



Emilie Lemakis photographs people wearing bunny masks, creates large drawings of flowers, and has made installations, one of which included a large number of empty wine bottles. She does it all, and does it well. SW!PE editor Peter J. Hoffmeister contacted her to discuss her diverse approach to making art.

**Peter J. Hoffmeister:** *You work in a wide range of media, but let's start by talking about your photographs. The "Bunny Series" and "Emilie Doppelganger: The Life of a Working Stiff" are captivating in a sort of unsettling way, like the films of David Lynch – and I don't think comparing them to film is far off, since they resemble film stills. For the "Emilie Doppelganger" photos, you created a doll to function as your double thereby extending your sculpture practice into your photography. I'm curious as to how you were you initially drawn to photography as a part of your artistic practice, and what it does for you that other ways of working cannot?*

**Emilie Lemakis:** Making photographs is an extension of my creative process. I have never taken a photo class or developed my own film; it all started when my grandfather gave me a Pentax K 1000 camera for my thirteenth birthday as a present. I took photos when I could all through my adolescence, which I think helped me in a time when I was unhappy and trying to find my way. I never felt lonely or bored while holding a camera. I think this early personal attachment is a reflection of how I'm still using my camera today. I'm not a very technical person, so I don't want to shoot with complicated cameras, and I'm not interested in taking photos of strangers unless of

course they are wearing a bunny mask or posing with Emilie D. The camera isolates a moment of who I am and what I'm doing, a ritualistic act, of which the photograph becomes evidence.

When I'm drawing or making sculpture in the studio the process is very different from my photos. I did go to school to learn more about art making. Studio work is much more isolating and I'm largely making my own rules while creating an image. Taking photos you have less control, it's more of a collaborate act. When taking pictures I don't feel a need to think about my past work like I do in my drawings and sculptures, it's roots are very different for me. The last picture I took has no past, and the next picture feels like anything is possible. This freedom and spontaneity generates emotions and ideas at a different pace.

**PH:** *What led to the development of Emilie Doppelganger?*

**EL:** I came up with the concept of Emilie D. after the SW!PE editors asked the artists for the second issue to consider their job as a subject for the work they would submit.

I wanted to do a self-portrait; I think wearing a uniform at the Met is almost like putting on a costume everyday. I didn't want to just take a photo of myself in my uniform or draw a conventional portrait. I thought about making a doll, like you would for a little kid's school assignment, with cardboard, yarn, and tempera



**Black-Eyed Susan (for Paul Klee),** Watercolor on paper, 2006

paint–and then photograph it. But I like to work large and found myself searching the internet for life-sized dolls or ideas on how to make one. The information on the internet ranged from kinky sites to innocent Halloween props. I then remembered the story about Oskar Kokoschka, whose work I loved as a student. His turbulent love for and breakup with Alma Mahler inspired him in desperation to commission a dressmaker to create a life-sized doll of her, to help him deal with his loss. However, it failed to heal him, and he later destroyed the doll by decapitating her in a drunken frenzy at a party.

I also watched a lot of videos by Paul McCarthy, another one of my favorite artists, whose work has a variety of props I looked at for technical and artistic clues. I very much like work that is humorous but with an edge, extreme or emotionally charged. These two artists, Kokoschka's story and McCarthy's performances, gave me ideas, but also support, in working in very new territory for me.



## "IT WAS LIKE ECHOING THE PROCESS OF A

I also have to mention that this is a collaborative project with my friend Nick, who took the photographs. His technical obsession with lighting transforms a scene. He also helps me get through the very difficult step of walking around in public with her; he is very relaxed when I'm very embarrassed. Emilie D. and I would be lost without him. Lastly, naming her was really hard. I wanted her to have a really traditional sounding name. Doppelganger, whether you know what it means or not, doesn't matter. It could be just a last name. I didn't want anything hip. Emilie's a bit old-fashioned.

**PH:** *I would say that your work is definitely humorous with an edge, there is a visual wit that is the cornerstone of your practice, and this is what ties everything together. Your drawings are great, and what is funny is that so many of them actually look like prints. When we were hanging the SW!PE show last year I loved the two Black-eyed*



Me and You, Digital print, 2011

*Susan drawings you brought so much I hung them next to my work. Even though it is the name of an actual type of flower, in the context of your work the name almost sounds ironic, since it sort of has violent undertones, as in giving someone a "black eye".*

**EL:** You're not the only one who has said my drawings look like prints. I like working in large flat and graphic handmade designs and patterns. I want the drawings to be imposing visually, and the flowers are no different.

But I never thought of black eyes. It's just the opposite in a way. When I was a child, I remember driving on some country road and there were Black-eyed Susans

## FLOWER GROWING IN SOIL."

growing wild along the side of the road. My father joked with my sister and I that the yellow and black flowers were named after my mother (her name is Suzy for short). So I always think of my mother when I see that flower.

That memory and a run in with a very large patch of Black-eyed Susans

many years later in a friend's garden were the beginning of using flowers in my work. I was then working on a now abandoned photo project of me wearing this little old lady's mask; I had Nick take my picture in front of the flowers. I really liked the image so I had the photo developed large, adhered to a shallow wooden box frame then proceeded to drill holes in the flower to inset electrical lights.



Me and You, Digital print, 2011



Me and You, Digital print, 2011

From that piece a host of flowers grew. The watercolors in the SW!PE show were all started by a small circle, then another, until all the small circles grew to a large overall image. It was like echoing the process of a flower growing in soil. This was followed by the piece "Red Eyed Blossom", which

was a stop motion video of the creation of a drawing from beginning to end. Next came a large erotic drawing called "Fuck Me Flower" with holes in all shapes and sizes. Then a sculpture of a barbell constructed out of wood decorated with flowers and drains. I designed a costume and made a video of me exercising with this very feminine barbell. The piece is called "Dumb Belle". My most recent flower, "New Mutations" is like a heavy metal death flower. The flower part is cut paper that I first covered with red splatters and drawn ink. The stem is painted to the wall so I'm



free to grow to whatever size of space I choose.

**PH:** *Is there any particular part of the MET that you find yourself looking at most? Since I work at night, I like to quietly sit on the Modern Art mezzanine and get completely lost in the paintings. They just put up a couple of nice Hockneys.*

**EL:** The mezzanine has some really great paintings; I like the new Hockney pool painting a lot. I think for me I'm looking at everything now. Surveying the objects from the beginning of civilization to present has broadened my understanding of what art is and opened my practice to new ideas. More recently I have been spending time with the really early artifacts in the Ancient Near East and Greek galleries. What they created is full of purpose, life, death and futility. The objects are very mysterious to me, like a secret I want to know about.

**PH:** *What are you working on now? Last time we spoke you said you were working on some bell drawings.*

**EL:** I like to work on several projects at a time so I have options when I go to the studio. I'm still working on the bells. I think of them more as poems than drawings. They are a kind of meditation on death and despair. I'm also finishing a quilt made of flattened beer cans, which is a companion to a spider web shaped piece I constructed out of beer caps and wire that hangs on the wall. Choosing the material for these pieces was inspired by folk art and the huge El Anatsui piece on the second floor of the MET's Modern art galleries. Lastly on the low-end art of things Nick and I are designing our annual holiday card. There is going to be a new addition to the family, Emilie D is going to have a baby. So I'm in the process of figuring out how to make a "mini-me" for our card.

Death, addiction and a birth - it sounds very depressing or silly, but it's life. As Louise Bourgeois says, "Art is a guarantee of sanity". I do believe in that. 🐞

