



Cat Clifford
FALL

11.15.2007-1.5.2008



Cat Clifford **Fall**

essay by Sara Callahan
interview by Billy Howard

CAT CLIFFORD RESUME

EDUCATION

- 2003 MFA Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist Univ., Dallas, TX
- 2000 Painting: University of Washington
- 1998 BA University of Montana, Missoula, MT
- 1997 University of Cape Town, South Africa, Art and Social Change

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 Contested Ground, Museum of Arts and Culture, Spokane, WA (forthcoming)
- 2007 Fall, Howard House Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA
Nocturnes, Boise Art Museum - Boise, ID (4 person show)
Drawn, Archer Gallery, Clark College, Vancouver, WA
5 x 7, Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin, TX
Rural Vernacular, SPACE, Portland, ME
People + Place, Seattle Portable Works, Seattle Municipal Tower
Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 2006 Wired Forest, Kirkland Arts Center, Kirkland, WA
And Deer and Trees and Things: Videos by Cat Clifford, Henry Art Gallery ,
Seattle, WA
Paper Trails, Howard House, Seattle, WA
Grown Accustomed, Crawl Space, Seattle, WA
New American Talent: 21, Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin, TX
- 2005 Deer Observations & Other Stories of Place, 4Culture, Seattle, WA (solo)
Nocturnes, SOIL Gallery, Seattle, WA (catalogue)
Wish!, The Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX (catalogue)
- 2004 Constructions & Architecture, The Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dal
las, TX (catalogue)
New American Talent 19, Arthouse at the Jones Center for Contemporary
Art, Austin, TX traveling exhibition until 2006, catalogue)
Sense of Place, The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, CO
- 2003 Film Screening To Walk Like a Deer, Jentel Foundation, Banner, WY
Master's Thesis, Pollock Gallery, SMU, Dallas, TX
- 2002 Taos Revisited, Doolin Gallery, SMU, Dallas, TX
Imaging the Landscape, Fort Burgwin Research Ctr, Ranchos de Taos,
NM
Cat Clifford: These Things Happen on my Farm, Doolin Gallery, SMU,
Dallas, TX
- 1998 Cat Clifford: New Works, Crystal Theatre, Missoula, MT

SELECTED AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2006 Artist Trust/Washington State Arts Commission Fellowship
- 2005 4Culture Awarded Exhibition
- 2004 Betty Bowen Artist Award Finalist Prize
- 2003 Jentel Artist Fellowship, Banner, WY



If but only for a moment I was there (video still), 2007, 3 channel digital video, 3 lcd panels on wood shelves

There is simplicity in Clifford's attitude that makes her work resist too much pedantic analysis and dissection. The lyricism with which she interacts with her environment would perhaps best be explored in a haiku or a short story. But I am no haiku poet or short story writer, so I will have to make do with the obtuse tools available to me. I had intended to write that Cat Clifford's work takes place at the intersection where three roads meet: memory, time, and the notion of home. But even typing that makes me feel as though I am doing the work injustice; art that is centered around the genuine and the honest is hard to talk about, as almost everything I say feels somewhat pre-fab and insufficient. Words are sometimes very difficult to use, no matter how well trained we are in using them. At times they are simply not enough.

Memory.

Personal memory, like personal geography is not linear. It folds back on itself, takes irrational detours, leaves out huge important events, and gets stuck on other seemingly insignificant details. Clifford's work raises questions about how memory works, what we remember and why, and whether objects have memory. The trace that is left deep within us when we experience something is made visible in Clifford's drawings where each act is drawn, carved away, and redrawn. The paper carries with it its own history, and the sky carries with it the trace of every movement of the bird's flapping wings. A sheet, falling slowly to the ground has each and every fold and movement engraved in its surface like shadows of a past memory. Mundane events are re-remembered, re-created, and re-imagined.

Clifford has, for many years now, obsessed about a particular house in Texas where she spent a great deal of time thinking and writing years ago. The most striking thing about the house was the linen insulation that cascaded down from the ceiling, long white strips of fabric flowing in the breeze let in by the cracked windows. This summer, Clifford finally made her way back to Texas only to discover that the fabric was gone and that the beautiful decay of the building was interrupted by stacks of old discarded household appliances. Rusting refrigerators and stoves prevented the happy reunion of past and present, memory and reality. But the artist, like the child, can remake the world to fit her own needs and desires, and consequently Clifford went back to the house of her memory and drew it. The white fabric flows in the wind and a white sheet falls on a pile of rubble. And a memory is remade, held on to for just a little while longer, and shared with us.

The disappointment and frustration at the failure and fragility of memory, and the desire for something, anything, to remain, inspired Clifford run wild in the tall grass outside the building, dancing, jumping, and falling. In *If but only for a moment* I was there one of the three monitors shows the jerky and awkward mistakes from that un-choreographed dance. It is the failures of the failure, the outtakes of the outtake. Here as in all her work, the simplest of actions becomes the most poetic of gestures. Clifford's performances are all about being in the moment, noticing that which has been forgotten, discarded and allowed to decay. And the very act of noticing restores dignity to the objects and landscapes that are there, right in front of our eyes, decaying and falling apart. Clifford sits like a chair, falls like a fence; she walks like the deer, and she retraces the steps of an imagined antelope. Her body is, in a sense, every body, every object, and it holds within it the history of all that which came before. In *Two Chairs* Clifford enters another old house, sees a fallen chair in a corner and sits down in the middle of the room, chair like, for a moment before walking up to the chair and picking it up. No one remembers the chair falling, no one was there, so Clifford re-enacts it and a new memory is created. Just like that.



My House Remains: The Flat Tops (video still), 2007, 7 ink on carved paper drawings, wood stool, video projector, digital video

Remembrance is the most solitary of acts. Memories cannot ever really be shared (with) other people. They are ours alone, and we must bear them alone, but we can perhaps share the idea of memory, of how we remember, and Clifford's work opens up that possibility.

I realize as I write this that my neat division into three thematic parts is already starting to disintegrate; time, memory, and home are already seeping into one another. But I figure that might be ok; Clifford, after all is wearing drawings, drawing photographs, and animating live videos. Borders are fluid. And yes, a haiku would be so much better...

Time

I see Clifford's work as serious play; personalizing the world and making it her own. She walks up to a fence and wishes it would fall, it would be beautiful. So she makes it fall by drawing it. She wonders what flight would feel like, so she draws it, each movement of the wings, painstakingly rendered, carved away, and redrawn until she has experienced flying. Time is of course also the basis of music, and Clifford's work is intensely rhythmical, and it is as though Clifford is conducting a visual orchestra of movement, improvised beats, and reverberating echoes.

There are many different time scales in Fall: Ecological time with the ebb and

flow of erosion, forest fires, re-growth; Animal time, with birds flying, antelopes walking; Industrial time, with the regularity of the machine, and way the frail body mimics its every move. The machine with its bolts and steel arms is in another time frame than the muscle tissue and bone of the body struggling to keep up. Personal time is of course there too with its web of memories and emotions.

And then we have the ruins, the visible passage of time, the houses decaying, the ephemeral, the transitory and momentary. Bird tracks on the snow. Landscapes on the verge of being forever altered by oil and gas exploration. Walter Benjamin once wrote that "allegories are in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things", a statement which is feel is very relevant to Clifford's work.

Home

This year, for the first time there are more people living in cities than in the countryside, and our own temporary geographies are more fluid and ephemeral than ever before. The very idea of a stable, unchanging home has become somewhat absurd, remote and wild landscape is an idea only. Oil companies are frantically looking for resources in the most remote areas, and tribes in the most distant parts of the Amazonian jungle drink coca cola as their plants are harvested by pharmaceutical companies. In that state of change, of constant development and rampant change, we begin to feel at home in constant movement and uncertainty.

The fact that Clifford's performances take place in many different locations; Wyoming, Colorado, Los Angeles, Vashon Island, or Texas, is also worth noting. Clifford has her own



The interior was like an Eva Hesse, falling, 2007, 2 ink on carved paper drawings, 1 shelf drawing, 1 lcd and dvd

very personal connections to all of these places, and in a sense, the actual geographical location is somewhat irrelevant. When watching *If* but only for a moment I was there we assume that the three videos are filmed in the same place, and the complexity of the notion of home is further expanded as we realize that they are not. In one of the three screens Clifford is perched on a pole, precariously balancing at an angle, making a visual link from the building to the ground. Her body is crucial in this process of exploring the notion of home and in grounding her connection from the home to earth. In *My House Remains: The Flat Tops* she dons her drawings of her family homestead in Wyoming while sitting in the snow in Colorado - the drawings pinned to her clothes like a second skin. The works in *Fall* are all linked together by Cat's personal geography, and act as her mnemonic road map of the United States. Home is a complex thing, not tied to a particular place but rather made up of a multi-layered, intensely personal and genuine interaction with a location, object or even, idea. And it is in a constant state of flux.



The interior was like an Eva Hesse, *falling*, 2007, 2 ink on carved paper drawings, 1 shelf drawing, 1 lcd and dvd



My House Remains (Flat top meadow), 2007, lambda print, 10" 15", edition 1/3



If but only for a moment I was there (video still), 2007, 3 channel digital video, 3 lcd panels on wood shelves



I wish these things would happen; they'd be beautiful (video still), 2007, 6 ink on carved paper drawings, 1 lcd and dvd with sound

Billy Howard Interview with Cat Clifford, October 25, 2007

Billy Howard: I would like to start with talking a bit about your relationship to nature and architecture, and how that relates to your latest body of work.

Cat Clifford: I like to be outside as much as possible. I spend a lot of time hiking or just hanging out in remote places. I am also interested in the structures that I encounter in rural landscapes. The histories and stories of these places, whether real or of my own making, are where I find inspiration for my own internal dialogue. It is in that dialogue that my work has its roots. My process involves going to a place and hanging out. Recently while in these places a certain action strikes me. I end up performing that and recording it with my camera. In case of *Work*, I came across these rigs and felt that I needed to move like them in order to understand this place. Moving like them connected me to this particular place and gave me time to think about my (and man's) connection to the earth in a real way. This summer my family and I drove down to Texas, and we drove back through northwestern Colorado and southwestern Wyoming. Later in the summer we drove to LA. In all of these places we saw oil rigs. The histories of these places are similar although the time lines are obviously different.

BH: Let's go back to the very beginning. Tell me a bit about how you came to do this kind of work?

CC: I went to graduate school as a painter. I took painting extremely seriously and



Two Chairs (video still), 2007

approached it in a very academic way. After my first semester I had had enough of painting and started taking creating writing classes. Finally things became fun again. I reexamined my ideas of what art was, and I started thinking a lot about my childhood. I grew up outside of Boston, our house was on a dirt road, surrounded by woods and small farms. When I got a little bit older I started to go to a ranch camp in Wyoming. I essentially spent my summers backpacking and riding. That was the first place that I felt that I really fit in.

It struck me that art didn't have to be made in the studio and writing didn't have to happen at a desk. I started going out to rural areas in Texas and trespassing into abandoned homes as part of my process in creative writing. I would draw the structures and record myself talking about the characters who lived in these places. Back in my studio I built sets where those character's stories could unfold. It all began to come together. I started making prints for the first time in my life. I came up with these three characters: Nan, an 80 year old woman who was divining for water; Annabelle, graduate archeology student; and Emily, a smokejumper. I would go out and do a scene as those people, a short private performance. After the performance I would cut a plate based on that scene. After printing it, I would scrape and burnish the plate and go back out and do another scene, and make another print from the same plate. The history of what had come before was always visible. These plates got me thinking about time and soon I started making videos and animations. I didn't have an epiphany one morning, it was all discovered through work. And that is the way everything is for me; I never go out with a plan of what I am going to do, I just go and hang out and see what happens.

BH: There is a playfulness and joy in the work that reminds me of Straight Photography where you try to remove yourself from taking a particular view, which allows you to reveal something even greater. Your acts seem really simple but they are also very

revealing about time and place, and the change that is inevitable.

CC: I need to keep things simple. The minute that I start to get clever or fancy things fall apart. They lose that sincerity I am looking for. My internal dialogue is complex. I have a difficult time talking about what I am thinking but I can say what I mean visually.

The house that you see in *Two Chairs* is a house that I used to go to when I was in graduate school. This summer I went back there, and *Two Chairs* is the result of that trip. In the video on the right I set my camera up outside and started to explore. I thought that I was going to climb into the house, but something totally different happened. I saw a chair on the ground, picked it up, and sat down in it for a while. The other video shows me inside the house. I walk over to a fallen chair, and sit down like the chair. The two videos play simultaneously, showing the two chairs, both having fallen down, and I am just caring for them and when I leave hopefully they will stay up and welcome someone else to sit. I am connecting myself to the history of that place, through these actions. The armchair that is inside the house, I remember sitting in it when I was in graduate school, and then of course it was standing up - so I am wondering what happened to it? There is more there but I am not ready to dissect it yet as I am still in the midst of this work and I don't want it to lose its magic.

BH: So these objects have memories, and by acting with them, you are recreating some of their histories?

CC: Yes, I am trying to connect with the history of that place. In *House Remains: The Flat Tops*, the tracks in the snow were made with a cutout bird I drew. Other birds have been there in the past but this time it was my bird. I was making the action, an action that has occurred many times in the history of that place. The tracks are only going to be visible for a small bit of time, as soon as the wind blows or the snow melts, they will be gone. They are ephemeral. The house in *If but only for a moment* I was there may not be standing the next time I go to visit. I caught it at a particular moment. In that piece I have become part of its structure. And that video will be around for a long time. Next time that I get back there it's going to be very different.

BH: In *The House* was like an Eva Hesse, falling you chose to capture the sequence with the sheet as an animation rather than making a live video of it. Could you talk about that choice?

CC: I actually did make a live video of it, and I made the animation from watching that, so that I could understand how it felt. The live video wasn't nearly as important to me for some reason. Even though I had thrown up the sheet, making it move by drawing it connected me to it in a more participatory way. I got to hold on to it for a while longer. It's the same when I make a bird fly across the paper. It happens so fast in real life, but when you make it fly yourself it can take the whole day. It is poetic.

BH: Talk about *Home* - it seems to crystallize a lot of the themes present in the show.

CC: *Home*, which will be on view in the Project Space, is a slide show that consists of drawings of all the places where I've lived over the years, as well as a bit of writing about each place. For instance, talking about the house I lived in while in graduate



Work (video still), 2007, super 8 transfer to digital digital video

school, I say " what I remember most about here is the lump in the floor", just simple little things that are the first things to come to mind when I think about places I've lived. Toward the end of the piece I say " I wish I lived here" " or here", and there are two drawings of open spaces, the kind of spaces where I make a lot of my work but have never lived. I then say "they feel like home". All these places where I make my performances feel like home to me. There is something very familiar about them, the kind of place where you breathe deeper.

BH: This makes me think of the interconnectedness of everything. What affects the chair or the stump in one place affects something else in another place.

CC: Definitely. In the installation My House Remains: the Flat Tops, where I walk out into the snow with the drawing of the cabin on my back and then fall in the snow, the projector is standing on a stool that is made from a madrona tree that fell next to my studio on Vashon.



Installation view, 2007, Howard House, Seattle

artist | T R U S T Creation of this work was made possible in part by an Artist
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