

## THE COASTAL POST



Jenn Dierdorf and Susan Stainman, Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn NY 2018

## Susan Stainman: Art + Connection

April 08, 2019 in Jenn Dierdorf, East

*On December 9th, 2018 I met artist and friend Susan Stainman at the Smack Mellon gallery in Dumbo, Brooklyn. I was there to see the group exhibition “Empathy” curated by Gabriel de Guzman which featured an interactive work by Stainman. I know Susan from her involvement with the renown arts organization, A.I.R. Gallery, where I was Director of Fellowship from 2014-16. When I met Susan she was finishing up her Fellowship award there and her practice involved sculpture of varying sizes and shapes that evoked ideas around sex, sexuality, intimacy and how bodies move through space. Her most recent solo exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery titled Dream Bird, Hatching the Egg was an interactive “chill” space complete with a designated carpet zone, soft sculptural forms on the ground for visitors to lean against as well as various sculptures on the wall and floor. The installation was reminiscent of her former sculptural work however this work felt more like an invitation.*

*The space seemed less about wandering around ogling artworks in the room, and more about sitting, and being in the space. Even with the cool green and blue color palette, the installation felt welcoming and cozy. Over the course of the exhibition Stainman led guided meditations and discussions in the installation, further inviting intimacy, trust and compassion into the space.*

*A year later, I am joined by Stainman as we sit in her recent work titled *Poised for Intimacy*. The piece is two impeccably constructed conjoined chairs. It has a hinge on one side and a clasp on the other. It can be “closed” and made into a satisfyingly complete padded circle, or opened and occupied, as it is now. Susan and I face each other, our knees bumping every so often.*

**Susan, tell me about this fun chair we are sitting in. Where did the idea come from?**

The chairs came out of an ongoing interview project - where I have in-person conversations with people about the idea of “momentary utopia”. A utopia that’s experienced in small moments at a time, in an internal and interpersonal way. I really want people to connect this idea to mundane moments in their life, just an everyday instance of utopia, rather than peak experiences, because we all have those, but most of our life is composed of mundane moments.

I love interviewing people, and at the same time I wanted to find a way for my work to continue to function without my presence, and yet still accomplish the intent of the interviews. I had been conducting these interviews, and creating events, mostly dinners centered around various aspects and values associated with utopias, which required my presence and guidance to happen. So how could I start making work that allowed the same ideas to be exchanged but without my physical presence. In the case of this chair, it’s really two chairs that can be closed and essentially unusable or opened to create an intimate space. In a small pocket in each chair are booklets with prompts that guide a mindful conversation between the two participants. The text on the cards asks them to consider what is utopia?

I also wanted to explore the difference between simply being in close proximity with someone and having intimacy. Building intimacy can be awkward, and the way our bodies are positioned in the work feels a bit awkward, let alone if you’re sitting across from a stranger and maybe your knees are touching.

**So what is utopia?**

Well the root of the word means “no place.” It’s generally considered to be a far off place of perfection, something unattainable. In literature or popular culture, it’s always something that fails. My current body of work is about reclaiming or healing this word to make it an idea that is more empowering, more attainable. Within this piece, the sequence of conversation would be to consider what a Utopia is and whether it can be viewed as something we already contain within ourselves. And whether we can access it through small moments of awareness. Can we identify momentary Utopia in our lives? How does it feel to contemplate that? How might you live your life differently if you considered these moments utopic?

**Are these the same questions you have been using in the interviews, before you made the chair?**

Almost, yes.

**So the chair is like creating a location for the interviews to happen?**

Yes

**Does this complete the project in that case?**

No. I don't think so. I really want to collect a broad range of experiences and talk to people beyond who I would normally interact with so I want to continue. Also, I like that the interviews can continue far beyond the timeframe of this exhibition and the limitations of needing a space to show the chairs.

For this exhibition it worked well to have an interactive object that creates a private-ish space to have a conversation, but I don't expect that the openness of this gallery would be comfortable for everyone. Normally, when I host an interview it's in a quiet, private space and the conversation is recorded. Many people wouldn't feel comfortable in an open space like this gallery discussing such intimate ideas in an honest way. So in this iteration the chair is an invitation to take a moment and consider some of these ideas and get a glimpse of what my work is about. But it is also very different from the experience of the interview.

**I know this is a different direction for your work from the more sculptural art forms you were making a few years ago. Do you see similarities between the two bodies of work, from the visceral sculpture to this more interactive work? Is location an important part of your work now?**

I don't think of it as an emphasis on location, maybe more about how the work makes people relate to space. One piece that comes to mind, that I made during my Fellowship at A.I.R., was a pleated, bright yellow piece made of tennis ball material that crept around the wall and turned around corners, low to the ground. And it required a kind of playfulness, both in how it spoke to people and how one had to move in order to view it. So there are definitely similarities. I just think eventually I got fed up with objects and just didn't want to make objects for the sake of objects. I wanted to move more directly into creating experiences.

Much of the sculptural work I was making at that time was about me exploring sexuality and the erotic. Not limited to the carnal act of sex, but also a holistic, spiritual, emotional thing that is in our make-up, similar to how Audre Lorde describes the erotic.

My meditation practice has also played a big role in the direction my studio work is taking. I've had a meditation practice for over a decade and have been teaching meditation for a couple of years now. The work I was doing just prior to the interview series involved intricately cut, multi-layered paper pieces using an extremely tedious and meditative process. The titles of the works referenced Buddhist philosophy, but that was the only direct hint at that part of my life. This body of work is really the first time I've made direct reference to meditation, to Buddhist philosophy. Really my definition of utopia is closer to nirvana than the Western definition of utopia. So, my concerns started to shift from using discrete objects to invoke an emotional or visceral response from viewers to directing their bodies in a more overt way, like the positioning of our bodies together in these chairs. Also to directly encourage viewers to turn inward through meditation or embodied conversation as an exploration of their emotional or mental state.

So all that to say yes, while sometimes and in some ways this work feels so new, when I really stop and think about it there is such a direct line from the older work to what I'm making now.

**Right, like even this chair is gently coercing us to deal with the space, or lack of, between us. How we have found this zig zag with our legs and how it shapes the dynamic between us. What made you want to make work like this? Moving bodies around and provoking mindfulness?**

I've always had a big heart and been kind of sensitive: I used to cry at certain commercials. (Laughs) I have more and more wanted to use my art as a way to heal or create change. And my meditation practice had a big influence on this work, because it led me to experience the sensation of being whole. I would have glimpses during meditation of feeling complete and not lacking, not less than or somehow broken, as maybe I had used to feel and it was great! I thought how amazing it could be if everyone could feel like this. I wanted to make work that was hopeful and empowering. Around the time I was moving away from objects and into creating experiences, I watched a video of a lecture by the author Junot Diaz and he was talking about the prevalence of dystopic visions in our culture: movies, books, etc. He talked about how much easier it is to think of a dystopia than a utopia and the relationship of Capitalism to this proliferation, that dystopias keep us disempowered. We are powerless to stop the end of the world, the coming of the apocalypse. With hope, with the possibility of utopia, we can feel energized and empowered. So I wanted to be a part of that possibility. I wanted to create art that focused on our relationship with ourselves and others, with creating connection and hope and understanding: a possible utopia.

**In what ways do you think this work relates to the idea of empathy, the theme of this exhibition?**

I think particularly with the interviews that I am recording in private settings; I became acutely aware of just how differently people see the world. I started to practice deep listening and pay attention to the language they would use to describe their experience, what ideas they would focus on. It was really eye-opening and connective for me to experience that, to be able to step outside of the way I think and feel and what I focus on in my experience, and just listen to someone else, without judgement or agenda. It also made me really want to reach outside of my bubble and talk to people who I may not otherwise interact with, and have these conversations with people less like myself. And I hope a similar thing is happening between individuals using these chairs, having conversations in this work, listening to each other and hopefully finding some common ground or understanding. I think these conversations demonstrate that even with our differences we all care about the same things.

**What's the plan for the recordings? How will the project materialize?**

I'd like to see them housed in a public institution as an archive. Once I have collected a critical mass I want to make them available to the public as an oral history project. I'm continuing to interview people and collect those recordings and would love more interviewees, so readers can reach out to me via my website if they are interested. An in-person interview is ideal, but I'm totally open to conversations over the phone. I am also building a few more performative/interactive sculptures: a small bench that can be worn as a backpack, a set of quilted "wings" that create a soft, warm enclosure for the wearer when they hug someone. I want to continue to explore ways in which moving bodies can help or hinder intimacy and connection. I also want to continue to make myself less necessary in the work: how can I set up the conditions for intimacy and connection, but not need to be in the space or be the person interacting with others.

For more information about Susan please check out her website.