

COMPLEX

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Monica Canilao Discusses the DIY Mentality and Creating Art Inspired by Her Native American Heritage

BY [RHIANNON PLATT](#) JUL 31, 2014

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Welcome to *Art Provocateurs Week*, in collaboration with *Art Alliance*, where we interview artists who are a part of the Shepard Fairey-curated "The Provocateurs" exhibition during Lollapalooza. [Enter our contest](#) for a chance to win free tickets to the exhibition or buy them [here](#). The exhibition runs from July 31 to August 4 at Block 37 in Chicago.

Monica Canilao weaves cultural histories into her practice, especially in her most recent exhibition "Born from Ruins" at Subliminal Projects. For this solo exhibition, the artist explored the Japanese practice of shibari, or rope bondage, in striking monochromatic photographs. In previous exhibitions, Canilao has also examined her own history, including her familial relation to a Native American Princess. This year she's also continued reconstructing a house in Detroit, added monikers, wheatpastes, and a pair of protruding metal legs. In each project, these practices become transformed into endless media, including photography, woodwork, mixed media collages, and garments.

Outside of her solo projects, Canilao has collaborated with other artists, including Swoon, Doodles, and Jetsonorama. While creating with Swoon, she assisted in the construction of the *Swimming Cities of Serenissima*, a piece that Swoon reprised for her recent rotunda piece at the Brooklyn Museum. This month, to continue the exploration of her Native American roots, Monica participated in Jetsonorama's *Painted Desert Project* on Arizona's Navajo Nation. Partnering with Doodles/Nick Mann, she lent her carpentry knowledge to reconstruct a roadside stand previously painted by Mann, which had been destroyed in a fire. Including wood inlay with murals by Doodles, the stand recreated the family's livelihood, as well as making the stand a visual destination on the long stretch of road to the Grand Canyon.

Now, Monica has joined her long-time supporter Shepard Fairey for "The Provocateurs," a title befitting her outlook on life and her artistic practice.

Both decorative art and heritage play integral roles in your body of work. Does your family have heritage as craftspeople?

Everyone has such unique histories and experiences that shape who they are as people and how they move through the world. I think heritage is a super interesting subject to play with and use as a "jumping off point" to create stories from. I came from a family of musicians and artists. My father was a carpenter and my grandfather was an architect. I have always been an advocator of the DIY mentality and learning as many skills as I can.

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From "RESONANCE" exhibition / Image via Resonance

How did you progress creatively at the California College of Arts and Crafts during your BFA? Did you find the environment different than that of a traditional arts college?

While I was in school, I made an effort to take as many studio courses that allowed me access to tools, equipment, presses, and looms that I had not been able to use or had access to before. I used so much of my after class hours printing late into the night and making use of all the resources school had to offer. I got a lot out of playing with media I had never tried before and figuring out ways to utilize as many mediums as I could. At any point while I was in school, I found ways to shape the curriculum to what interested me the most. If I didn't like the assignment, I spoke with the teacher and often came up with a new one to replace it.

I was at CCAC during a particularly magical era, and my peers were all at the top of their games. They are all mostly still working artists to today. I made a lot of amazing connections while I was in school. I had not been to any other arts college, so I don't really have a comparison, but I was particularly taken with the caliber of old school teachers that were still working illustrators. They had a profound effect on building up a lot of my techniques.

Your most recent exhibition, "Born From Ruins," explored Shibari culture. Why did you choose to incorporate this practice as an influence?

I have been doing a lot of experimental collaborations this year using new people and new media. I make costumes for fun and combine them with my installations for performances with musicians (like with my friend Some at Art Basel Miami Beach). I had seen some friends of mine do an intimate Shibari performance in a small candle-lit structure and was incredibly moved by it, so I decided I wanted to do some kind of collaboration with them. I fell in love with the stunning lines that the ropes made during the Shibari performance and how powerful the energy was. Another mutual friend had wanted to do some kind of photo shoot collaboration with me, so we all joined forces and started this series of scenes using Shibari as a medium. It was really powerful having all of these amazing artists combine their skills to make this idea a very finished thing where we shot film and built specific sets for each scene. Now that our experimenting went well, we are going to continue this series on an even more elaborate level.

Shepard Fairey has been an avid supporter of yours for several years, from blog posts on OBEY to attending your gallery openings. How did your relationship begin?

I believe I first met Shepard in 2008 in London when I was doing a show with Swoon and David Ellis at Black Rat Press. A bunch of artists happened to be in town at the same time working on projects. Swoon and our posse would go out wheatpasting, and we kept running into Shepard and his gang. It was a fun time. We all went out together and thus a relationship started. Mutual friends making things.

What interested you about working with Shepard for "The Provocateurs" exhibition?

Shepard has always been super supportive, and I just had such an amazing time working with him and building my solo show at Subliminal Projects that it made so much sense to participate in "The Provocateurs" show, as well. I have so many amazing peers who are also in the show!

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Artemis / Image via Subliminal Projects



Vaunt & Sol / Image via Subliminal Projects

How will you be challenging viewers' expectations, fitting under the exhibition title as a "Provocateur?"

I have always been one to do what I want when I want. It seems as fitting a title as any considering the life I have been leading...living as free and as hard as I can.

How do you think exhibiting in a big group environment is different from that of a gallery setting when discussing cultural and outsider aesthetics, such as decorative arts, found objects, and Native American histories?

I think that people decorating themselves as a means to express themselves is great. It is unfortunate how intensely native cultures have specifically been commodified and commercialized as a hip means of decoration. But those lines are so hard to pinpoint, as so many cultures have different forms of headdresses and interesting styles. The model of the gallery is changing, and as an artist who works in so many different forms of media, I am just going to build the kind of installations that bring me happiness in whatever the circumstance. I have always used found materials and decoration in what I do, and will always do so.

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With the completion of your first solo exhibition in Los Angeles and this project with Fairey, do you have any other exciting projects on the horizon?

As soon as I returned to L.A. from my projects in Detroit, I uninstalled the exhibition, left, and have been building and painting as part of the **Painted Desert Project** on the Navajo Nations Reservation in Arizona. I recycled all of the scrap wood and hardware into that project. Now that I am finally home again, I am trying to play catch up from months of being away on back to back projects.

I will be starting a new series of works for a two-person show I have coming up in London in November with Ouite Pieski at **Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery**. The Shibari Series will be reconstructed for a show at The Armory. I have a lot of adventuring to catch up on in the Bay, as well as a collaborative mural on Valencia Street in San Francisco with Chip Thomasin August. I always have lots on my plate.



From "RESONANCE" exhibition / Image via Monica Canilao