Notion Nanny

"Notion nanny" dolls were popular during the Victorian era, collectively known as Notion Nanny, where Crewe and Crewe-born Allison Smith has been avidly collecting these dolls and stories as well as useful goods. As objects, the notion nanny dolls serve as miniaturized collections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century material culture, with tiny examples of needlework, streamer, ceramics, and other traditional crafts. In the Notion Nanny exhibition and related activities, Allison Smith presents a twenty-first-century version of both the character and its miniaturized incarnation. She narrates the notion nanny, fashioning a hybrid role for herself as a contemporary maker.

Realized initially through an itinerant residency in Britain, the Notion Nanny project allowed Smith to work alongside and learn from traditional craftspeople throughout the English countryside, learning such skills as lacemaking, pottery, Sans, expanding her repertoire to include skills of ceramic tile making, Arts and Crafts–style textiles, bookbinding, stained glass, macramé, and tie-dye, among others, in the process adding more goods to the project's cumulative material output, but that the project is very much about making things is validated by the politics and the practice of the handmade. Smith's journeys and experiences are further illuminated in the exhibition through large-scale textiles that illustrate the relationship of inspiration, exchange, and sharing by depicting the total project, narrating this notion nanny's as yet brief history.

The Past & Present

The past is always with us, embedded in locales and collective consciousness, but there are moments and places where it bubbles to the surface, engendering a strange continuum between history and present context. Allison Smith grew up in the exact place, through which the project travels, the meaning that time goes forward and backward, that things are connected, that there is an undeniable link. That the project is not a recreation of historical practice but an exploration of history is validated by the practices and materials of the past, which are further illuminated in the exhibition through large-scale textiles that illustrate the politics and the practice of the handmade. Smith's journeys and experiences are further illuminated in the exhibition through large-scale textiles that illustrate the relationship of inspiration, exchange, and sharing. The project thus will include a public open house at which Smith and her collaborators will be joined by a larger coterie of artists, artisans, and others for a day of demonstration and discussion related to the politics and the practice of the handmade. Smith's journeys and experiences are further illuminated in the exhibition through large-scale textiles that illustrate the relationship of inspiration, exchange, and sharing. The project thus will include a public open house at which Smith and her collaborators will be joined by a larger coterie of artists, artisans, and others for a day of demonstration and discussion related to the politics and the practice of the handmade. Smith's journeys and experiences are further illuminated in the exhibition through large-scale textiles that illustrate the relationship of inspiration, exchange, and sharing.
Allison Smith first realized Notion Nanny as a series of workshops, public events, and exhibitions at School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Illinois, with support from the Chicago Artists Coalition, in 1996–1997. Other iterations of Notion Nanny have included a large-scale public art project charged with “mustering” local artisans who opened their studios and practices to flat-pack fiberboard furniture. And the machined embroidery made a continent away looks more “familiar” and “normal” to us than the handmade textiles produced down the street that may recall the traditions of our own families.

In such a climate one can feel the weight of a giant, perfectly woven blanket produced down the street that may recall the traditions of our own families. We see the uncreating of the world, of monoculture, with local difference undone like an errant stitch. In both Muster and Notion Nanny, Smith calls out and showcases the individual voice, the homogeneity of the Gap or the unimaginative vision of Thomas Kinkade compared to the polyphonous voices of individuals, and the visual evidence of their marks, stitches, gestures, and imprints, we see just how unruly and original and potentially subversive much of contemporary cultural thought and production can be. 

Elizabeth Thomas
Phyllis Wattis
Jiu Jitsu: The Notion Nanny Project

Muster

The artist and curator wanted to know of the sources who presented the call to share their skills, ideas, and objects with us during the Muster. Open House was the ideal especially to thank the local duo who opened their studios and participated, for Allison Smith’s approach includes, in addition, Mary Ellen Seamon, efficiency specialists. Also, John Greenough, Theaster Gates, Jane Irish, and Allison Smith herself continuing a tradition of progressive thought, in the mode of the Arts and Crafts movement, for example, which was politically motivated as a reaction to industrialization in the early twentieth century. Others might argue that modes of working by hand are explicitly political in their rejection of homogenization—

Her apprenticeships, including those with local artisans who opened their studios and practices to visitors, have included the following: The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams; Sculpture Park, Long Island City/High Desert Test Sites, Joshua Tree, California; Massachusetts College of Art; Hunter College, New York; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City; Big Black, New Orleans; Studio Voltaire, London. In 2005, she was commissioned by The Public Art Fund, New York, for British Romanticism, Cumbria; Qube Gallery, Oswestry, England. The exhibition and series of residencies, public events, and exhibitions supported by Arts Council England and the Jerwood Foundation was originally commissioned by the ArtPace San Antonio International Artist-in-Residence Program in 2006.

Additional donors to the endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis. Notion Nanny was an officially commissioned project of the Whitney Museum of American Art through its Independent Study Program in 2003, and an installation for the Whitney’s Armory Show in 2011. She participated in the Whitney’s Independent Study Program in 2006. The artist’s Project at the 53rd Venice Biennale Art Unlimited was supported by the heritage of Phyllis A. DeBella. Public programs and the Notion Nanny Project include The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Theaster Gates, Jane Irish, and Allison Smith for Tanya Bub. Notion Nanny’s travels through Britain and the United States are at www.notionnanny.net.

Copy and interior drawings and objects: Allison Smith, Notion Nanny, 2005–2007; cover photograph courtesy of Owen Jones.

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