, LaFayette was awed by the invisible "balance sheet" beneath her feet. Her previous documentations of nature seemed to pale in comparison to the image rippling over stone, a fictionalized construction made possible only by geometry, which she terms a kind of drawing. By manifesting something newly realized, LaFayette's work becomes a metaphor for the artist own experience.

Susan W. Knowles

Susan W. Knowles, an independent curator, has organized numerous museum and gallery exhibitions. She serves as the Tennessee editor for *ArtPapers*.

