

Sound Plots: *Aporia (Notes to a Medium)*

Episode 3: Artist Talk with Colleen Brown, Jamie Hilder and Elizabeth Zvonar

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This is a conversation with Colleen Brown, Elizabeth Zvonar and Jamie Hilder on the occasion of the exhibition *Aporia (Notes to a Medium)*.

Jamie Hilder: The prompt of this conversation was to talk about uncertainty and doubt as it fits into our practices and I think the throughline that I imagined – at least to begin this conversation – was to talk about interdisciplinary practice where I think uncertainty is at the very foundation of my investigations. And I know that Elizabeth works across sculpture and across photography and collage, and Colleen across sculpture, installation, writing and embroidery. I would like to open this up to either of you to talk about the role that uncertainty plays in imagining an interdisciplinary practice.

Colleen Brown: So I don't embroider and that's because it took me two years of trying to embroider because I thought that the content of the book for some reason – because I'm supposed to be a visual artist – would be embroidery. I have no recollection of why I would have landed there, my mother did not embroider and the work is about my mother, I think she probably would have hated embroidery as well. But the reason I ended up writing was because I was writing to try and solve the problem of embroidery and figure out how I could embroider more and eventually, slowly gave up. But I was pretty certain through the whole thing that I hated embroidery, so there was no uncertainty there! [laughs]

Elizabeth Zvonar: The book that you just published is the first time you published a complete piece of writing, were you writing before or was it more diaristic journal entry-type things for yourself?

CB: I really lucked out, so I was writing, I write a lot, I bet you write a lot ...

EZ: Sporadically ...

CB: I write as a problem-solving tool, so it's just another thing you do in your sketchbook. So that's how I was writing and then, I don't know why I would have ever done this either, but I took this into Michael Turner and I said, "What do I do with this?" Because I thought his answer would be, "Well, I'll give you the correct embroidery pattern." And he said, "Great, I can't wait to see more of your writing!" Thank goodness.

EZ: I don't see myself as an expert in collage, for example, but I'm really good at it and I know that, but I wouldn't profess to be an expert or anything. Out of all the areas that I work in, I think I can own collage as a medium [laughs], I think I understand it. But for everything else, I feel like I'm fumbling towards something while I'm doing it, so things will change, the plan I started with may alter and I'm good with that.

CB: Your comfort with collage. I don't produce collages as a finished thing, but it's a way of working on ideas and I like it because things aren't glued down so you can move them around. Do you think that that was part of what attracted you to that medium first?

EZ: When I first started out making collage, I used to deliberate where things should go and then glue them down, eventually, and make a finished piece. Now I work very differently and I don't glue anything down, I just spot tape things so they can always be moved. There's a point when something is finished, but to your point, could things be because things were being moved around, they were in flux, is that an attractive quality? I think it has grown into that for sure, but that's maybe what I've learned from that process is that things can be very loose and open and I enjoy that. But then in order to create a finished piece, I'm scanning and enlarging so I am fixing something in its final state.

JH: Also, you've got this interdisciplinary frame where it's kind of like a permanent diletante-ism, where everything is new and exciting and you fumble your way through things. I have made video for fifteen years, maybe longer than that, but last week I had a friend come over and re-teach me video editing software because it goes away as soon as the project is over and I have to consistently come back to it. But I was also thinking about this positioning of ourselves as, you know, consistent or constant learners within an interdisciplinary practice. But that potentially ignores a certain type of mastery – mastery is a horrible word, I don't want to be anywhere near it – but competence, let's say, we've become competent in our middle age and we've aged into it by doing it for years and years. Are you confident enough in an art practice that you would consider yourself mid-career? All of a sudden, we've become mid-career without really knowing how it happened.

EZ: Doing something long enough through practice, you get good at it or you toss it eventually, right? If you're not competent with it, one should know when one isn't going to pursue something. I mean, I think there's a drive to continue that is internal and that's the only reason why people write or make music or make art or whatever – whatever it is that they pursue, there's something inside that's driving you to do so, because otherwise, why would you do it?

CB: As far as mid-career, or another way you phrased it, as having expertise, I really feel like I aged into it, like I was forced into it because of a social situation and it was because other people needed me either to get out of the way because they needed to have the novice space, or they needed me to get good enough at something so that I could help them. And so it was more of a social position. But from an art point of view, I get way more jam out of doing things that I don't know how to do, so the writing thing is new and so I'm more into it. And I'm actually more excited about it and I think that that probably shows in the work. I need to keep hopping around, I think.

JH: I guess my other question would be around that same type of impulse about following ideas into particular media, because they are ideas and I think this is an example of how you started with an embroidery project and realized it didn't work and moved into writing, how ideas demand particular approaches and sometimes you start an idea one way and you realize it can't be that way, so you pivot into something else.

There was something about the mirrors and the relationship to astrologers, tarot readers, clairvoyants, this uncertainty embedded in a scientific framework – particularly the astrologer – that I find ridiculous and convincing at the same time. To convince you that your horoscope is going to be what is most useful to you at the time, and it's open to interpretation, but I still somehow abide by it.

CB: I see the mirrors as like the voyagers are going out, but they're only reflecting back, I don't spend a lot of time imagining who the receiver of that message is, I assume it's us and I'm going to continue to receive this message, so when I see those cascades of images in the mirrors, in a way that's what makes me think.

EZ: We're trapped in our endless reflection back.

JH: It's these moments of uncertainty rooted in mirror technologies and technologies of identification during Covid that helped me think through the facing mirrors, the two-facing mirrors that kind of shoot off into an infinite realm.

EZ: And we're living now in this increasingly AI culture, so it's hard to know the veracity of anything that you see online.

CB: What I've been thinking about in relationship to some of your questions about certainty, Jamie, I think that I became a sculptor because I had this sense of certainty about objects and I maybe didn't trust other kinds of things, like social things, so it seemed like undeniably real. That's suspect as well, it's interesting that I would have landed on that, I don't know that there's any more real, true, like it's real, but is it true? And I find it really interesting when I'm doing research that I'm reading, reading, reading, trying to become expert or knowledgeable about something and then I tend to not be able to start writing about something unless I can look up historical photographs or advertising photographs related to that, and then if I feel like I can read that image, whatever that means, I'll be absolutely confident about what I'm saying.

JH: Maybe that leads into the question that I had about your relationship to taking the project from an imagined visual, the book that you've written, from a proposal for an exhibition into a textual space, and the link between your sculptural impulses and the way that you wrote the text, because you talk about it, at least I recognize it on the first page where you talked about maybe thinking about figuring language or a pile that I recognized from your sculptural language, and then I thought about it again this week and the way that it does sort of operate as a pile in the best sense of the word, the way that you used the word, but also a constellation of memories or texts. So I was wondering if you could talk a little about the process of writing as it relates to your sculptural practice or your visual art practice.

CB: Generating sequences of words is hard, I can't plan it, so it's not in my control. But the structuring of a text I enjoy, like what page comes first and what page comes next, and so it is in my control and I suspect that that's more like sculpture or at least I understand it more like sculpture. There's the social part, so that things would be fragmented but coming from different social spaces, and I think that comes from sculpture too, and that things don't need to be, you know, attached, and I think the structure of the book relates to that because there's not a ... I didn't try to make a throughline that forced everything to be together.

JH: I was wondering if either of you wanted to talk about the humour in your work, or the humour that comes out of your work for you or for people who respond to it, who find your work funny, I've chuckled in front of Colleen's sculptures having no idea why I'm laughing, and I wonder, what's that response?!

CB: That's really awesome!

JH: I think some of your collage work, also, is surprising and funny.

EZ: I like it when people get the joke, whatever that might be in the way that I'm working, but it also keeps me interested as I'm making things and maybe the resolution to a piece is when I find the humour in it, the title often might finish off the piece. It's part of something that I enjoy doing, it's very pleasurable when other people get it as well, to have that experience.

CB: Yes, I mean, I don't check in with people enough, I don't know if they're getting it or not, this is news! I think the reason that you can't, that it's so great to not be certain for humour is that it's this doubling and you have to hold two positions for something to be funny. Irony requires that you hold two positions. So you can't be certain, because you have to be in those two places at the same time, and that's what's the relief about it, you're unstable, destabilized.