





ABOVE & NEXT:
FIGURAL SCULPTURES
IN ARCHITECTURAL NICHEs

NICHE AUDIENCE

CLAIRE COWIE AND LEO BERK

AUGUST 16 - DECEMBER 3
2021

FOREWARD

Exhibition conversations with Seattle-based artists Claire Cowie and Leo Berk began well before COVID-19 impacted the way we engage with the world. Once the pandemic became our new reality, the artists felt it was imperative that their MadArt exhibition, *Niche Audience*, address their personal (and our collective) experiences of isolation, retreat, and self-protectiveness. While reflecting upon these global shifts, the concept of a niche as a physical space for safety and solitude arose as the central metaphor for the show. *Niche Audience* comprises a collection of eleven architectural alcoves, with all but one hosting an anomalous human-like figure. Playing off of the exhibition's title, Cowie and Berk chose to include one empty niche, inviting viewers to actively engage with the work and temporarily become part of the installation. In this way, the artists confuse the relationship between the figural sculptures and the viewer, each of which is simultaneously the exhibition *and* audience.

Embarking on their first large-scale collaboration as domestic partners, Cowie and Berk were mindful of the ways in which *Niche Audience* could combine their individual curiosities, aesthetics, and material investigations to create an entirely new presentation of their work. In their solo practices, they employ different





RIGHT:
ANTERIOR AND
POSTERIOR
INSTALLATION
VIEW OF FIGURE
IN NICHE

perspectives to examine people's physical and relational existence within the world. Berk considers this largely from his public art practice, which is driven by his early interests in architecture and the ways in which the built environment can impact one's interpretation of and movement through space. Cowie, on the other hand, utilizes a variety of media to create layered and imaginative, two- and three-dimensional worlds that reveal relational narratives between people, animals, and the environment.

Niche Audience expands on these individual explorations by presenting a holistic and symbiotic interplay between the human form and its surroundings. Drawing inspiration from niches ranging from ancient spiritual rock shrines to Southern-backyard bathtub Madonnas, the artists were inclusive with their research and gathered examples of human figures in compact spaces across history and cultures. They even included contemporary examples, modeling display cases that hold action figures and a Seattle city storefront made from meticulously stripped-down drywall. The figures that occupy these architectural recesses are representative not of one gender or family, but are meant to reflect a collection of individuals that encompass a variety of characteristics and emotional states.

Fueling this diversity in style, texture, and color was the artists' intention to create an entire show without purchasing new materials. This

decision created an opportunity for them to think creatively about sourcing, which led to a mutually beneficial partnership with neighborhood construction sites. As much of an ecologically responsible decision as it was a personally imposed challenge, this choice required the artists to consider new ways of working with unconventional materials. Using almost entirely refuse, recycled, or found items, the need to remain flexible, responsive, and inventive became vital to their process. The outcome was rich with association and discovery, as familiar, yet obscure materials were presented in an entirely new context. Together Cowie and Berk created a world that is distinctly imaginative, while simultaneously reflecting the textured complexity of our time.

EMILY KELLY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR + CURATOR
MADART



ABOVE:
INHABITABLE NICHE, REPURPOSED ARTWORK
FROM FORMER EXHIBITION OF BERK



CURRENT:
STUDIO ENTRANCE; STOREFRONT NICHE WITH
FIGURE, AND POSTERIOR OF BATHTUB NICHE AND
CONICAL NICHE WITH ROPE

IN CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE COWIE AND LEO BERK

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHOW TITLE, NICHE AUDIENCE?

The title refers to several things. The idea that only a small fraction of the public is really interested in art is especially fun to play with in this free, accessible space. The figures are literally in architectural niches, and there is a question of who the audience is. Is it the viewers looking at the art? Or the sculptural figures watching the public?

FROM THE BEGINNING, IT WAS IMPORTANT TO YOU THAT NICHE AUDIENCE BE A REFLECTION OF THE CURRENT GLOBAL PANDEMIC. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE WAYS YOU CONCEPTUALLY AND STRUCTURALLY INCORPORATED THIS INTO THE WORK?

Because we were planning our collaboration before the pandemic started, we were really struck by the effect it had on us and the work, and how much it changed our thinking about what was important to pay attention to. Like everyone, we were finding ourselves isolated from most people, but also in much closer quarters to each other. Carving out a space to feel safe, have privacy, and maintain comfort became so valuable. We realized that the architectural niche could serve as an appropriate metaphor as a space of protection, and also gave us a format that happened to suit our individual practices. Leo has been making work responding to architectural spaces and materials for a long time, and Claire often uses found, mixed-media and is interested in relationships and the environment.

YOUR RESEARCH INTO ARCHITECTURAL NICHE SPANNED ACROSS CULTURES AND HISTORY. HOW DID YOU SETTLE ON THE SPECIFIC INSPIRATIONS FOR THE SCULPTURAL NICHE INCLUDED IN THE FINAL EXHIBITION?



ABOVE:
FIGURAL SCULPTURES IN BATHTUB NICHE AND
CARPET PADDING ROCK CAVE NICHE

We were excited that niches are a part of almost every place and time where there have been people, and generally they provide a kind of shelter. However, they range widely in material, scale, and specific use, so that gave us a lot of room to experiment. We researched many different niches for a few months and saved images of anything we liked. Then, when we found or were given materials, we looked for a natural harmony between those and a form. Sometimes the niche came first, like the wooden one, which was made from old bits of a neighbor's fence. The figure there was placed and altered to work with that Byzantine-inspired space. Sometimes the figures were resolved first, and dictated the niche concept, like the elevator crates lined with white plastic, which were made to fit the sculptures like collectable doll boxes. The drywall piece was inspired by a local storefront, the kind which is rapidly disappearing in the area as new construction goes in. The bathtub piece is a nod to bathtub lawn shrines found throughout the US. The large foam block felt so similar to the ruins of Greek exedra.



The carpet padding had a sort of illusion of rock, which was like natural rock cave niches in Asia.

IN NICHE AUDIENCE, YOU PRIMARILY USED REFUSE, RECYCLED, OR REPURPOSED MATERIALS. WHY WAS THIS MATERIAL APPROACH IMPORTANT, AND HOW DID IT IMPACT YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS?

Before we had ever arrived at our initial proposal ideas for MadArt, we had committed to using materials in a sustainable way. Because this space is

so large, we knew we most likely wouldn't be storing all the work afterwards. We really didn't want to purchase new materials that we were probably going to end up throwing away shortly after. Once we had our theme for *Niche Audience*, we realized we could also address the construction and constant development in the area by sourcing many of our materials from the waste stream of these projects that were within a few blocks of MadArt.

Another goal was to use the MadArt studio as a real art studio where we were not just assembling a planned

installation, but conceiving and creating the work like we would in our own studios. By sourcing most of our materials from what we were offered and found during our residency, we were required to respond more quickly and dynamically to materials, to make room for surprises, and to rely less on our typical, individual methods of working.

THE FIGURES EACH EMBODY INDIVIDUALIZED AND EXPRESSIVE CHARACTERISTICS. HOW DID THEY COME TO BE, AND HOW DO YOU THINK ABOUT THEM COLLECTIVELY OR AS INDIVIDUALS?

They are individuals; they are meant to be unique in expression, and informed by the nature of the found objects. This was a way to take advantage of disparate materials and to reflect their isolation. But, of course, they form a community simply by being in the same larger context of the MadArt space, and that was also useful as a metaphor for our lives. We must balance the complexities of both our individual selves and the greater society.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

CLAIRE COWIE's multi-media sculptures and works-on-paper address loss, community, ambiguities in perception, shifting landscapes, and the fragmentation of memory. Cowie was born in North Carolina, is currently a Teaching Artist-in-Residence in the University of Washington's Interdisciplinary Visual Arts Program, and her work is represented by James Harris Gallery and Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Awards include a Pollock-Krasner Grant, fellowships from Washington State Arts Commission, Artist Trust, Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, and the Behnke Foundation. Cowie's work is included in the collections of: Allen Institute for Brain Science, Twitter, Facebook, Henry Art Gallery, Microsoft Corporation, Swedish Cancer Institute, Tacoma Art Museum, and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

LEO SAUL BERK believes his childhood spent living in a radically unconventional house designed by the visionary American architect and painter Bruce Goff shaped him to become the artist he is today. His work continues to examine the transformative potential of exceptional architecture to positively shape our lives. Based in Seattle, Berk has received the Betty Bowen Award and the Artist Trust Innovator Award. He has staged solo exhibitions at INOVA (Milwaukee), Seattle Art Museum, and Frye Art Museum.



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