

maake

Melissa Vogley Woods

Melissa Vogley Woods (b. 1968) Born and bred, lives and works in Columbus, Ohio. Vogley Woods is currently an artist in residence at the Vermont Studio Center and has also attended the MASS MoCA Artist Residency and the GCAC Dresden Artist Residency. Vogley Woods is active in her community as an artist curator. Her latest curatorial projects include collaborative project "Will Play for Space" with the Mint Collective at Spring Break Art Fair: Brooklyn Immersive, "Rooms to Let" I and II and III exhibition series held in donated houses, and along with Jennifer Reeder, was the co-organizer of "Tracers" Feminist exhibitions that included panels and events and rock concert. Vogey-Woods is a current member of the band FistGig, an experimental punk band that is both art project and punk band. Recent exhibitions include solos at Wexner Center for the Arts; Columbus OH, Weston Art Gallery; Cincinnati OH, Denison Museum; Granville Ohio, Raskolnikov Gallery, Dresden Germany and Ohio Dominican University. Vogley Woods has been included into curated exhibitions held at The Columbus Museum of Art, Czong Institute for Contemporary Art; Korea, Firehouse Art Center; Longmont CO, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions;, Museum of Sisters Aslamazyan; Guimri, Armenian Republic.

Statement

I work to harness and understand the unmanageable space made by fragmentation and erasure that occurs as history becomes written and solidified. My work focuses on presence, existence and obliteration. I am also exploring contrasts between representation and misrepresentation all through a collage like thinking-process of cutting, piecing dissecting and layering. My work is not actual collage however, I think in a collage-like way when I work. My work presented here is created using a traditional baroque plaster process that involves the manipulation of pigmented plaster in combination with an inlay process. All the work is made from solid pigmented plaster. I am interested in this process because it moves from malleability to a solid.



Take Down, 2018. Scagliola, pigmented plaster inlay, wall mounted, 17 x 17 x 2 inches

Interview with Melissa Vogley Woods

Interview by Andreana Donahue

Hi Melissa. In what ways has the experience of growing up in Ohio informed your artistic practice? Are there any other artists in your family?

Yeah, it was in the cards for me to become an artist. I was an uninterested student to say the least... I even flunked 2nd grade! While I was a curious learner during my school years, I was not into doing what people told me to do when they wanted me to do it... I always wanted to be an artist and I distinctly recall thinking, "yeah, this doesn't relate to art and just not doing the work." I was wrong by the way-- it all relates! My influence was my grandfather on one side, who was a taxi driver and artist and my grandfather on the other side was a steel worker and artist. My mom was an art teacher and portrait artist and my dad was an electrical draftsman and a self-made landscape designer. If I did not see their artwork on the walls or see what they were building, I am not sure I would have gone in this direction- their making work allowed me to feel like it was an option....

You've been based in Columbus, Ohio for many years. What are the most valuable aspects of living and working in this community as an artist?

Living and working in Columbus has come to inform my work on a few levels. I believe one of the many reasons I am so interested in erasure is rooted in being in and from this "middle." I have always lived in the Midwest and so has my family-- for generations. My generation was the first to go to college and my parents were the first to finish high school, which is not unusual in this area. I feel like I am speaking out of a Midwest sensibility or more like a Midwest mood of some sort... This might be a root to all the grey in my work!

While I live in the center of this country, I am "out of center" in terms of the "art world." I feel this as a local in Columbus but also an artist who is not affiliated with an institution. This leads you to realize that you need to make your community in the form you want it to be, and from my perspective, it may be easier to do this in a place like Columbus. I have been able to curate many exhibitions, organize exhibition projects and public forums and art projects, put on exhibition-related rock concerts, start and participate in several collectives that operated in a warehouse and in various locations lent for free. I have had the opportunity to exhibit over 100 artists in dozens of projects and exhibitions... the downside is that it's hard to get the eye of the art world or to enter into a discourse that you see on the coasts. It would be great to join this conversation from the Midwest-- you can really feel like you are in a vacuum here. But one must persist!



Melissa Vogley Woods in her Columbus studio.

In the past you worked as a mural painter, in addition to opening a store in the '90s. When did you decide to focus primarily on your studio practice and how do you sustain this successfully?

Yes~ for 15 years I ran my own company. It all started with the opening of a gallery/store when I was 25-- which sounds a little crazy when I look back at it. I had about two thousand bucks saved and just went for it. I had been living in Mexico prior to that and when I came back to Ohio, I busted ass saving up my money for a second trip but then decided to start this business. It was a risk but it worked out. I was able to keep afloat from gig to gig with a lot of hustle. Two years into the business, I became a single mother and would take my daughter, Camille, with me and paint while they slept in a baby backpack. Eight years later, I got married and had a second child, Polly, who like her sibling spent a lot of time in the baby backpack too!

What catapulted my move away from the business was an artist residency in Dresden I was awarded in 2008. It was while in Germany that I reconnected more fully to my art-making and decided to scale back the custom work and murals and to start thinking about a move. Two years later, when I was forty-two, I went to graduate school at Ohio State University. After graduating in 2012, I got an amicable divorce and ever since have made my living teaching. At this point, I've taught forty-two different classes at various institutions, including Denison University, Kenyon College, Columbus College of Art and Design, in a variety of positions from an adjunct to a full-time visiting professor and over the last year, I've been able to save up for a self-imposed sabbatical next year! After that, who knows? The only way I was able to do this was stubbornness but also because the landlord of the store locations trusted me somehow, thank goodness!

Can you tell us about your workspace? What's your favorite time of day in the studio?

Yes! I love my current studio! It's still pretty new to me and I am still occasionally rearranging, but it's mostly settled. The studio is on the third floor of a former fire truck factory in an industrial area on the southside of Columbus, which is nice because there are no distractions. I prefer to work very early in the morning, heading off to the studio with my thermos around 7:30 am. This is not always practical, depending on family or teaching but that is my ideal and I love to work up until dinner if possible...



Supporting Parts Remain, 2017. Scagliola, pigmented plaster inlay, wall mounted, 17 x 17 x 2 inches

You mention that your work is “fundamentally divided between painting, sculpture, installation and performative video.” Can you elaborate on this and the relationship between these various ways of working?

I am first and foremost a painter so all my other work is created through that loose lens of color, frame, flatness, space and the idea of the tableau are all at play. I see my paintings as fields of time and the sculptures as still moments that are left behind; as things that have fallen out of time. My performative videos have become a way to speak to internal conflict and performativity of the self in time. I work all these various forms through abstraction as a way to represent erasure and to keep the work open while allowing for elements to become hidden. These all work together like an ensemble-- I use these various methodologies as a way to be comprehensive. I set these disparate conditions up to interact and infect each other. For

example, I want the memory from a video to linger while you look at the sculpture, or the sculpture to linger while you look across the painting and so forth...

In terms of the studio, I work on all these at once. I typically have five or so paintings going while working on various cultural projects. The videos are more complicated and often require travel, sets, renting cameras and hiring help. They begin with a bit more planning, but I am also always thinking about movements of the body and how they can relate to an object, form or image.

I know research is integral to your process. Can you talk more about the information or imagery you're seeking out? Can you provide insight into your process more broadly?

Yes, my work is rooted in research but it is not what is known as "research-based" by any means. I don't typically talk about the research unless I am giving an artist talk and you would likely not know there was research done by looking at the work. At the same time, if I talk about it, you will see it in the work and this is how I want the artwork to function. I am fascinated by erasure and the covering up of things so this is how I orchestrate the existence of information or research in my work. My research is hidden and shadowy while it informs the work's movement, structure or form.

My recent research subjects have included such diverse subjects as: foot fetish videos, striptease, the Flavian Palace and Emperor Domitian's use of arches circa 81 to 96 CE, the Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters (my current obsession), The Hudson River School of landscape painting and a sport like Greco-Roman wrestling. It all makes sense when you see the work. Each one of these have been a source of inspiration and inform form and conditions in my work.



Grab Hold, 2017. Scagliola, pigmented plaster inlay, wall mounted, 20 x 18 x 3 inches

You've dedicated an extensive amount of time to perfecting your use of Scagliola, a mixture of plaster, raw pigment, lime, beeswax, and glue that mimics marble. How did you learn this complicated Italian Baroque technique? Why were you drawn to reimagining this decorative medium?

I am really interested in scagliola, or "stucco marmo's", historic use as a facade or cladding for architecture and its ability to capture marble or rock, as well as the stratification and

crystallization that is inherent in the process. The medium has the ability to mimic the natural processes of stratification, layers, time and the pressure inherent in stone or rock and even the layers of the earth. I think of the stratification as many voices throughout time that have been compressed and fused into a solid. My work is created around ideas of what is erased and what remains-- so this stratification, malleability and then subsequent crystallization of the material is foundational to my relationship with it. Scagliola is colored and layered though the whole of the object. You only see what I have polished for you -- the rest is buried.

This material was most often used to mimic marble, and this mimic or fake is what I'm drawn to. Being a "fake" means it could be thought of as a cheap imitation-- yet it takes so much skill and years of practice, it is in fact much more valuable than real marble. In my performative work- I also think about the value and movement of gesture-- for instance, differences between classic, elegant, refined, trashy, ranchy. This is a common topic I think about and while not directly related to scagliola, I see the connection of value here.

My love for stucco marmo or scagliola started on YouTube, romantic right? I came across a video of an artist working with Scagliola, or Stucco Marmo, around 2011. There was no information and the video was inaudible but after some digging, I figured out what it was. I spent a year researching, applied for a grant and was able to find a mentor who could teach me its secrets. I have since taken two trips to Italy to learn techniques, meet scagliola artists and learn its history. Over the last three years, I have developed my own formulas and made adaptations so I can use the medium sculpturally, as this was always my goal for the process.



Installation shot of Melissa Vogley Wood's work at Epstein Gallery.

What is the significance of stacked and folded forms, as well as the arches that recur throughout your work?

Good question! That's where all this work began in 2015, I decided to try to return to painting on rectangles and my subject matter was pulled from an image of stacked folded quilts— I worked with the quilt as a framework for many years in the form of installations, prints, drawings on fabric and photographs. These quilt inspired stack paintings began as a way to reconnect to the previous series and for me to think about what layers meant to me— this was also my first exploration into abstraction. The stacks represented time and a storing away of a multitude of something. The folded forms began as straight stacks, then soon began to shift, flop and spill over themselves. I began to zoom into the layers and once this occurred, I broke the frame and the singular stack took on the vastness of a landscape. This move was inspired by the Hudson River School and a residency in that region at Mass MoCA. I realized the stacks-turned-landscape was actually a view of a timeline and I then knew that I needed to disrupt this timeline to block, cover and create obstacles. That was when the arches came into the work. As a human- made form, they were the perfect disruptor and the root of my interest was born out of research into the Flavian Palace and the arch form. Emperor Domitian had large, arched niches installed in every room of the palace so he could project "divinity" and so

he could see anyone who might try to sneak up behind him. This reeked of power and paranoia and I bonded with this form and enacted it in my work in many ways. The meaning of the arches has now expanded. Sometimes I paint onto the walls a very subtle mural of arches that can barely be seen and sometimes the arch is referenced in installations and sculpture, often in a ruined state and vacillating between bold and faint in the paintings.

There's an exploration of ideas related to abstraction obvious in your work. Can you address the less overt influence of landscape and the figure that began to appear in more recent years?

Yes! The figure and landscape manifested once the imagery of stacked quilts shifted and collapsed in on itself. The stacks in disarray became a landscape. The landscape still exists in my work but it has become more about time, space and distance. Once this happened, the painting opened up to me and I found that I needed something to occupy this space.

Then while researching scagliola in Italy, I visited the Borghese Gallery and was completely taken by Bernini's *The Rape of Proserpina* (1622) and *Apollo and Daphne* (1625), as well as a sculpture by Giambologna called *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1583). After seeing these works in person, I was inspired to insert figures into my own work. I want to show an entanglement of humanity in a state of conflict and tension within this landscape timeline. I was drawn to the gesture of a grabbing, claiming hand and the bodies frozen in conflict in these sculptures. It took some time deciding where the figures would come from and what form they would take but eventually I settled on Greco-Roman wrestlers and began to pull images from YouTube videos and stills of wrestling competitions.

The figures are all in conflict and are locked together in a state of unrest. I insert the figures in a cut, collage-like fashion and my aim is to weave them in and out of the timeline landscape, so to speak. I do want the viewer to relate to the figures but not quite see them. I am looking for a kind of wandering experience with the paintings and they are often painted as a panorama with several works connecting together in order to become experiential and overwhelming.



What we may not know 1, 2019. Scagliola, pigmented plaster inlay, wall mounted, 22 x 15 x 3 inches

Do you feel your work is in conversation with the legacy of feminist artists working in painting, video, and performance? Who are some artists you keep returning to?

Yes I do-- I think about artists who have used performance/video and abstraction like Geta Brătescu' and Lynda Benglis and Howardina Pindell. I am also influenced by artists who use their bodies and specifically, dissect the body such as Helena Almeida, Lyubov Popova (in the form of clothing design) and Hannah Wilke and Senga Nengudi's 'Performance Objects. A specific piece that I can not get out of my mind is Faith Ringgold's American People Series #20: Die 1967. I am also interested in artists who use performativity in their work such as Sarah Lucas, Wendy Geller (my former professor), Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. I am currently looking at Nan Goldin's work that reviled intimacy and dependency in relation to my series of mouth-shaped sculptures which come out of thinking about what is handed down in the timeline-- things that are handed down sideways or unintentionally through generations. It may be that these sculptural necklace-like works are leading me back into photography.

As a current member of MINT Collective, can you talk a bit about its mission and programming?

MINT ended about a year ago— we had a great run as an artist-driven space. Some of our final projects included an installation project we put on with the Spring-Break folks and some collaborative 'zines. Many of the members have gone on to attend prestigious residencies and to have exhibitions in amazing galleries. They have really entered into a larger art world and I do believe having the space and exhibition programming helped them. But they are also really good artists making stellar work.



What We May Not Know 2, 2019. Scagliola, pigmented plaster inlay, wall mounted, 22 x 18 x 3 inches

Can you share more about your attraction to showing work in alternative spaces (such as Planned Parenthood clinics or donated houses) as opposed to more conventional gallery and museum settings

Currently, I am involved in a new collective called “Middlechild.” We are interested in using the vehicle of the art exhibition as a form of collaborative practice. Our most recent project “Lobby.” is a three-month, two-person exhibition inside a Planned Parenthood surgical center. There was no opening reception, no visiting hours and much of the artwork is hung in various exam and recovery rooms around equipment and curtains. We hope to offer another level of care to the people who utilize Planned Parenthood. In this medical, clinical setting, artwork is meant to support the healing and recovery of the people they serve as well as the staff and clinicians. Careful consideration of imagery guides the programming. The staff has spoken very highly of the artwork’s presence in their daily lives and project and that is how we gauge its success. We are in

the planning stages for the next season with more Planned Parenthood Centers with hopes of expanding.

The donated-house format was really about where my work was focused at the time. I was interested in making art inside of houses and convinced several landlords/developers to basically lend me some houses for free. The project began in 2010 and over three years of programming, I exhibited 73 artists in five houses. That was pretty fun!

Over the years you've organized many curatorial projects and collaborative performances with other artists. In what ways have these collaborations shifted your perspective or approach?

These projects have helped me expand my ideas of what being an artist is and I consider my public projects, curating, workshops, my band **Fistgig**...all are integral to my artmaking and existence as an artist.

I see this kind of self-organizing as a sideways, out-of-center way of working. A way of working that slips around, appears and disappears-- outside and around hierarchy and this connects to my work.

Also why not!? Good, giving and game - is that how the saying goes? I am always game to volunteer on a project as long as my schedule allows. I want to help my friends get their work made and out into the world. Sadly, I can't always do it but it is a goal to allow time for this. I feel like it is the responsible and kind thing to do.

Can you share your thoughts on the importance of building community and supporting the work of other artists?

I've been in this community for a long time -- as a shop owner, mural worker, arts administrator and artist. I have seen a lot of people pass through this town and I have had a wide range of experiences. What has been the most fulfilling are the small, unorganized interactions in these various communities: one-on-one studio visits, volunteering for a friend's project, creating an exhibition for a group of artists you want to see together, or creating a workshop for a specific group of interested populations. But it can be as simple as just showing up to openings to support your peers and colleagues...and I admit, the showing up can sometimes be the most difficult with kids (together, my partner and I have four!) These are the moments that fuel me and my work, that keep me dedicated and going. They connect me to the importance of artist residencies too- these are pure gold to artists because of the conversation and people you can meet.



First Message, 2018. Scagliola, pigmented plaster inlay, wall mounted, 20 x 10 x 6 inches

You're also a co-writer and co-producer of the upcoming feature length film *They/Them/Us*. Can you tell us more about this project and its genesis?

YEAH! Never thought I would dip into the film business! I am co-writer and the film is about sex after 40, BDSM, gender non-conformity, class and blending families - all in a rom-com package! I'm really excited about it and we are set to film in June!

What are some of your other interests outside of art-making?

I mentioned this before, but I am in a band called **Fistgig**. The band consists of three people: two bassists, two drums and a cello bow and triangle. I would frame it as joyfully angry anti-melodic punk music.

I am also really into hiking and camping with my kids on long road trips- my car is totally rigged for it too! And I am active in other communities outside of the art world, which I feel is very necessary to a well-balanced life.



Melissa Vogley Woods' Columbus studio.

Artist residencies you've been awarded include MASS MoCA, the Vermont Studio Center, and three months in Dresden through the Greater Columbus Arts Council. How do you typically utilize your time at residencies? Have any of these experiences particularly impacted your development?

I am very happy to work alone for long periods of time but as most artists know, that time can be hard to come by. When at a residency, you have the opportunity to work all day without noticing that time goes by at all. I find that all that time spent in the studio accelerates my development and I tend to make big moves in my work, pushing in new directions and taking risks. As important as this studio time is, I have found that the time just hanging out with other artists is just as valuable. The opportunity to meet other artists and writers, talk about our work and create experiences with each other is just priceless and some of my dearest friends are people I met at artist residencies.

What are you working on right now? Do you have any upcoming projects, exhibitions, residencies, or other news to share?

Yes it's a busy year so far! Here are my upcoming :)

March 12 - April 17 2020 "To the Clearing" will be on view at the [Fort Hayes Shot Tower Gallery](#).

March 28 the band plays at [Dirty Dungarees - experimental venue](#) (MVW, Gina Osterloh, Liz Roberts) May 23- Aug 16 2020, I will have an installation up at 2 + 3 x 18: at the [Decorative Arts Center](#) in Lancaster. June 2020, I will attend the Wassaic Project Family Residency, Wassaic, NY. I am working on a video for the Projected Video Program, Straight Through the Wall NYC that will be on view Summer 2020 [Straight Through the Wall](#), and in the Fall 2020 I will be in a three-person exhibition with Bianca Beck, Leeza Meksin at [Hammond Harkins Galleries](#)!

© 2021 Maake Magazine. All Rights Reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#)