

Along country lanes and urban cross-roads, an itinerant apprentice offers ideas and articles of all sorts traditional and revolutionary, abundantly crafted in exchange for skillful demonstrations and sociable company.

—Allison Smith, “The Notion Nanny Cry”



Notion Nanny

“Notion nanny” dolls were popular during the Victorian era, collectible figures commemorating a bygone custom—female peddlers who journeyed through the countryside with baskets of varied wares in hand, selling goods on street corners and in other public spaces. In life, these itinerant traders served as important conduits of aesthetic articles and ideas, connecting isolated locales through news 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, tinware, ceramics, and other traditional crafts. In the Notion Nanny exhibition and related activities, Allison Smith proposes a twenty-first-century revision of both the character and its miniaturized incarnation. She reanimates the notion nanny, fashioning a hybrid role for herself as a contemporary maker, apprentice, trader, and storyteller.

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, blacksmithing, wood turning, basket weaving, and horn carving, to name a few. In the process, she crafted a life-size notion nanny doll in her own image, complete with detailed traditional costuming, who holds in her basket the fruits of Smith’s exchanges with her collaborators. In Berkeley, Smith will work with skilled artisans, 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 Notion Nanny basket.

That the Notion Nanny project is very much about making things is validated by this cumulative material output, but Notion Nanny is also a social enterprise of working, exchanging, 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 trail of inspirations, exchanges, and objects comprising the total project, narrating this notion nanny’s as yet brief history.



The Past Is 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 Northern Virginia, where Civil War battlefields and living history museums figure prominently, and where twenty-first-century men and women make meaning (and community) in the present through the precise recapitulation of the past—walking the walk, dressing the part, shooting the musket, churning the butter, darning the sock. This performance of the authentic past is complex, for we cannot actually travel back in time, we can only look backwards through the filter of the present moment, and here the uses of history become apparent. Looking at the parts of the past we choose to relive, resuscitate, or remember actually provides a window onto present preoccupations. In the restaging of a battle we reify national identity, in the remaking of a quilt we witness creativity linked to identity, in the retelling of a story we transmit shared cultural values.

Allison Smith looks to the past not to recreate it, but rather to adapt models of creative engagement that have relevance in the contemporary moment. In 2005 she enacted *The Muster*, a large-scale public art project that was inspired by the pageantry of Civil War reenactment. Hundreds of people came together in a “polyphonic marshalling of voices,” as they each readied their uniforms and campsites in order to publicly declare their individual causes in response to Smith’s question,



The Muster, 2005

“What are you fighting for?” Rather than asking for a simple expression of dissent, *The Muster* challenged participants to channel common frustrations with war, politics, and cultural hegemony into individualized statements in support of peace, forgiveness, courage, improved communication, and freedom from fashion, among others. Like *Notion Nanny*, the project reflects the artist’s reconciliation of seemingly anachronistic influences—Civil War reenactment and contemporary activism, traditional crafts and revolutionary dialogue. In *Notion Nanny*, Smith again borrows historical form and imbues it with contemporary content by recasting the itinerant peddler as an itinerant artist, whose apprenticeships engender dialogue about the persistence of traditional craftsmanship and produce objects that reflect the complex relation of traditional aesthetics and materials to contemporary ideas.



We Make Our World



Smith builds collaborative relationships with other craftspeople in an effort to create a temporary guild of makers, providing a platform for the exchange of ideas, skills, objects, and experiences around the practice and politics of the handmade. In her individual relationship with each craftspeople, she normally borrows the model of apprenticeship to give form to the nature of instruction as an exchange of both labor and knowledge. The skills she seeks to develop—from ironwork to needlecraft, basket weaving to letterpress—are ones whose mastery requires more than the several days’ time she devotes; nevertheless, the apprenticeship facilitates

the production of objects through a combination of collaboration and guidance. Imparting knowledge and active making are inherently social processes, and through them, the project gestures to the nonmaterial creation of relationships.

In contemporary art of the past decade, there has been an increasing turn to social exchange as both a process and a product, as artists develop work as part of collaborative activity, or enact their work as a participatory experience that demands the active engagement of viewers. Smith’s temporary guild is itself a

social construction for the purposes of the project, but it enacts on a small scale the desire to connect in more personal ways with the objects and experiences that comprise our worlds, and by extension, the people and circumstances that produce them. Recent years have also seen a more fervent embrace of all things grassroots, handmade, bottom-up, local, and collective—from the desire to eat locally to the rise of DIY (do-it-yourself) culture to the ascendancy of indie crafters. I say embrace and not resurgence because these currents of artisanship and self-production have always existed (especially in a place like the Bay Area); still, there is an undeniable saturation of these ideals into new areas. This reflects myriad impulses, from those who would argue that we return to the comfort of the handmade in times of war and conflict, to those who would posit an anti-capitalist position of individual production, to those who would cite a growing consciousness of the environmental, social, and political ripple effects of even our most basic consumption. These impulses are all directed towards an increase in our individual agency, recognizing that we can exercise control over the world we make for ourselves, whether by literally making things or by making ourselves conscious consumers and active participants.



Subversive Tradition

Notion Nanny is a distant cousin to the crafts-based and DIY practices of many artists and activists who look to the handmade for its potential in shaping alternative economies and communities. In radical quilting bees, collaborative artists’ zines, and off-the-grid self-sustainability, the interest in craft has exploded as a means to articulate positions of anti-globalist and anticapitalist dissent, support activist creative expression, and promote individualization. In these activities, tradition itself is subverted, as the means and methods of craft are adapted to new forms and in the service of new ideas.

Smith is similarly implicated in reworking traditional techniques to create art that articulates present-day subversive messages through past aesthetic language. When fashioning works of art through her collaborations, Smith forefronts and interrogates the use of craft as a conveyer of messages and embedded meanings, whether about national or gender identity, political or social beliefs, ethnic custom or personal inspiration. But *Notion Nanny* also asks how traditional craft itself can be subversive, how the retention of historical modes of creation might work against conservative notions and thwart expectations. When Smith posits this question of revolutionary intent or content to the makers with whom she works, the responses are as varied as the practices. Some might see them-

selves 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 implicitly political in their rejection of homogenization—traditional crafts reflect the particulars of the maker and spotlight local difference. Nowadays, we arguably touch and use more objects made without human hands than with—from perfect blocks of factory cheddar cheese to stamped plastic cups 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 of monoculture, with local difference undone like an errant stitch. In both *The Muster* and *Notion Nanny*, Smith calls out and showcases the individual voice, generative in its role as creator or dissenter (or both, as the case may be). Far from the homogeneity of the Gap or the unimaginative vision of Thomas Kinkadee or the monotony of network TV, when we are presented with 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 matrix Curator



Cover and interior drawings and objects: Allison Smith, *Notion Nanny*, 2005–2007; cover photograph courtesy of Qube Gallery, Oswestry, England. *The Muster*, 2005: Recruits drilling at Fort Jay on Governors Island, New York Harbor, May 14, 2005; courtesy of the Public Art Fund, New York; photo by Amy Elliott. Basket weaving photography by Owen Jones.

Allison Smith first realized *Notion Nanny* as a series of residencies, public events, and exhibitions at Grizedale Arts/The Wadsworth Trust Centre for British Romanticism, Cumbria; Qube Gallery, Shropshire; and Studio Voltaire, London. In 2005, she mounted *The Muster*, a large-scale public art and performance project, as a commission of The Public Art Fund, New York. Smith has exhibited her work widely, including venues such as P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York; Hunter College, New York; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City/High Desert Test Sites, Joshua Tree, California; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams; and The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh. She received a B.A. in psychology and a B. F. A. from New School for Social Research/Parsons School of Design in 1995, and an M.F.A. in sculpture from Yale School of Art in 1999. She participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2000, and the ArtPace San Antonio International Artist-in-Residence Program in 2006.



The artist and curator would like to thank all the creators who answered the call to share their skills, ideas, and objects with us during the *Notion Nanny* Open House. We would especially like to thank the local artisans who opened their studios and practices for Allison Smith’s apprenticeships, including Dianne Ayres, John DeMerritt, Theodore Ellison, June Schwarcz, and Diane Winters, and others who joined the process after the printing of this brochure.



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Public Programs

BAM Galleries
2626 Bancroft Way, Berkeley
Gallery Information (510) 642-0808



Gallery Talk

Sunday, May 13, 3:30 p.m.

Allison Smith with Elizabeth Thomas.
Reception to follow.

Open House

Sunday, May 20, 11 a.m. – 3 p.m.
Free admission

Allison Smith will be on hand with a coterie of local craftspeople and other skilled practitioners for activities and exchanges around the notion of the “handmade.” Join us for a festive day of demonstrations, storytelling, and more.

Notion Nanny Weblog

Follow *Notion Nanny*’s travels through Britain and the United States at www.notionnanny.net.

In the Museum Store

The Muster by Allison Smith. This recent publication chronicles the events and participants in Allison Smith’s project for the Public Art Fund and includes essays by Tom Eccles, James Trainor, Anne Wehr, and “Mustering Officer” Allison Smith. (\$15.95, paperback).



Allison Smith *Notion Nanny*