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profile : artist



emerge

William Lamson

William Lamson is an artist whose work always evokes something unique. While he first gained prominence as a photographer, the 30-year-old artist is now defying labels, mixing images, video and sculpture into work that is striking and clever.

Here, in a conversation with *Corduroy's* Summer Kemick, the artist reflects on the motivations behind his work and talks about humor, pathos, and opposing forces.

So, how did you get started?

Well, I've been taking photographs since my sophomore year in high school and throughout college. In those years I was interested in photojournalists like Capa, Cartier-Bresson and company. But after college, when I started shooting in color, I realized I didn't really want to be a photojournalist, I just wanted to make pictures. So for three years I worked on a project called *Encounter*, which involved driving around America in search of subjects. This changed in graduate school after reading an essay by Edward Said called, "Professionals and Amateurs." In this essay he celebrates the freedom with which amateurs can follow their interests, in contrast to the limitations that professionals set up around their area of expertise. When I read it, I felt like a professional who had been fenced in by a type of photography that I had studied for years, rather than an artist who was free to do whatever he wants. So in response to this essay, I built a 9-foot enlargement of a paper airplane and started photographing it at night, since I had been thinking a lot about how both the history of photography and the history of flight were pioneered by amateurs. Anyway, this became a project called "Sublunar," and it opened my working process to include video and sculpture.



vital capacity



Your photography series *Me In America* seems to be the earliest work you make available on your website. Was this project a turning point in your work?

Definitely. I began this project as an exercise; a way of engaging with the landscape when I could not find anything else to photograph for my *Encounter* project. But I soon realized that I really enjoyed the playfulness and the performative aspect of inserting my body into the landscape and I wanted to continue working in a way that allowed for a sense of humor. This project also made me aware of the materiality of the things inside of each image; for instance, a tree trunk, septic tank, or billboard.

Who or what else are you inspired by?

On a literary level, I think about Don Quixote a lot. I first read it in my high school Spanish class and I was taken by his obsession with the heroic act. My video, *William Tell* is inspired by Quixote and other misguided male adventurers. The language of Quixote is so great, even in translation there is something fantastic about how seriously he takes himself. In terms of artists, I love the work of Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alys and Roman Signer. Their work is very playful and as a result it is easily accessible.

Is accessibility important to you?

Definitely. So much of contemporary art is about exclusivity; you need to know about the artist's previous work or their references to be able to engage with it. Orozco, Alys and Signer all make work that can operate without an explanation, yet there is depth to it.

What have been your favorite pieces or moments in your career?

One of my favorite videos is called *Vital Capacity*. In it I wear a mask with needles in it and I try to prevent falling balloons from popping on the mask by blowing them upward. I like the balance that is created between gravity and my attempt to keep them aloft. It's funny, but it's also dark and humbling, since I always fail. I recently made a video called *Emerge*. In it, submerged balloons break the surface of the water and float for a short while before becoming airborne. *Levitation Exercise* is another favorite. It's funny because all of these involve balloons, air, tension, and lightness. *Levitation Exercise* plays with scale a lot because when you see the balloon in the air, it could be any size. Then, when it comes down and I am illuminated as well, the viewer sees how large it is and the scale shifts.

How do you come up with the ideas for your pieces? Does it start with a concept?

Sometime I have the idea in my head and I just have to determine how to execute it. But other times I discover a piece after playing with materials. My work often deals with two opposing forces: gravity and human force. I create specific challenges for the characters in my work. There is a delicacy and violence in these challenges and in how the masculine figure deals with them. Like in *Vital Capacity*, there are really tender moments, when the balloon is almost touching my face and I am almost out of breath and then 'boom!' the balloon is gone.

How do you turn one of your ideas into an art piece that people can understand?

I don't think very much about whether people will understand the work, since most of my recent videos deal with creating a physical event. Each idea begins with a stick figure drawing and a quick layout of how the shot will be framed. After that, if it's something that I can make in the studio, I will just keep repeating the process until I get what I want. Hopefully the final result will also include something that I did not totally expect.

How much do opinions and critiques matter to you?

People's opinions mean more to me than I would like them to, but I think that is just a reality of being human. But when I am making a piece, what I care most about is whether I like it. I try to focus on this part of the process, since it's the only part I can control.

Your work has an awkward quality to it but it is also relatable. What kind of message are you sending with your pieces?

What do you hope people take away from your work?
Humor and pathos; a mix between the two. Both of these human experiences make up a lot of our existence. I like work that can astonish; something that's close to spectacular, like a lot of Olafur Eliasson's work. Photography is good at capturing a moment of horror and wonder, creating mini-spectacles. Performative work shifts that feeling away from a specific moment into something less defined.

Your work is becoming more well-known and you have participated in a number of group shows, as well as some solo shows. What are some goals you have for the future?

The most important thing for me is being able to sustain a creative career and stay excited and motivated. I think it is important to embrace the transitions in your work so that you can continue to develop. The business side of art can be totally consuming. Of course I care about the external manifestations of success, but I can't control that. What I can control is making good work.

Those are some wise words. Anything else to add?

The most important thing you can do is to create a system where you can get by and make art. Everything else comes out of that balancing act. If this means building sculptures out of toothpicks in your bathroom because you have no money for a studio or for materials, fine. It's a place to start developing a language and if you are invested in the process, it will lead you somewhere.

