

## *Heather Mekkelson interview Adam Grossi, 2008*

*Debris Field* is a part of a series of sculptural work that similarly bleeds into awareness. Working with images from public disasters, Heather Mekkelson catalogs and reconstructs the fragments, “composing” ruins from hand-crafted debris within the framework of art historical, Romantic catastrophes like Gericault’s *Scene of the Deluge* (1818) and *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819). Mekkelson’s *Debris Fields* are eerie stages set with the mundane, stripped of its value beyond that of index. For Mekkelson, the study of ruins is a deconstruction of psychological and physical permanency, but for the viewer, taking in the idea of catastrophe as neatly registered landscape, reads as an unsettling bellwether. As Mekkelson notes herself: “recent disasters [provide] a window through which we can foresee [our] world in ruins;” *Debris Field*’s fabrication provides perspective, disaster and catastrophe might be of our own manufacture.

Heather Mekkelson is a current MFA candidate at The University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work has been featured in Chicago exhibitions at Standard (solo), Gallery 400, 40000, GARDENfresh, The Green Lantern and The Pond. She was included in the inaugural exhibition, *41/90: Contemporary Landscape at The Figge Art Museum* (Davenport, IA) with accompanying catalog. Mekkelson’s *Debris Field* project will be accompanied by an essay by art historian and critic Lane Relyea in a forthcoming issue of *Art Journal*. She was nominated for a Driehaus award in 2006.



Heather Mekkelson *Debris Field told them to look after the younger ones*, 2008 (installation view)

I always tell people that the best part of being an artist is that you get to meet and know other artists. Regardless of how well my own work is going, I can always step outside the the studio and be inspired by the insightful practices of people I feel honored to consider my friends.

I’ve decided that another good use of this blog would be to publish directed conversations I have with other artists about aspects of their work that fascinate me. For this inaugural conversation I have spoken with Heather Mekkelson.

I am currently in graduate school with Heather and it has been a privilege to be working in such close proximity to her. Heather’s work is rooted in sculpture and sculptural installation, and our conversation is focused on aspects of her recent solo exhibition *Debris Field* at ThreeWalls here in Chicago. By way of introduction, here is a sample of Heather’s exhibition statement from *Debris Field*:

*Recent disasters have provided a window through which we can foresee the world in ruins. Empathy, the primary reaction to catastrophic events, coupled with the projected imaginings of a disaster in our own world, makes disastrous events powerful, existential transformations. This exploration of ruins as deconstructions of psychological and physical “permanent” systems is the continuing influence of my work.*

All photographs that appear here are installation views of the exhibition. The last note I’ll add before jumping in is an important one: for this conversation and all others that will appear here in the future, I’ve deliberately avoided editing the transcription. I’ve removed some “likes” and “umms” but that’s about it. My intention is not to create a cohesive text but rather to provide some transparency for a view into the fluid, expansive, imperfect way that artists process their thoughts before things are smoothed over by exhibition didactics and curatorial statements.

The fact that parts of Heather’s responses read like eloquent art criticism is simply a reflection of the depth of her consideration of, and engagement in, the ideas and processes of her artistic practice.



AG: I really only have one question...

[both laugh hard]

AG: ...but I thought that there should be some precursor to the question?

HM: uh huh.

AG: So I was wondering if I could get you to describe — without explaining anything about what it means and why you did it — if you could just describe in very simple terms, what you did for your solo show at ThreeWalls.

HM: I constructed debris and put it together in a field...

[both laugh]

HM: I already don't like what I'm saying!

AG: Revise!

HM: Okay, revise! So, what did I do... [thinking] ...and I'm not supposed to think about it too much?

AG: Sorry, I know it's sort of tricky...

HM: It is tricky.

AG: You were given a room, sort of two rooms, right? Can you describe —

HM: physically?

AG: Physically, what happened?

HM: You walk into the first threshold, and over your head is a parabolic speaker with a recording of late August noise — so, cicadas are running on that. Once you walk through the hallway, in between the water main pipe and the corner, there is a wrecked soccer ball. When you look through the room you see this field, and in the foreground there are swaths of brown and black shingles. With some various items mixed in there — carpet padding is one of the things that come to mind. And then there are these crests of other objects. So, one of them is a bent door panel — all of this stuff was made by me, so it's been pigmented and it has muck on it. And in that trio — the door panel, the off-white dinner plate, the red magazine holder which also has a page of a scrapbook in side of that... further to the right of that is an oscillating fan without the stand anymore...

*[Heather continues to describe the installation in detail. With her permission I've trimmed this description to provide quicker entry into our ensuing conversation.]*

.... The white garbage bag, which is the most fragile thing I've ever made.

AG: Oh yeah, that did look super fragile.

HM: Yeah, it's really fragile.

AG: And does that object have a —

HM: Have a metaphor?

AG: ...a direct, umm, correlative representation?

HM: Yeah, that's also a wave crest.

AG: Okay, okay.

HM: Oh, there's a big blue tarp above the ship mast too, and these, um, coiled up mini blinds that are in the foreground of the blue tarp. So that's stormy sky, with some striations through it, if you're standing in the sweet spot.

AG: Gotcha.

HM: It's all gotta be from the sweet spot.

AG: Okay. Where was the sweet spot?

HM: The sweet spot was by the soccer ball.

AG: Okay.

HM: Yeah. ... So if you looked straight ahead from the sweet spot, you'd see the whole landscape.

AG: Ahhh.

HM: You'd see the sun and the ship and the storm clouds, and then the dark swaths would be where the shingles are.

AG: Do you have to be at a certain elevation to hit the sweet spot? Like, do your eyes have to be at a certain height?

HM: Just my general height. I'm 5'5." So yeah, that's pretty general.

AG: Was there any way of, sort of, telling the viewer that that's where the sweet spot was or was it more, sort of like ... was that implied?

HM: [shaking head]

AG: It was not.

HM: It was not necessarily implied. I think it might have been implied through the book, if you looked through the book you could see the relation of where the photograph was taken versus the painting that it was kind of bouncing off of.

AG: Gotcha.

HM: And so then, so you have to walk around that unraveled duct work thing to get into the side room.

AG: Okay.

HM: And in the side room is what I've been calling a plinth, basically like a shallow cement block with two PVC pipes coming out of it. There's some work lights in there, standing work lights, the halogen ones. Those are arranged in a specific way so that the shadow that is cast from the work lights creates a horizon line, sort of a stand-in for the horizon in that room. There's a couple stakes, like uncut wooden stakes, with the orange tabs in there... oh yeah, I didn't even talk about the stakes...

AG: No, that's okay...

HM: [laughs]

AG: This is a good job.

HM: Okay.

AG: So, moving back a step... umm... you've already sort of opened this up, but how did those things arrive at their positions in the room? From what you've said, it sounds to me – I'm sort of talking to you as though I know less about your work than I do –

HM: Yeah.

AG: — just cuz I want to have this conversation...

HM: Sure! Okay.

AG: So,

[Both laughing]

AG: So you're clearly referencing things in the room as though they comprise an image. And so can you talk a little bit about the transition from those two things?

HM: Sure. I guess I should say that the objects were, first of all, chosen off of actual documentation of disasters... so I just extracted those — I have this ongoing catalogue of all that stuff. So, I like to amass all the things before I make the selections of what goes in there. And that's somewhat based on these romantic paintings of catastrophes – this last show was for Turner's – the slave driver's throwing the dead and dying overboard one.

I always say that's a template; it's not necessarily something I stick by, or that I'm trying to create some trompe l'oeil effect, that's not it at all. I'd like the installation to just be what it is: a field, an overly composed field of whatever these disasters are. And I think the painting becomes important for me as a compositional tool. The fact that these painters were using all of these pretty formal tactics and devices to make paintings look pleasing to the eye, like the diagonals and the vanishing points and all those things. I think it's a pretty interesting device for me to think about, as far as sculptural installations and this idea of pictorial field and walking into it. So that's kind of why I rely on those. Also, just to give me anything to bounce off of. I

might not like where the sun is, so that leads me to the decision that the sun shouldn't be there, and it should be somewhere else. So that's where those lie.

Also, I work site-reactively a lot. So, depending on what the architecture is, where the light sources are, how the room actually feels – where the expanse would be when you walk in – it's all important. So, the expanse when you walk in that room isn't directly opposite you when you walk in, it's actually at this diagonal.

AG: Awesome. A couple of other questions came to mind, but I'm going to restrain myself, because I have found that from doing this in the past, if I speak too long with someone, I won't transcribe it.

[both laugh]

HM: There's a second part to the last question that I think I skipped... I don't remember what it is.

AG: Oh, boy... hmmm.

HM: You were asking where the influences came from compositionally...

AG: Yeah, yeah...

HM: ...and there was another part?

AG: Ummm... yeah, yeah, I think it was good.

HM: Okay.

AG: So, here is my question. Whether or not it was intentional, the pairing of you and William Cordova for this ThreeWalls exhibition – not that you were exhibiting jointly, but they were installations in the same building – had me thinking a lot about this idea of aesthetic deprivation. Both spaces... I don't know if William Cordova operates off of a larger structural principle like you do with the paintings... but to me, in both spaces there is this sense that we are not after the spectacular.

HM: Right.

AG: And I wanted to just ask you about that because it's very intriguing to me.

HM: Yeah, I can see why, it's a really nice point. I can't speak for him, but yeah, aesthetic deprivation is a great way to put it. For myself, I always think that there should be a certain amount of frustration, or at least not getting to the full gratification that people naturally want. Especially in my work, talking about disasters, everybody wants to see the jet ski in the tree, and the two by four impaled through the thing... and it's not about that at all. It's supposed to be an eerily composed version of what disasters are, and that, for me, parallels the idea of traumatic memory. How we remember things, the way testimonies describe events. And also just this idea of American Cool and a postmodern loss of affect. We're left frustrated and unfulfilled and our traumas are never fully integrated into our lives; they're always left in this sort of picturesque land. So, yeah, it's aesthetic deprivation as far as there is no heapage, and there are no obvious signs; it's more about the interruption of normalcy than anything else.

AG: Gotcha. So, the loud splash imagery would function too much like an icon for the experience?

HM: Maybe 'icon' is a good way to put it, I also think it's really typical; I think it's overly typical of what our representations are of disaster and how it actually affects people's lives. And how it gratifies us as voyeurs to see that sort of thing. But that's not where the tragedy lies; the tragedy lies in my mind that, "that's somebody's dinner plate that's sitting there." And it goes back to Roland Barthes' punctum versus the studium. These are the things that pierce me; not these really gratifying splash moments.

AG: I don't know this Roland Barthes theory. Could you speak about that quickly?

HM: Yeah... this is from Camera Lucida. He talks about the studium and the punctum – the studium is the logical response – I could be totally ripped apart for paraphrasing this!

[both laugh]

HM: ...because it's very complicated and I'm going to really simplify it!

AG: But it informs your work.

HM: Yeah, it does. And so, the studium is like the logical response: you receive the information and you understand it in this rational way. And then the punctum is this other side of things... a lot of people equate it to the death drive, but that's another long story. Basically, for me anyway, it was these marginal things in the photograph that reach out and pierce you, and really stick with you forever. So my response to looking through disaster documentation is always based on that – seeing

somebody's slipper in the middle of this massive field of debris is more haunting for me than seeing the two by four or the fork impaled through the telephone pole, or whatever it is, you know?

AG: I also wanted to ask about the non-hierarchy of objects in the room. What I'm reading as a very deliberate lack of hierarchy to the installation. To me, it didn't seem like I should spend most of my time looking over here, as opposed to over here, or that this was a lead up to this. Umm....

[Adam thinking]

HM: I can remark.

[both laugh]

HM: Yeah, there is no hierarchy. That's sort of subjective, too; I don't find a hierarchy in the materials, although I would put that comforter in the garbage bag up there, for myself, my own taste.

AG: That's true, I did look for a long time at that.



HM: There are certain things that draw you in closer, like the handbag that's bound up in the mini blinds – some people really feel wrenched by that. So, yeah, I don't set it up like, "this is the most important thing" ... if anything, and this goes back to the selection of Debris Field as the title: it is a field, and it's supposed to be a gestalt view. But I also know that I like details and I like smaller things, so I entertain that part of it for me too.

That might be a reflection of the reality of disasters. Unless there's a photojournalist framing it, there is a leveling of everything – all objects just become part of the field. I mean, even if there are upside down cars and stuff – they don't hold the attention as much. This has to do with where I'm going now, with the idea of photojournalism framing these things, and how we're looking at mediated images of these really existential events for people, many people get affected by this in huge ways. And we just see a lovely composed photograph of it. Which is creepy. But that's another tangent.

AG: Another thing that I think is really striking about the show is that there isn't a disaster. The focal point of those objects is not there.

HM: No.

AG: And I guess this relates to my question about devaluation. Um...

HM: Oh, I think you might be talking about the event – how the event itself is not there?

AG: Yeah.

HM: Yeah, you're totally right, and it's great that you picked up on that... there's something where – and I don't know why I set this up – I'm more interested in the moment before the event, and the moment after. The actual event itself, I think, is beyond description in any sense. That's sort of where the sublime is, right?

The sound piece is kind of acting like the threshold too, the moment before; and then when you leave, the return back to normal life. But it's never been about the event itself, and that's a strange thing for some people. I mean, I'm more interested in the aftermath, absolutely. So yeah, that's a big part of the deprivatization too: there's no explanation. You just don't know where you're walking into, and when.

AG: And the way that the objects have been stressed, the sculptures created... it seems like, because of the material you're using, and by "material" I mean objects that seem familiar, where you think, "I've seen that, that might be in my house..."

HM: Yeah.

AG: The way that they've been stressed is an interesting ambiguity because parts of the installation look very much like they could be detritus from a construction site. Like someone forgot about the fan and it got left in the wet concrete.

HM: Yeah, right.

AG: And I guess that observation has a lot to do with the framing of the gallery space too. But then there are certain things, like the purse in the blinds, and even the way that things are treated so delicately – the delicateness of that comforter – it becomes something completely different because of the way you've handled it; because it isn't accidental, you know? And that's a strange kind of mind warp.

HM: Yeah, I like the mind warp. I think that a lot of my work before this started was so subjective: where I was going, what I was doing. And I had this moment where I decided I was like, "I'm more interested in these universal experiences." And so, having things that are both familiar and alien and walk that line, for me, leave it more as an open text almost. People can put their own readings on things. There's a specificity to it, but there's also a huge amount of generalizing.

So yeah, I mean, I think a lot of us have a floral bedspread somewhere in our histories, you know? [laughs] So that can automatically jog something in everybody. And I think I'm more interested in jogging my audience than I am in jogging myself. I have my own personal, sentimental things in there. I guess there might be some nostalgic items for myself, but I would also like them to be ambiguous enough that anybody can put a reading on top of them.

AG: Yeah, I can relate to that desire in my own work.

HM: Yeah, I mean that's kind of like the big, grand goal of communication, right?

AG: Yeah, yeah: Something for me and something for you.

HM: Yeah. Sharing. Instead of me just mapping what I was doing for the last two years... which is totally where I came from.

Lots of site-specific stuff, lots of mapping... yeah. Enough of me!

[both laugh]

AG: Cool. I think that's all I wanted to ask you.

HM: Okay.

AG: Yeah.

HM: Cool.

AG: Cool.

HM: Alright. Don't leave anything out!

[both laugh]