

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH CONNER

Q: What attracted you to participate in this exhibition?

A: Kathleen Moles, Curator of Art at the Whatcom Museum invited me and I was excited to have an opportunity to work with her. I have lived in the Northwest since 1981, and the Whatcom Museum's reputation for innovation in art exhibitions caught my attention early on. I consider it an honor to be asked to participate in that culture of experimentation and exploration. I was also very interested in being a member of a group of artists who were asked to develop work in response to site and circumstance; it has been exciting to see what is emerging, since each of us has a different approach, aesthetic, set of concerns, artistic practice, etc. I like Bellingham very much and I enjoy working away from home with the opportunity to explore a new place.

Q: How did the parameters set for the exhibition (work must relate in some way to Old City Hall building site) affect the approach you took to creating the work for this exhibit? Were the parameters a hindrance to your creativity, an inspiration, a challenge?

A: I have worked on public projects for almost 20 years, so the parameters set for this site and the exhibition itself were actually extremely liberal. I spoke with the curator about my desire to have one of the more eccentric spaces. I chose to use the former vault, which is both the smallest space and has the greatest number of entrances and exits, including the elevator. I probably (consciously or unconsciously) increased the parameters and restrictions in order to be inspired by the characteristics of the space itself. The installation I developed for the vault space makes a small space even more difficult to navigate and, I believe, more "hermetic." Sound is dampened by the size of the space, and the fact that it is carpeted. I'm trying to include subtle sounds that will only be heard in the vault space, and lighting is planned to enhance the sense of being somewhere else, not necessarily in the expected museum or gallery space.

In direct response to the museum itself, the materials I chose to work with are, for the most part, gathered from museum collections including the Photo Archives, the third floor clock collection from the West Coast Watch and Clock Museum and a selection of preserved birds which are not currently on display for the general public. The collections, and the space itself (the vault and the museum are both intended to protect and preserve), as well as the awkward circumstance of a visible tower clock that has never told time accurately, got me thinking about time, how it functions within a museum, how it functions outside the museum, why it is important, and to whom.

I enjoy working with materials at hand. The museum staff was very generous in offering items from exhibition infrastructure for use in the installation, including an enormous number of pedestals and molding recycled from a museum renovation. I also took advantage of the offer of construction assistance from the staff, which made the pedestal "sculpture" possible.

I would say that the parameters have been an ongoing inspiration and resource. For me, parameters also included resources to which I would not have had access outside this project: staff expertise, assistance, and stories; the "stuff" of the museum, from pedestals to stuffed birds; a space to play in that is also open to a large public.

Q: Can you describe the work you are exhibiting?

A: The work is a constructed landscape within a small architectural space that provides a four-month reprieve from life behind glass for selected shorebirds from a large museum collection. I've incorporated photographic images of the clock collection, the tower clock, and architectural features of the museum. Sound and lighting also transform the space, relating to historical, geological, personal, and other notions of time.

Q: How much of the work for this exhibition is completed ahead of time versus created on site?

A: Off-site work was primarily research and mulling over the opportunities. Almost 100% of the fabrication and installation, additional thinking and some shifts in concept and execution, were accomplished on-site, with the generous support of patient and creative museum staff.

Q: What is your process for creating a new work?

A: I do fairly extensive research, which yields materials and ideas that I am unable to let go of for one reason or another. The next phase includes "play" and experimentation with how these ideas and materials may or may not relate, both in my mind and on site, with the actual objects, materials, and physical characteristics of the space. I pay close attention to how elements of the installation work together, bounce off each other, sing or fall flat during the installation process, which prompts a series of additions, deletions, changes and edits. I try to be as objective as possible about my own reactions to work in progress, evaluating why I am obsessed with certain elements, while simultaneously trying not to be too attached to any particular material or object. I am also shameless about asking others for their opinions, incorporating the stories they provide in response to the work-in-progress, as part of the final work. Perhaps I should say "semi-final" as I'm not sure anything I have ever done is completely "finished."

Q: Were there any special challenges or experiences you've had as you've prepared for this exhibition which would give more context to the work we will see at the exhibition?

A: I was interested in the hermetic quality of the space, as well as the multiple access points. I also wanted to create something complex and mysterious. I did not anticipate the challenge of working in such a small space, with the requirement that it remain publicly-accessible throughout the installation process, in large part because of the elevator. During the process of installation, I, and some of the staff members who helped me, became quite literally disoriented within the space--we couldn't remember which pedestals had been completely painted and which had not yet received a second coat. Trying to keep the passage to the elevator open to the public necessitated moving tools, pedestals, birds, etc. on a constant basis, and I think we all felt as though we were starting over several times during the course of a day. The process became closely associated with the physical, emotional and sensory characteristics of the installation itself--a bit confusing, somewhat disorienting, frustrating, and complex. It will be intriguing to see if visitors to the space have similar reactions, without having been a part of the process.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY: Elizabeth Conner grew up rambling through fields and climbing trees in upstate New York, 6 miles from the nearest extremely small town. Both her grandfather and father owned lumber yards, so building materials and construction activities were an important part of her childhood. She studied French and Russian in college, lived in France for three years, and spent her 20s in New York City, managing international high school exchange programs for the American Field Service and continuing to travel.

She “dropped everything” in 1980, put on a backpack, and headed in the general direction of South America. She made it as far as Mexico, where she was pleasantly distracted by a shipboard job working for natural history cruises off Baja California. During this time, she began painting watercolors of the desert landscape. In Seattle for the summer, she paid a visit to Cornish Institute and was seduced into four more years of formal education by a brief glimpse into a life-drawing class, jazz rhythms seeping into the halls, light-filled dance studios, and a bucket full of drawing materials.

Traveling is still in her blood, but the exploration involved in public art projects satisfies a good part of her wanderlust. She works collaboratively with communities, and with other artists and fabricators, architects, engineers, transportation planners, and landscape architects, to incorporate art into public spaces, through explorations of the beauty of landscape, how communities work, and how infrastructure supports human activity. Her recent studio work has included experiments in improvised performance and chance-based photography.