

INTERVIEW WITH KRISTEN RAMIREZ

Q: What attracted you to participate in this exhibition?

A: As an artist perpetually more interested in notions of place and history, the opportunity to create a site specific installation in an art and history museum was too perfect for me. I was also so excited to be working in a building that is so multi-faceted. Not only has it served so many roles within this landscape—as city hall, the city jail, the office of the mayor, and so forth—but it is also so large and iconic and red, and it also continually baffles me that it is perfectly symmetrical and reads the same from the front and the back.

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 would assert that the parameters set for the exhibition very much complimented and inspired the way I typically work. It is often the case that my art-making begins with an historical investigation of a place or time: researching through primary sources wherever available, through my own photo documentation of a place, and, naturally, through on-line resources. For Site Specific, I was thrilled to spend time with Jeff Jewell in the museum's Photo Archives. He was a real treasure trove of information. With his guidance, I investigated the iconography and modes of communication used by Bellingham's "business houses" as they emerged at the turn of the last century. I was given a large catalog of photos taken in the year 1905 that revealed a preponderance of commercial spaces and business endeavors that framed the landscape of "New Whatcom." Imagine my further delight when—as a printmaker-- I was also introduced to an archive of printed ephemera from the early 20th Century. In broadsides, playbills, business cards, and coupons, I found more evidence of our uniquely American fascination with not only commerce, but also with science and spectacle.

Q: Can you describe the work you are exhibiting?

A: In approaching this installation, I asked myself how our notion of place and history, looking particularly at patterns of commerce over time, have shifted over the last one hundred years. Discovering the catalog of photographs in the Photo Archives revealed to me that we've always lived with an exuberance of signage and commercial iconography that we must digest in our daily life. I selected text, broadsides, advertisements and coupons and used these sources to create an installation meant to overwhelm the senses. In terms of materials, I relied on simple sign painting techniques as well as silkscreen and letterpress printing. Leonard Baskin, one of my favorite printmakers, once said: "people like me, who care about printing – about the architecture of the page—constitute the tiniest lunatic fringe in the nation." My love of prints made the museum's collection especially relevant. It gave me great pleasure to pay homage to the Whatcom Museum's archive.

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

A: All of the work was completed in my small studio in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. What I had left to complete was the installation of each individual piece into a coherent whole once I arrived on site, including all 5,000+ letter-pressed coupons, which –for the record—nearly killed me! Needless to say, I don't have a space even half the size of the museum's Gallery Five, so many aesthetic decisions happened on site. For me, these are really the most exciting decisions an artist can make. Having the opportunity to work in a space this size is both intimidating and extremely invigorating.

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

A: In terms of generating ideas, my work has remained consistent for the last five or more years. I make work that is about this notion of place. More specifically, I make work about the disorienting, urban, American experience in my own attempt to understand what it means to be American. We live in a very young country where the urban environment is seldom designed. This results in a flood of messages that are layered on top of one another, creating a noisy collision of textures, colors, stylistic and cultural contrasts. Too often, the past gets erased in our eager drive to always live at the frontier of the future. In my work I choose not to despise the chaos of the American city, but to enjoy the exuberance of icons and signage that typify it.

As for my process, it often begins with a response to the site, as it did in this case. In other situations where the site plays less of a role, I begin with ideas or icons or patterns and play with drawings and collage until the work opens itself up to me and I see what my next steps are.

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 would say my biggest challenge in getting this work completed was the smaller installation of brightly colored coupons that originally came from milk bottles. I enjoy creating multiples and knew that my objective was to overwhelm the viewer with color and commerce in a rather small corner. I didn't, however, realize just how long it would take to print over 5,000 coupons on my letterpress then individually die cut each one. Phew! I will know better next time to call upon interns and volunteers.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY: Kristen Ramirez was born in San Francisco, CA and raised in Sacramento, CA. She earned a BA from UC Santa Cruz, a MA in Education and California Teaching Credential from San Francisco State University, and a MFA in Printmaking from the University of Washington. Ramirez exhibits her work as much as she can in and around Seattle where she teaches at both Cornish College of the Arts and Pratt Fine Art Center. She lives in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood with her husband, Morgan, and their dog Loopy.