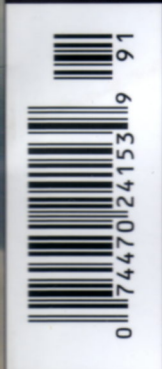


COILHOUSE

A LOVE LETTER TO ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

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INTO THE ~~W~~OODS:

The Wisdom of
Madeline von Foerster



THE MYSTICAL PAINTINGS OF MADELINE VON FOERSTER INVOKE NAMES LIKE VAN EYCK, BRUEGHEL, BOSCH, REMEDIOS VARO, ERNST FUCHS. IT'S VIBRANT, MULTI-LAYERED WORK, FILLED WITH OCCULT AND MEDIEVAL SYMBOLISM AND RENDERED IN THE PAINSTAKING EGG TEMPERA AND OIL TRADITION OF THE FLEMISH OLD MASTERS. AGELESS, YET THEMATICALLY TIMELY, SCHOLARLY BUT ALWAYS DEEPLY PERSONAL, HERS IS SIMPLY SOME OF THE MOST MOVING MODERN WORK IN THE MEDIUM.

ENDANGERED SPECIES II (underpainting), 2008 (12 x 15.5 inches)

IF YOU'RE FAMILIAR WITH THE PAINTING TECHNIQUE OF THE OLD MASTERS, CLOSELY EXAMINING PAINTINGS LIKE THESE CAN BE MIND-BOGGLING... SO MANY SMOOTHLY-PLACED, MINUSCULE BRUSH STROKES, PATIENTLY LAYERED, CULMINATING IN PORTRAITS THAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS HAVING AN UNEARTHLY INNER GLOW.

THE FIRST TIME I SAW MADELINE'S WORK UP CLOSE WAS AT A TYPICAL, OVERCROWDED NYC GALLERY OPENING: PLENTY OF CHEAP WINE AND FABULOUSLY DRESSED PEOPLE, ALL TALKING A LITTLE TOO LOUDLY OVER ONE ANOTHER. THEN THERE WAS MADELINE HERSELF, STANDING OFF TO ONE SIDE, AS ELEGANT AND LUMINOUS AS ONE OF HER PAINTINGS.

SINCE THAT TIME, I'VE COME TO KNOW HER AS ONE OF THOSE EXCEEDINGLY RARE EXAMPLES OF A PERSON WHOSE LIFE REFLECTS PURELY IN THEIR ART. SHE HAS A BIG BRAIN, BUT AN EVEN BIGGER HEART, AND IT'S A CERTAIN, ACHING SOULFULNESS AS MUCH AS THE RIGOROUS CRAFTSMANSHIP, THAT MAKES HER WORK SO EXCEPTIONAL.

RECENTLY, I STOPPED BY MADDY'S COZY STUDIO IN THE GREENPOINT NEIGHBORHOOD OF BROOKLYN TO VIEW HER NEW WALDKAMMER SERIES, AND WE CHATTED OVER A POT OF TEA. IN HER OWN WORDS, MADELINE HAS PAINTED A VISION OF "NINE IMAGINARY CABINETS IN WHICH TO EXPLORE HUMANITY'S OFTEN DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE (IN PARTICULAR, THE CRISIS OF DEFORESTATION). THESE WOODEN CABINETS INTENTIONALLY ALLUDE TO THE ONCE-LIVING TREES THAT WERE THEIR SOURCE. MEANWHILE, THE 'CURIOSITIES' DISPLAYED ARE ACTUAL SPECIES, DEPENDANT ON THE TREES FOR SURVIVAL."

INTERVIEW Meredith Yayanos

Can we talk a bit about your studies/schooling as a painter?

I have an art education, but I didn't start painting 'til after art school, on my own.

When I began, I knew how I wanted my paintings to look – a sort of Surrealist/Northern Renaissance mix – but I didn't know how to paint. So I would sweat out a painting and it would take me months. Ninety percent of the time, painting was a laborious, punishing exercise; really hard work. In 2004, doing some research on the internet, I found out about Philip Rubinov-Jacobson's Austrian seminar in the Mische technique. This is a 15th century technique developed by the Flemish Masters, the same ones I was trying to emulate, using alternating layers of white egg tempera and oil glazes. I rushed to sign up, and I'm so grateful to have had the chance. This is the way I make every painting now. Naturally, large paintings still take months, but the work is much easier and more enjoyable now. I don't think the method would be optimal for every painter, because it works best with careful drawing and planning, but it is certainly the one for me.

What attracted you specifically to the Northern Renaissance school?

I could give you the academic answer, but I am going to give you the honest answer, which is really silly. I was looking at the way they painted nudes, very idealized, with a tiny top, long spindly legs, and big bloated bellies.



Clockwise from top left, four compositions in oil and egg tempera on panels: **Redwood Cabinet**, 2008 (24 x 32.5 in), **Essentia Exaltata**, 2006 (9 x 12 in), **Specimen Cabinet**, 2008 (12 x 16 in), **Resurrection**, 2008 (16.75 x 24 in)

I thought, "That's me with PMS!" The fact that their iconic female figure resembles mine when my self-esteem is lowest, somehow was an invitation to investigate these paintings further, and I also marveled at the details and the drapery. These painters' minds worked in the same way my mind works. It was recognition.

There's such loving attention to detail in all of your work, down to the very last drop of dew on a flower petal, a cabinet's grain, the hair on a tarantula's leg. Many of the pieces in this recent Waldkammer series are quite large. I feel like I'm viewing, not months, but years worth of hard work here. It's breathtaking. It also looks like a rather formidable physical and mental endurance test! How do you keep your eyeballs from falling out of your head?

First of all, thank you, Mer. I am so glad you've gotten to see the works in person. It was a push to get these paintings done. For the final six months I worked seven days a week. Regular exercise was crucial. I decided it was more important to go running regularly, than to have a day off. I also tried to do things in batches – all the drawings, all the underpaintings, etcetera, in order to develop the body of work as a whole, and keep myself from getting bogged down on any single painting. But I would be lying if

I didn't admit there were many hours wasted staring at a panel, trying to motivate myself to do the next task.

I think my gallerist Yasha Young was a great assistance, here. Knowing that

the show was coming, knowing that she had made an investment in my work, and that I wasn't just working for my success alone now, was a great incentive. I'm sure you find the same thing true with yourself and the other *Coilhouse* women, since a magazine is also a giant undertaking. If you want to make impossible things happen, the way to do it is to commit to them and to involve others in that commitment. Then you can move mountains.

Or die trying! Do any of your body parts ever go numb?
My hand did, at the end! But I bought a wrist brace for it.

Do you ever hit either a physical or a mental wall and just go "AAAAGH"?

All the time! Several times a day, probably!

How do you work through it?

I have to talk myself out of it. My favorite recent tactic is to remind myself, when there is a challenge, that these are the moments when we are most alive – when we are pushing for something beyond our capabilities and comfort zone. That's all the "wall" is. It is the same for an athlete or indeed for anybody. To grope through that wall is to reach into aliveness and growth. But I also have to give myself permission (when



THE EYE: a flip book made by the artist at a very precocious six years of age.

“WE ARE MOST ALIVE WHEN WE ARE PUSHING FOR SOMETHING BEYOND OUR CAPABILITIES AND COMFORT ZONE.”



ROYAL PASTIME, 2007 (6 x 7.25 inches, not including frame)

"What can I say. I was inspired to create this painting upon learning how Karl Rove spent his first day of retirement: hunting doves. I thought, if the symbolism isn't too obvious for him, well..."

that tactic just doesn't work) to do something that may not be the best anyone has ever done, but is what I can manage at that moment. There will be other paintings.

Again in keeping with the Flemish masters, as well as the Medieval Alchemists, you'll often make very careful, conscious symbolic choices. As opposed to merely suggesting something with broad strokes, you render your allegories explicitly. Would you call yourself a classicist? A perfectionist? A control freak? [laughter]

I am probably all three, but I just know that that's how my art comes out. All my creativity seems to come out through this narrow aperture of highly detailed and specific imagery. Perhaps I'm too literal sometimes. At one point I went so far as to write captions for my paintings, and a friend told me, in essence, "you have to leave something for the viewer to bring to the experience!" And she was so right.

This whole issue is demonstrated perfectly at the Frick Museum here in New York, where perhaps my favorite painting of all time, Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, hangs directly next to a Flemish Renaissance painting... a Van der Weyden, I think. As you know, my paintings more resemble the Van der Weyden – full of information – but the Rembrandt blows me away. The background is this giant murk of brown tar with only a few hints of landscape. But in trying to discern that environment, you become part of it. It is a collaborative magic between the painter and the viewer. I don't know if it is something I can ever achieve, but I am inspired and humbled by it.

There's an edge of surrealism to your work as well. So many scrumptious mutants, monsters, angels... How much of your work springs from the subconscious, from visions or dreams?

I love the Surrealists, but they probably wouldn't have approved of my process, which is less "automatic" or instinctive than theirs! I typically approach a painting intellectually, sometimes even writing down what I want to say, and then envisioning how best to express that visually. I make use of all those angels

"THE WHOLE DIY PUNK ETHIC WAS AN INCREDIBLY EMPOWERING CONTEXT IN WHICH TO EXIST. I WISH EVERY YOUNG PERSON COULD HAVE AN EXPERIENCE LIKE THAT."



INVASIVE SPECIES I, 2008 (12 x 15.5 in). Oil and egg tempera on panel

and monsters as convenient conveyers of meaning, though my meanings are not always those that are determined in the iconography of history. I like to borrow those meanings and then play with them.

Any contemporaries whose work you particularly enjoy, or relate to?

I love the work of Julie Heffernan, Odd Nerdrum, and of my friend Benjamin Vierling, who you know painted the Joanna Newsom portrait for *Ys*. He works in the same oil/egg tempera technique I use. There are so many artists I like it would be hard to list them all, but those are three at the top.

"Pop Surrealism" is a label I see being slapped down on a lot of very disparate bodies of work. If someone ever slapped it on yours, I might squeal indignantly and peel it right off again! I love how difficult it is to properly classify your work in a modern context. Then again, the less easily pigeonholed you are, the more press opportunities you may miss. Do you ever feel like the odd one out? Do you care about stuff like that? I know the "message" behind your work is important to you, but are you a populist?

Oh, this is a big one... I am definitely a populist in that I think art should have an effect on people, and an effect on culture, while still being the artist's truest expression. I am frankly disgusted with how much art out there has nothing to say, and offers no connection to the viewer whatsoever. This comes from an exploration that was perfectly laudable during the last century, when artists were concerned



MADELINE VON FOERSTER in her Greenpoint, Brooklyn studio (photo by Andrew Kist). She's seated next to her epic painting *Amazon Cabinet*, which was recently held by customs in Frankfurt, Germany until security could verify that the five-foot tall *Waldkammer* work had indeed been painted by a young American artist, and not by a 16th century Old Master.

Madeline's a hubble lass and she'll probably blush when she reads this, but I must add that in addition to being a phenomenal artist, the woman's a five-alarm stunner who consistently dresses her tall, willowy frame to the nines. "I have a lot of fun with clothes because – hey, why not? You have to get dressed anyway! I have gotten some great things – and thrown away a ton of money on crap – from Ebay. Sometimes I invent weird search terms that define a particular mood and see what comes up. I would say my biggest fashion secret is to not be afraid to look like a total idiot at least half of the time. And that's probably a good rule of thumb for the rest of life, too."

with exploding and dismantling everything that had come before. But it has reached a point of alienation and disingenuousness. Instead of being a gift from the artist to the world, most art now is a trick the artist is playing on the world. Of course, in the end the ultimate butt of this joke is artists themselves, because while society has found other avenues to bring beauty, and meaning into life – music, movies, blogs, etc. – contemporary art has little to no relevance.

I have absolutely no idea if I can have any effect on this sad state of affairs, but that has to be my goal. My intention is not to fit in, but to expand the envelope, to broaden the discussion. Pop Surrealism has made huge strides in this area simply by making art that people actually like to look at!

You were a feisty punk rock activist in your teens, making stencil art advocating for social reform and animal rights that you wheatpasted up all over town...

Yes, I was a founding member of a punk artist collective in the S.F. Bay Area. We made wheatpaste and stencil art, and also art for protests, like a giant three-headed puppet representing Columbus, Uncle Sam, and the Pope, for the 1992 Columbus Day celebrations. Fun stuff. What was so amazing about that period was that anyone could make a zine, or organize an event, or start a band and make a 7", and go on tour without any money. The whole DIY punk ethic was an incredibly empowering context in which to exist. I wish every young person could have an experience like that.

Were you a bookworm child? A constant scribbler? Did your family encourage you to pursue art?

Yes, I was both: bookworm and constant scribbler. My family didn't cultivate my art with classes or lessons, but they did make sure I always had plenty of art supplies, and they were incredibly supportive. The best thing they ever did for me was to raise me without TV. I would urge every parent out there to throw away your television set and let your kid find other things to do. How could I have developed the patience and creativity necessary to make my paintings, with that kind of instant-gratification entertainment always on hand? I still don't watch TV. Nothing on TV, I think, could possibly be worth what people give up to ingest it. I'm not saying it isn't ever good; I'm saying it isn't worth the sacrifice of our precious time and brains. I rent movies when I have time – which is seldom – because film can be a magnificent art form, but my set has no antenna or cable.

Although your adult work's grown far subtler over the years, its symbolism continues to reflect your deep concern for the planet and its inhabitants. Can you remember early instances of this compassion/compulsion to help your fellow creatures?

I was always a terrible softy, and always passionately concerned with fairness and with the suffering of others. I used to sleep teetering on the very edge of my bed, my mattress almost completely occupied with stuffed animals. Every one of them had to come to bed with me, every night, because I couldn't bear hurting the feelings of the ones who were excluded. I really believed my animals and dolls were sentient, for a long time. Every child inherently loves animals, so I think I was just normal in that regard. It is a love which has stuck with me. I was lucky to be exposed to ideas of environmentalism and vegetarianism when I was young, and took to those notions.

I know you participated in the spay-and-release program for stray Brooklyn cats for quite a while. Care to talk a bit about your experience with that?

Thanks for asking! For anyone who is agonized by the sight of feral cats in your neighborhood, there is something you can do. It is easy and absolutely worthwhile. I started feeding two starving feral cats near my studio, one of whom was pregnant. I went to a three hour training session with Neighborhood Cats, a great group here in New York. They explained how to rent traps, which I did, and they loaned me a cage for the kittens (who had been born in the meantime). I trapped the whole family, and took the adults to the vet to be spayed

and vaccinated. The kittens I kept at home in the cage, petting them every day, till they were tame enough to be adopted (adult feral cats can almost never be domesticated, but with the kittens it's usually possible, and really fun). The sad part was that a few weeks after the adult cats were released, they disappeared, their food dishes full. Feral cats will almost never leave their territory voluntarily, so I think they must have eaten rat poison or been otherwise killed. It was a very sad end to what had been a rewarding and wonderful experience.

Not too long ago, you showed a rather bleak series of paintings inspired by life in wartime. As this magazine goes to print, the Bush administration is packing up. On January 20th, we'll have President Obama in the White House. How are you feeling about what's happened?

The state that the world is now in only demonstrates the putrid greed, waste, ignorance, and death-worshipping tendencies of the last U.S. administration, and to various extents, the rest of the American government. I have high hopes for Obama, but I don't know if any one elected president could enact the kind of changes really necessary to stop catastrophic global warming, which is a much bigger long-term concern than either war or the economy.

Even your darker, more brooding paintings are imbued with light and hope. I'm thinking specifically of *The Dodo Egg*, *The Promise*, the mandrill *Mother and Child*. In certain cases – for instance *Entitlement* and *Royal Pastime*, which are very grim – the hope still remains because you have rendered the slain dove and that menacing crown of swords with such painstaking care. They are beautifully sad/frightening. I'd like to think that where there is attention to beauty, there is always hope. How do you stay hopeful?

This is a great question. I am incredibly pessimistic about the future of this earth. As E.O. Wilson describes, we are hurtling towards "The Age of



ENTITLEMENT, 2007 (6 x 7.25 inches, not including frame) "Why is authority so often linked with war and violence? Some leaders see waging war as inextricable from and synonymous with leadership. This has been true throughout human history. Isn't it time for a new paradigm of leadership?"

"AS E.O. WILSON DESCRIBES, WE ARE HURTLING TOWARDS "THE AGE OF LONELINESS," THE COMING TIME WHEN HALF OF THE WORLD'S SPECIES WILL BE EXTINCT, AND ALL THE MAGNIFICENT WILDERNESSES DENUDED AND TORN. TILL MY DYING BREATH I WILL RAGE AND FIGHT AGAINST THAT FUTURE, BUT I AM ONLY ONE PERSON."



THE DODO EGG, 2007 (5.5 x 7 inches, not including frame)

Loneliness," the coming time when half of the world's species will be extinct, and all the magnificent wildernesses denuded and torn. Till my dying breath I will rage and fight against that future, but I am only one person and it is definitely swimming against the tide. Whatever I am personally able to do will not significantly decrease the likelihood of that outcome. However, I have been given this gift of life, and I believe it is the only one I will get. Therefore, I am greedy for such experiences as love, happiness, and hope. And that is how I choose to live my life. It is a choice, because even as there is always infinite cause for despair and regret, there is infinite possibility for grace, even bliss. One cause for hope is, I am far from the only person who is outraged about the treatment of the planet. Sometimes cultural evolution can occur at a rapid pace – look at women's rights – even when humans retain the same selfish and industriously destructive DNA we've always had. America is currently in the throes of an epiphany: that our profligate lifestyle has been a spending spree made on unsustainably borrowed credit. Hopefully we will figure out that it has been paid for with unsustainably borrowed planetary resources, too. Things are very bad, and there is not much time, but there is still hope.

Any thoughts on taking personal responsibility as an artist? As a human being? As a living being, period?

In a way, the crisis is great enough that there is less need for categories. It's more like, "All hands on deck!" Everyone can figure out for themselves what gifts they can bring to the table, but then they need to bring them. Seriously, we need all of you. The world needs all of you. And I don't care whether we're talking about fighting poverty, war, AIDS, deforestation, or just about spending more time with each other, hiking to the top of that hill you can see from your window, or reading that book you love in the original French, like you always wanted to do. Turn off your television and do it.



CABINET FOR A SPOTTED OWL, 2008 (9 x 12 inches) Ink Drawing

The advent of the internet and the nearly non-existent gestation period for creative work before it's commoditized has definitely changed the way we bohos live and work, think and socialize. I worry that with all of this pixelated material instantly at our fingertips, we're losing appreciation for craft, detail, depth, tangibility. We want it all and we want it now, and damn the consequences. Do you think alternative culture as we once defined it is endangered? Extinct?

This is the Great Investigation of your magazine and I applaud you for it. Things have definitely changed... we have gone from zines to blogs, from homemade cassettes to downloads, and I could romanticize the past and insist those things were better, but who knows?

In the course of my life I've waded through a wide swath of alternative culture – falling in love with goth, industrial, punk, crust, black metal, neo-folk, etc. There were often mileposts on this journey when something dear to my heart appeared in peril of being “co-opted,” and taken away from me forever. Somehow this always failed to ruin my life the way I predicted it would. But I guess it is an occupational hazard. Those in a position to make money from these things will forever come parasitizing after our energy and creativity. If all we give them, and all they can “steal” from us, are the very ideas and values that are needed in the culture at large, I say leave that barn unlocked and the stable door open wide! But I am not in favor of “selling out,” if it means diluting your vision or making it “palatable” to the masses. I say, convert the masses, not the message.



IN THE GARDEN, 2002 [48 x 72 inches]