

**NY ART MAPS**

**ABOUT**

**ART MAPS**

**BROADER NY (/NEW-PAGE-1/)**

**BLOG (/BLOG-1-1/)**

**INSTAGRAM (/NEW-PAGE/)**

**OTHER PROJECTS (/PROJECTS/)**

**CONTACT US! (/CONTACTO-1/)**

OCTOBER 30, 2018 (/BLOG-1/2018/10/30/MKNHOSUABV76YTLEOXKH51G8MTS2N8)

## **Titanic by Claudia Bitran at her Smack Mellon Studio (/blog-1/2018/10/30/mknhosuabv76ytlexkh51g8mts2n8)**

SOFIA QUIRNO (/BLOG-1/?AUTHOR=55A401A5E4B0A61292233A78)

*Claudia Bitran moved to the US to attend Rhode Island School of Design for her MFA degree in Painting, and relocated to NY after her Thesis Show in Brooklyn. She has shown her work in the US, Chile, Taiwan, Scotland, Germany and Mexico. She obtained the Van Lier Trust grant, Jerome Foundation Grant for Emerging Filmmakers, Emergency Grant for Artists, Roswell Artist in Residence Program, and was part of numerous and very prestigious residencies like Smack Mellon in NYC, where she recently was a Studio Artist Resident. As fans of Claudia's work, we visited her studio in Smack Mellon to learn all about her practice and the residency.*



Shoot on a Hornblower Cruise in New York, 2015-  
Photo by Alejandro Moreno, Francisca Molina, Joe Bochinsky, Audra Woloweik

**AM:** But, as you said, sometimes you even do the camera yourself too...

We are obsessed with her video remakes, specially with *Titanic*. Claudia has been working on her ongoing “shot for shot” reinterpretation of *Titanic* for 4 years, it’s a very ambitious and amazing project.

**AM: NY Art Maps**

**CB: Claudia Bitran**

**CB:** When I first had this idea about reenacting *Titanic*, I presented it to the *Museo de Artes Visuales* in Chile. A year later they invited me to have an exhibition of this project. The show consisted of two floors of the Museum where I could display props, sets and performance remains, as well as small screens with excerpts, in addition to a large projection in which I showed excerpts of the film.

**AM:** Looking at the trailer and the raw selection of scenes, we realize how differently you engage with each one of them. Some with animation, others reenactment. There is also a very interesting use of metaphors. Can you tell us more about this?

**CB:** I work in this way, because I do not want to reproduce literally what’s happening in the movie, instead, I try to reinvent scenes using a variety of materials that help me create new narrative dimensions through the use of metaphors.

**CB:** Yes, I have different cameras.

Sometimes I use a smartphone, or a GoPro, a Canon 7D, a Nikon. I go around with the GoPro during the day a lot, when I’m walking through the city. I also shot at the Titanic Museum.

**AM:** There is a Titanic Museum?

**CB:** Yes, well it’s called The Titanic Artifact Exhibition. I was in Roswell, New Mexico by coincidence when the exhibition was up in Hobbs New Mexico, so I went to the Museum, spoke to the curator, and after a lot of planning, she granted me access to all the rooms in the museum, the curator helped me gather actors thanks to the local newspaper, and she even played as Molly Brown. It was amazing. The whole town was acting in the movie! I had a lot of fun but it was also very stressful because 56 actors showed up instead of 16 who had originally signed up.



Shoot at the Titanic Artifact Exhibition  
Nov 2016 at The Museum of Western Heritage in  
Hobbs, New Mexico.

For example, sometimes I use snow to represent the water or an inflatable *Titanic* slide instead of a real ship. These “changes” allow me to speak about other aspects of the film. I am pushing for a different rhetoric, because I like humor, first of all, but also because I like to speak about power dynamics, class, and acting, and about wanting to be something that you are not.



Bitran's hand made scale model for scenery shoot



Titanic, a deep Emotion Performance shoot at The Canham Natatorium, University of Michigan with Rebekah Modrak's Students of "Dressing up and down" class, Stamps School of Art and Design in

Photos by Brian Henning. Special Thanks to Erin Anderson and the Hobbs Community.

**AM:** So, the big question is: Why *Titanic* out of any other movie?

**CB:** There are a lot of reasons but mostly because I wanted to make something that everybody could relate to. *Titanic* is a movie that is embedded in everybody's memory even if you haven't seen it. Everybody knows the story. Also, it's a metaphor of the 20th Century. It's like the Coca Cola of the moving image. I thought everybody would want to participate in a way or another. Also, I love the impossible challenge of trying to make anything interesting out of this overused and over parodied film. Is there even any possibility of making something artistic from pop appropriation anymore?

**AM:** Totally. *Titanic* is the romance story of our generation. We also are assuming that you are a fan.

**CB:** I am a fan of *Titanic*, and I'm also a fan of all the things that I make work about. I've seen it 800 times, so when you see something this many times you can start dissecting it and asking questions about its construction. I am very inspired by how the scenes are built, and touched by when the music comes in, and the timing, the editing. I think that all those things make you feel emotions and that's what I am a fan of: The capacity of provoking emotions.



**AM:** So, every shift and decision is very important and intentional, isn't it?

**CB:** Yes. Every shift from the original film to what I decide to do is important. Some of the footage, for example, was filmed in Chilean Patagonia. You know how the tours in Patagonia are fancy, you are basically paying to experience the ice, ... the money involved in that, and the closeness to death, and the melting of the ice, so many contradictions in this kind of tourism.

**AM:** We also love how the characters don't have fixed genders in your movie. We also enjoy how they go back and forth in gender even in the same character. For example, in the part where Leonardo wins the tickets to the ship, a little girl plays "Fabrizio" (Leonardo's best friend). You also have homosexual scenes in a heterosexual love story.

**CB:** I choose to make Jack all genders and all ages and all backgrounds because one of the most important things about James Cameron's *Titanic* is the roles that Jack and Rose (Leo and Kate) play: a very heterosexual, normal and archetypical relationship, and we are so used to relating to the world through characters like these.

**AM:** How long is it taking you to do this remake so far?

**CB:** 4 years of making it. 550 actors and cameraman. 18 cities. \$30,000 so far -which is nothing for all of this work. (I pay every cameraman). 25 kinds of cameras. 35 Jacks. Post production is going to be a lot of money, I need grants! I know how to edit but I can't do all that needs to be done alone.

**AM:** While all the characters change, we have realized, no one plays Rose but you? Why?

**CB:** I play Young Rose always, but I have a 4 actresses who play old Rose. It's important that young Rose is always the same person, because 1) I think this chaotic collage needs some stability. People can relate to the same Rose/director/artists throughout the entire piece, And 2) It's also like an endurance performance that I am doing as an image maker.

**AM:** You showed us some of the techniques you use to portray different aspects of the movie, for example high class has to be portrayed in a stiffer way. But, based on what you have told us so far, and looking at the scenes, we realize that the decision also has to do with what you have at hand. Right?

**CB:** Yes, for example this residency building (Smack Mellon) has the hallway that looks a lot like the corridors of the ship, so I use the



Claudia Bitran, Kiss Stand, Omaha, November 2014

**AM:** Right, the only challenge of these two characters' relationship is class...

**CB:** Yes, it's class. So, to change the Leo in my movie it's to give us a chance for us to feel other emotions that are not that simple or archetypical. I want to challenge the simple emotions that we are used to feeling between a woman and a guy (white confident guy and white troubled woman). What if we present Rose as Jack's mother? or what if you are a woman and Jack is also a woman and she is looks just like you? Or a different color? What kind of feelings could all these produce?

**AM:** It is also very interesting how you resolve difficult scenes in such a particular and smart way.

**CB:** It is a decision but sometimes it is also out of need. For example, I was alone in the middle of the desert and I needed a boat for a scene, but I only found a pedal boat in a small lake. And I needed characters but I

hallway for a few scenes. When I am walking on the street, I am always looking for things that resemble something in the movie.

**AM:** It is wonderful when the "making off" is actually part of the scene. For example, when you are moving the ship and we can see you doing it, or pedaling the boat, or the presence of the green screen. Nothing is disguised. The remake tries to be indexical enough, but not that much.

**CB:** Well, it's funny to include those details because they are useful for example, for the scene where one of the older woman who plays old Rose is talking to the scientist, she doesn't remember her lines and I've decided to keep it that way in my movie. In the monologue, at one point she says "A Woman's Heart is a Deep Ocean of Secrets." For some reason, the actress couldn't remember that line, and kept saying "A Woman's Heart is a Deep Emotion of Secrets." I thought it was brilliant, so I've decided to keep it because it fits so well with what I'm doing. The bloopers are the best part! They are so transparent, and they actually portray truthful feelings and actions. So, I have decided to keep them. I am also planning some scenes where I will film people explaining scenes of the movie.

**AM:** Given the kind of material that you tend to use for the set design, is it important that we see the trace of consumerism (like

only had barbies. That is how I filmed the “I’m the King of the world” scene: by myself on a paddle board with Barbies. Haha

**AM:** And how about the sinking ship scene done with the deflation of an inflatable boat? How did you manage that scene with kids playing on it?

**CB:** It was actually an accident, the motor for the inflatable stopped working so the ship started deflating and the parents of the children that were playing on the inflatable went crazy! Nothing was dangerous really, but some of the parents were screaming “We’ll sue you!” so that part wasn’t that fun. I’m glad I had 5 cameras this surreal disaster. It is also interesting to ask: Who invented that toy? How wrong it is to have that for rental for kids’ entertainment? It’s a giant toy that is based on a real story where thousands of people died...



Shoot at Socrates Sculpture Park, 2014- Photo by Cristián Fuenzalida and Rob Maccinis

**AM:** How did you manage to get the real boat you use for the rest of the scenes?

cardboard that shows Coca Cola, etc)?

**CB:** Yes, it is important. I like to show the craft in the most raw way. I work with materials that are recyclable and trash because I want to comment on the production value of Hollywood and about the absurdity of those numbers. I’m trying to make something that can be as “emotion-inducing” but with barely any resources. Bring people into a world that is psychologically engaging....

**AM:** How did you start making video? What was your first video project?

**CB:** I started making video very young in Chile, filming friends and family. But my first video project was a documentary about being transgender in Chile when I was 16, it was a documentary for a French class. It was very experimental, with water and colors and stuff, and then I made a documentary about surrealist cinema when I was 17. After that, I didn’t make any video work until grad school. I went to grad school in RISD for painting. I started making videos again because it just seemed like the most natural thing to do at the time (I had just been a Britney impersonator on a Reality TV show in Chile, and I had my mind on that more than painting) I made my first video animation in clay, which is still one of my favorite videos I’ve made “Someone like you by Adele - Original cover”

**CB:** That ship is a real Cruise ship on the Hudson River that I rented with grant money. I rented it for three hours for \$3,000. So, I had to film as many scenes as I could in three hours. I had five cameraman, who were filming in different locations of the ship with different actors, all at the same time. The shot list and story boards for that shoot were very hard to put together

**AM:** You do the production, acting, editing, casting and set design all by yourself?

**CB:** Yes, I do everything. I make most of the things alone, but for big things like the iceberg scene, I have rented or asked for permissions to use specific spaces. I also have recruited a around 40 or 50 cameraman in different cities. Cameramen are super important for me.

**AM:** So here we are at your studio in the Smack Mellon residency program, which is so prestigious. Congratulations! Can you tell us a little bit about the residency program?

**CB:** It's a very awesome program, not only because you get your own private studio with four walls for yourself, but also because the residency makes sure that you get studio visits with curators, writers and people from the art world that you would want to talk to. You give a list of people you want to meet to Smack Mellon, and they try to book studio visits with them. All the residents write names on a list and we all meet with everyone, we get 20 minutes studio visits with all these important people, which is a true gift. It's a very quiet place and it's very isolated from the outside. There are only 6 residents, so it's very calm and peaceful... and the open studios are great. Last time I got a solo show out of open studios. A lot of people come, Dumbo is great, culturally rich...

**AM:** How about the Smack Mellon gallery space, are you invited or allowed to use it?

**CB:** It is an amazing space! But there is no direct relationship between the gallery and the residency program. They are two separate things. I haven't shown there but they have had a few shows in which the residents can participate, so that's a great opportunity also.

**AM:** What other resources does the residency provide?

**CB:** The residency includes a media lab with computers, big printers, scanners and a wood shop –that I used a lot for some projects– which we all can use and it is great. The residency also has a mentorship program for teenage artists, I am one of the mentors of this amazing program.

**AM:** Thank you Claudia! It was a pleasure to visit your studio.

*See Claudia Bitran's work @  
[www.claudiabitran.com](http://www.claudiabitran.com)  
(<https://www.claudiabitran.com/>)*

*Check the Smack Mellon  
Residency @ [smackmellon.org](http://smackmellon.org)  
(<http://smackmellon.org/>)*

All images - Claudia Bitran's website.

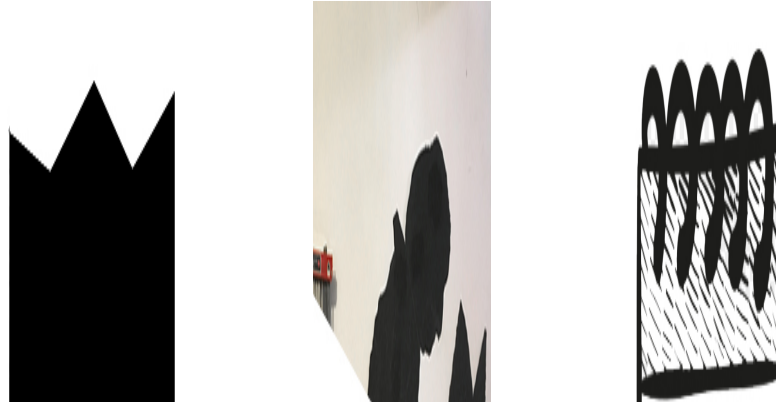
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