



ALLYSON MELLBERG

INTERVIEW BY KRISTIN FARR / PORTRAIT BY JASON LEFTON

THERE IS PIGMENT BEING LAID DOWN ON PAPER WORLDWIDE, BUT IT'S RARE TO FIND WORK MADE WITH INGREDIENTS FROM THE ARTIST'S GARDEN. ALLYSON MELLBERG'S PIECES WILL BIODEGRADE IN SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS. THEY'LL BE ABSORBED BACK INTO THE LAND THEY CAME FROM, JUST LIKE US. BUT FOR NOW, THEY ARE HERE TO REMIND US THAT NATURE IS BOTH THE SOURCE AND THE FORCE.

Prophetically, maybe even intrinsically, Allyson had already introduced tar balls and an invasive murky dark substance into her work when BP's recent catastrophe hit the Gulf of Mexico. Concerned with our environmental future, we talked about science fiction themes evolving into non-fictional realities when I video-phoned her this summer at her family's house in Virginia Beach. She and her husband, Jeremy Taylor, are both artists and professors in Charlottesville, North Carolina. —*Kristen Farr*

Kristen Farr: Did you ever have chicken pox as a kid?

Allyson Mellberg: Yes, in the summer, it sucked! But I've always been fascinated with stuff like that. The first time I got poison ivy, I thought,

this is horrible and I hate it, but look at that blister!

You've made paintings of figures with facial growths or blisters, which were inspired by the harmful parabens found in beauty products. What do you think of the cosmetics industry?

It's disconcerting. Many women spend a lot of time being upset about their appearance and spending lots of money on products, and then on top of all that, putting crap on their bodies that doesn't come out, parabens and things that mess with your hormones or endocrine disruptors. They're found in breast cancer tissue and are linked to infertility. There are all these things that you're being sold—not just an image that's really hard to keep up with, but

also something that's unhealthy, physically, not just mentally. I don't buy a lot of beauty products, but am really picky when I do.

Everybody wants to look nice or feel nice about themselves. I was interested in what it would look like if all this stuff could surface, all these things that you put in your body that are inert, that might be doing something you can't see. If these were to surface, how would we feel differently about them?

In some of your paintings, the human figures share skin spots with the animals they're interacting with. Are they catching something?

I like the idea that it isn't clear who's catching what from whom. I made a piece a few years





ago with a person bending down to a little rodent, and the title is *One of Us is Completely Harmless*. I like that relationship to be a little mysterious.

Your figures' clothes are usually modest with simple stripes or patterns. Why that choice?

I've been waiting for somebody to ask that for a long time. I like the idea of everybody's clothes relating to each other. There's a general kind of clothing, almost like a uniform. You get the sense that all of these people are equal with each other.

Sometimes people will say I only draw girls, but actually some of them are boys. The clothing definitely lends itself to this androgyny that I

think is interesting. When experiencing nature in a pure way, you're almost like a child. You aren't as aware of your gender, or you aren't fully formed as one or the other.

When I first started making this work about people connecting with nature, there was a part of me that said I guess they could be nude. But it seemed too literal; it would be taken in only one way. There would be more of a focus on the nude figure. I didn't want to do that, so I had to think of a way for them to be neutral.

Also, some things are really flat—I'm influenced by miniature paintings and folk art, where there's a lot of flatness. The stripes are a way to play with volume and form. Sometimes before I paint on the stripes the drawings have

a very different character. It comes from being a printmaker and doing etching or engraving, carving lines around something to give it mass and volume. It wakes them up sometimes, depending on the color and what kind of pattern I use. I like patterns, I feel as if they give off energy; they have a lot of life to them. It's the same thing with my drawings that have multiple faces projecting out. They're more alive because they've got this pattern, and they start to move and vibrate as a result. That came out of me doing yoga and thinking about that oscillating energy. I've talked about this with people before, and they always end up asking me about drugs. I've never done any drugs, so I'll say, "Sorry, I'm just crazy." They assume I'm tripping on something.

How do you imagine your characters behaving?

They probably wouldn't talk a lot. They'd be quiet, slow moving figures, and they'd probably be in a meditative state. If approaching something in nature that you hadn't encountered before, you'd probably be pretty quiet and slow to avoid getting attacked or scaring it. And the characters that are disfigured look proud because, although messed up, they're dealing with the situation. They accept themselves.

What sight have you stumbled upon that made you drop everything and sketch it?

One time I was driving here, to the beach, from

Charlottesville. I was doing a craft fair and was exhausted to the point where I needed to call somebody and talk to stay awake. Some friends were driving ahead of me, and suddenly I saw a goat on the side of the road. I thought it was going to walk over the guardrail, so I was bracing myself in case I had to swerve. As I got closer, I saw that it was really an albino fawn with this little pink nose. I wanted to stop immediately and go look, but didn't want to scare it. I called my friends to ask if they'd seen it, and they hadn't. It was magical, this amazing animal no one else had seen. I drew this little sketch—really badly. Jeremy's definitely in charge of drawing animals in this family.

You and Jeremy often collaborate, and you made a piece together called *The Legacy of*

Brutality. What's that one all about?

Jeremy's notorious for having music titles. That one's from a metal song. It's talking about war, one of those pieces where we wanted to make big versions and wheatpaste it. It's about our feelings about war and fighting over oil, but also about our feelings towards the legacy of brutality towards animals. In his work you see a lot of deer and bunnies, animals that are thought of as passive, or are tested on. It's harder to see a human image with the animal image, bound together, with violence added. Some people can look at images of animals that are violent or difficult, and even though it may be upsetting they accept it more than they would if they were looking at a person. If you mix them together, it's definitely a different

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statement that can maybe speak to a broader range of people.

You seem so attuned to animals.

I'm going to get killed one day. I'll see a cougar and be like, "Hi, Kitty!" Or a bear. Well, actually, I'd probably run from a bear. I joke about being a Midwesterner who grew up around much less wild nature, and then moved down south, and was like, "Hey, pretty spider!"

I saw a video of you feeding a wild pigeon.

It was actually a morning dove. I was staring him down one day, and he got really close to my feet. I just froze because it was so amazing. He was so pretty; they have those purple iridescent spots on their necks. He started nibbling on the bottom of my shoes. He wouldn't ever let you pick him up, but if you put your hand out, he would land on it. After two years of that we didn't see him again. We don't know what happened to him, but there's dove hunting around here, which is terrible. People plant entire fields of gorgeous sunflowers as a draw. So you've got two beautiful things together being pooped on by hunting.

It's so depressing knowing there are people who don't share your respect for nature.

It can be heartbreaking to care about the things that we care about, but I'm not going to stop caring about them. I'm not able to. Every day since the Gulf disaster started I'll think about how we're talking right now, and it's gushing, and there isn't enough being done about it. We signed up with Audubon to volunteer and were going to drive down to New Orleans, but they aren't letting anybody in. BP is totally in control right now. Wherever the oil hits, we won't live to see it completely remediate. It's permanent. News moves so fast, but just because the news forgets doesn't mean that it changes. My kids aren't going to see the ocean and the Gulf in the way that I did, before now.

One of your latest paintings depicts an oily substance spilling from the characters' mouths. Was that a direct reference to the BP nightmare?

Funny, but it wasn't. I made that before it happened. It freaked me out because that piece was just a demo for my students. We were going to make large narrative ink drawings, so we looked at surrealist drawings by Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo,

who are two of my favorite artists. I also asked them to pull from surrealist literature, and I used a quote from Haruki Murakami as an example. It came from his story in *Kafka on the Shore* where Mr Nagata has this big thing come out of his body, and I ran with it in my own way. It was weird when all of this happened, because another piece I made around that time was a girl with draping goo around her, which came from pictures I'd seen of tar balls and tar masses that had washed up on shore.

Let's discuss science fiction.

I think science fiction is effective when it talks about how consequences of human action can affect the future. Sometimes things that are fantastic looking and gross can be real. These tar masses that are floating up on the beaches are bizarre. They don't look like things we see in our everyday lives, but they're real. It's a reality that we haven't confronted until now. Science fiction ideas will be showing up more in my new work. *Unearthly Child*, the title of my next show, is the name of the first episode of *Dr Who* from 1963.

You'll know who your soul mates are—the people who will understand that reference.





It's a nerd test. I mean that with love.

Tell me more about this *Unearthly Child*.

It's a faceless person who is here but can't see or communicate. There are people who live on the planet who don't connect with it and aren't really interested in it, so they become blank. I'm interested in classic dystopian ideas. Ursula K Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* talks about environment and social problems and puzzles out what could happen. What I like about science fiction is that it happens through really weird images, so you can remove yourself enough from that reality to learn a lesson.

What are your favorite books?

My favorite book of all time is Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet*. Another one that influenced me was *The Word for World is Forest*, which is also by Ursula K Le Guin. I like old Isaac Asimov collections. There's a story called *Parasite Planet* with walking cancers called doughpots. I love these big white blobs that eat everything in their path and I've been trying to figure out a way to use them for years. I'm trying to make them materialize. The difficult thing about doughpots is that they're all white. They'll come out in full bloom someday.

What about sculptural doughpots?

I'm actually trying to teach myself to carve wood and finish three figures for the show. One

of them is holding a big blob. I'm also working on a soft sculpture, and one idea involves a doughpot, but I'm unsure what's going to happen yet. Sometimes I don't know until I'm doing it.

Tell me about your materials. You make them yourself?

Most of them. We're moving towards making more and more. Right now we're growing woad and weld plants. Woad is a substitute for indigo. There were indigo plantations in the South in the 1800s, but they had a lot of pestilence and problems. It's more of a tropical plant. And weld is a yellow pigment. We're also growing safflower and scarlet flax. You can get oil out of them and use the fiber as paper

or fabric, but we aren't growing enough to do that just yet. We have pokeberry in our yard, also called inkberry, which was used in the Civil War. It's fuchsia when fresh but it eventually turns brown and looks a lot like walnut ink. The Declaration of Independence was written in inkberry. It's brown now, but it used to be hot pink, which is funny to think about. And we have marigolds growing, which makes a beautiful yellow.

When we were in graduate school, before I met Jeremy, he started doing the research. I need to credit him for that. There was a big life change that happened when we got together. In undergrad some of my printmaking professors got sick from materials in different ways—respiratory problems, scar

tissue, allergies—the whole gamut of things that can happen. Jeremy was interested in natural materials, and then he had to stop using anything toxic because he was having reactions around the time we started living and working together. It was so compelling; it changed everything. I remember getting rid of all this stuff. At the same time I started reading about parabens, so I was also throwing out hair products and make-up. It was an interesting purge.

I can't imagine working in any other way. It's so safe for us to work, and I love all the natural pigments. It's made my work subtler in terms of color, but I don't mind that. It's cool to teach it too, because I feel like there should be a paradigm shift. We're writing a book about it,

and I teach all of my students how to make walnut ink. I taught drawing last semester and I did an egg tempera demo. That's older than oil paint; it's really stable and easy to work with. Dry pigments can be a pain, so sometimes I'll make the egg medium and mix it with good quality watercolor as a way to avoid them.

Even if you can't sit there and grind everything yourself, there are ways to make it safer. Pigments like green earth or yellow ochre are safer. Some people who work in traditional egg tempera are still using lead white in a powdered form. Lead is natural, but not safe, obviously. There's that funny contradiction of things that are natural yet dangerous to us. Some are carcinogenic or irritants; you have to do your research and protect yourself. I want to



JUXTAPOZ

Flea Beetles
Egg tempera and homemade walnut ink
11" x 14"
2010

SOMETIMES
THINGS THAT
ARE FANTASTIC
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be making art until I'm an old lady like Louise Bourgeois.

If you look up old recipes for ink, they read like brewing beer. People mixed walnuts with vinegar and oak galls, which are these growths on oak trees made from a parasitic wasp. They make a beautiful blue or black tone. You can find old manuscripts or copies of the Torah written in this historical ink. You can also find old letters from the 1800s or 1700s and see through them where the ink has eaten the handwriting away. Walnut ink is acidic; if you boil walnuts, it makes tannic acid.

Are your walnut ink paintings going to eat themselves?

Probably in a couple hundred years. It's an archivalist's nightmare, in a way. But I won't be around for that.

And they aren't going to take up space in a landfill.

They aren't; they'll just biodegrade. To me, it seems really human. It's paper that's natural; I use mostly cotton rag paper, and materials that will just go away. If they're framed and kept under glass, their life will be longer. It could be many hundreds of years. People who own the

work will never see it go away, and probably their grandkids won't either.

That's what conservators are for.

Yeah. Figure it out!

It seems like it's part of your artistic practice to make the world better in your own way. You put your money where your mouth is.

I never really thought about it, but we're growing our food literally right next to our paint. The pigments are in a box garden because they rob the soil a little bit, but they're in the same fenced in plot.

Could you eat your paintings?

Probably not because of the egg yolk, it's old. We're getting into using egg white, a medium called glare. It's a little more flexible, but it stinks. It smells so bad.

The way you install your wall pieces reminds me of hallway collections of family photos with mismatched frames.

My mother owns a frame shop, and the walls in our house were literally jammed. That was probably my first influence. We're all artists.

My mom and dad met at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1960s, and my brother went to the same art school that I did. Everybody either makes art or music.

What were you like as a kid?

Even back then, I thought I could talk to animals. I'd make friends and find stray cats and devise plans to tame chipmunks in our yard, and a groundhog that lived in our field. Of course it never worked. I had a big imagination.

You haven't changed much.

No, I haven't. I'm very similar to the way I was then.

When do you feel the most stoked?

When the ocean is warm and I can go swimming; when I'm drawing, and when I'm in the garden picking food with Jeremy and my cat. Those are the top three.

For more information about Allyson Mellberg, contact Allysonandjeremy.blogspot.com.

