

BOMB

Liking Difficulty: Nancy Shaver Interviewed by Ann Lauterbach

Found objects and fabrics.

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Nancy Shaver and I have been conversing for some years, often, but not always, sitting side by side on a slightly raised deck with narrow tables, facing the bar, toward the entrance of the restaurant Swoon in Hudson, New York. Swoon is a few doors down from Nancy's shop, Henry, on Warren Street. We order some drinks and some appetizers, and we talk. We are in each

other's company on other occasions, because we both teach in Bard's MFA program—she in sculpture, I in writing—and so we find ourselves in relation to these pursuits and to our students. Nancy is a person of precise terseness when it comes to language; I am a person of elaboration. We make an excellent couple when it comes to thinking about art. Nancy likes to talk to me because, I think, I allow her to articulate her thinking. This “allowance” has to do with a spirit of collaboration innate to her work; she has given me permission to be her interlocutor, to draw her from her natural reticence into her often astonishing and always acute reckonings with the world, its objects, affiliations, relations.

We decided that we might want to proceed by single words, rather than questions, although I am not sure we can hold to this in live conversation. It is almost ten a.m. on a sunny day in late May. Nancy is going to arrive at my house in Germantown at noon, and we will have lunch and then begin our conversation.

—Ann Lauterbach

Ann Lauterbach My first word is “fabric.”

Nancy Shaver Oh, fabric ...

AL I wanted to know when did you begin to notice fabrics, and what about them speaks to you?

NS I think I've always known about fabric. My mother taught me how to use the sewing machine at an early age. And now, I like the specific of the word, and how its meaning and connections go out in the world. In my old age, fabrics interest me because they're easy to collect and assemble. You can have them in piles, and just change them around. They're easy to physically handle, but it's challenging to figure out how to display them in my shop. So I like that challenge. And how fabrics overtake my eye.

AL When you talk about the kind of initial emotion of touching a fabric, what is it that your hand is telling your eye?

NS Sometimes it's telling me color, sometimes, and at this point, it's pattern, texture, and how they combine to make something else, which is both of them and neither of them.

AL Is that relation about edges or about planes in your work? When you juxtapose one pattern against another, are you interested in what happens when they touch each other or what happens when they make a surface?

NS I'm interested in both aspects. One is not more important than the other.

AL You often create a grid out of fabric-covered blocks. What do you like about the grid?

NS Economy and small size. It was just purely out of cheapness and availability of material that I began working this way. The wood is a commercial material, the blocks of 2 x 4 lumber, not quite square. I like the “not quite” about it and then trying to achieve a certain amount of precision from my working with the raw material.

AL The next word I'd like to bring into this constellation is "difficulty," which as you know is something I'm interested in as a value, and so I want to know how difficulty strikes you in terms of both the making of a work and its reception.

NS I think I love difficulties as well. I love visual difficulties. I love trying, in a nerdish way, to get to the point when the finest decisions will make a difference. I wish the viewer would like difficulty as much as I do. I feel that art should provide a kind of difficulty, in terms of finding a meaning you can say you found in relation to the work.

AL "Finding a meaning you can say you found in relation to the work," and the way that meaning comes is, for you, and I think for me as well, an understanding that "difficult" is itself a point of access, as opposed to bafflement?

NS Yes, it's a point of access, but also a point of learning. In a process of working, when I'm most befuddled, I, over forty years, have realized this is the place to be when I want to learn something. Something I don't know. I want that thing, that visual experience that I don't know.

AL So then let's say that you go from the known to the unknown when you start making work. I'm wondering how do you know when you have arrived at discovery, or at a resolution? With your work, there is so much elaboration of textures and visual materials, sometimes I have a sense that there is no stopping. But in fact there is. How do you register completion?

NS When I feel like there is nothing else I want to do. But this isn't a fact; this is the job of my eye—when my eye rests, when it doesn't want anything else. I think my eye is this separate entity I want to please. My eye likes activity.

AL Does that mean your eye is the source of judgment?

NS Yes.

AL So you trust it to tell you?

NS I do trust my eye.

AL One of the things that I've seen in your work is a love of making something that puts unexpected things, say, some negligible, mass-produced material, right next to an extremely fine Japanese kimono fabric. Is it part of your pleasure in juxtaposing things that wouldn't "normally" be put together?

NS Yes, I think this could hopefully, possibly reveal the width of beauty, and the width of beauty to all people.

AL There is something in your work that seems very clearly to be about adjusting or shifting.

NS It's adjusting, shifting, and accepting. Accepting the fact that now I'm completely dedicated to these fabrics that women my age wear, garments from big box stores. What is available to women of a certain age is pretty bleak, and is mostly overwrought florals and patterns. Pretty ugly, actually. I hope by putting them together that I'll achieve some kind of beauty. A multitude of many kinds of beauty.

AL So there is a sense of redemption in what you just said. A redemption in taking what seems not admissible to a certain standard of aesthetic beauty. You like to bring these inadmissible evidences into the work. I don't think you do it as a kind of sleight of hand; I think you do it out of a really profound respect, as well as an anger at the limited choices that are available to persons with less ...

NS Visual ...

AL Acumen? Knowledge?

NS Yes, exactly. Somehow I feel very aware at this moment, because of the internet, how very, very paltry visual life is for most people.

AL Could you speak more about how your hand informs your eye?

NS I realized when I started to take apart Japanese fabrics that my hand, because it was taking apart the fabric, saw how it was put together. From my hand I learned of Japanese fabric making and pattern design. It is all based on landscape and nature. And it is thrilling. I think the hand and the eye in a visual world are connected and provide knowledge through experience. It's fairly unconscious. Through careful looking, you can see this gift of hand and eye together—physical knowledge can move toward the intellectual world.

AL So the physical sensation of touching is one way in which the mind comes to understand how to make something, by understanding how it's made.

NS But it's a "know."

AL I want to shift gears here and ask you about your reading. Pretty much every time I come to see you at Henry, you tell me about something you are reading or have just read. It seems to me that you are a constant reader, and that you read with a strong understanding of what you appreciate and like and what you don't. Can you talk about that?

NS Yes, I think reading has given me the way to approach making art, as well as given me the goals for making art. I don't think of failure in reading so much as I think about failure in art. When you go back to the story of this handmade doll and the other, this commercial object, the commercial object fails and the handmade object fails. But together, that's the novel. And I think that's what I get from reading. The experience of living in all different forms, the experience of people taking in information and returning it to the world.

AL But writers are conscious of the fact that there is the word "doll," and it can refer to that doll or another doll. Writers have to deal with that sameness and difference in the descriptions of the world. We have the same word to indicate different things, aspects or qualities of things. I would imagine that it would give you a certain sense of freedom and a pleasure in seeing writers confront this word they're stuck with. The word "sun" or the word "green," and your eye tells you, "There is that kind of sun, and that kind of sun, and that kind of sun," and the light is different in each instance, or aperture, and the "green" is different depending on X, Y and Z. Maybe there is something in writing that allows you to kind of sit inside how you make a distinction between one doll and another?

NS I think that's exactly it. Whatever I've developed as an intellectual being has developed from reading. There are so many other greens available. I love that complexity of the billions of greens.

AL Just to follow up, what have you read recently that you absolutely loved?

NS I'm reading Zadie Smith's *Feel Free*. There is this fantastic essay about hating something and then suddenly loving it, and it's just a wonderful explanation and exploration of that fact.

AL Can you remember a time when you came across a work of art, and you hated it, and you learned to love it?

NS Yes, because of Bard. My first year at Bard, we were going to see David Smith, and I thought I hated him. Taylor Davis said, "Isn't it wonderful?" and I said, "No, I HATE Smith." And she was so taken aback, she didn't know what to do. She took me around and showed me David Smith, and then I liked David Smith. And now I love David Smith.

Nancy Shaver's work can be seen in the group exhibition Dime-Store Alchemy at the FLAG Art Foundation in New York City until August 17.

Ann Lauterbach's tenth book of poetry, Spell, is due out from Penguin in October. She is Schwab Professor of Languages and Literature, and Co-chair of Writing in the MFA, at Bard College.