



Monday, April 17, 2006

MULTIPLICITY SQUARED



Artist, Teacher, Writer, Web Designer
Julia Stoops: *Renaissance Woman*

New Zealand native and Portland-based, [Julia Stoops](#) is an multi-dimensional artist teaching in the **Intermedia Department** at [PNCA](#). Behind the scenes she has established a penchant for working with some of Portland's best known artists, designing websites and more. We had an opportunity to chat a while to dig a lil' deeper into what drives her daily creative ritual.

TJ Norris: Julia, how are you doing?

Julia Stoops: Really good thanks. :)

TJN: Quite good. And I am very excited to be able to chat with you as I am a big fan of your web work. Well, I'm probably most curious about how you got interested in web design in the first place. And if in some way, you see the work you do as using the same side of your brain as when you're painting. After all [Blue Mouse Monkey Design](#) is *hardworking websites for interesting people*. I like the concept behind the subtext.



JS: Wow. Big juicy questions. Well, I used to be not exactly a Luddite, but I wasn't attracted to computer technology. It looked hard, like math, and lacked an aesthetic draw. Then in 1999 I attended a lecture about new developments on the web, and I was blown away by what I saw. Visually I was intrigued by what were then innovations in animation and effects, but what was more profound was the realization that the web is a place to move through. We use standard spatial

metaphors to describe it, but the experience is actually something quite different, and very exciting. And the global nature of the web was attractive, too, along with the dissemination of knowledge and ideas outside of traditional institutions and controls. Inspired, I blithely set out to learn web design so I could jump on that bandwagon. Ha ha ha. I almost died, it was the hardest thing I've ever studied in my life. I wasn't wrong about the "like math" part.

Learning web design stretched my brain. I had to figure out ways of thinking that involved holding a lot of relationships in my head at one time while I worked through them. It's very different from making art, and very different from thinking about theory or philosophy or other liberal-artsy subjects. It was some time before the activity became easy enough that I could simultaneously make aesthetic decisions as I went along. And it's totally absorbing. I'm guessing it's an all-brain activity, because you're making decisions about colors, layout, shape, form, edges, narrative, theme, symbol, and so on, while also thinking about what it looks like over time with interactivity or animation, and how the visitor encounters it, what their possible and desired reactions and actions

will be, how to make sure those reactions and actions happen and not undesired ones, AND you have to build this experience both visually and in code. And you have to know how to make the code cross-browser and cross-platform compatible. So some aspects do feel similar to painting. -- Try this color. Nope. Try it a little darker. Nope. Stand back. Look at it from across the room (weird I know, since who looks at websites from across a room, but I do this when designing sometimes). Adjust it lighter. Move that circle over a quarter inch. -- Actually, it's more like collage than painting, but it's still about making formal aesthetic decisions. But then there's all this other activity happening to do with what you are building (and here it feels like sculpture or architecture) and that it is going to be a time-based experience for people. And that experience needs to be facilitated. Not controlled, but facilitated, because otherwise the visitor will just get confused or bored and jump to another website.

The *Hardworking Websites for Interesting People* comes from the sites really doing work for my clients. They don't just sit in cyberspace and look pretty, they actually help my clients with some aspect of their creative lives, usually by consolidating and streamlining their self-promotion efforts. And my clients are all really interesting people. I'm super lucky that way!

TJN: Touché! Where did the blue mouse name come from?

JS: Back in 1999 when I was new to this, I wanted a domain name. It was frustrating because everything I could think of was already taken. Around that time my husband had a dream about playing ball with a small creature that was a cross between a mouse and a monkey. I added blue because it sounds good, made a collage from actual mice and monkey photos, made a painting from that, and there she is, the *Blue Mouse Monkey*.

TJN: Can you say some about where you grew up and how you landed here in Portland?



JS: I was born in Western Samoa, grew up in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Washington D.C., where I studied at the [Corcoran College of Art](#). Went back to my native New Zealand for a few years, where I did another round of college, and met my husband **Thomas Martin**. Together we decided to try the Pacific Northwest. It was April 1994, and we bought a car and drove up from San Diego, camping along the way. Neither of us had been to the region, so we didn't know quite what to expect, or where we'd land. April is a good time to camp in California, but that's not the case for Oregon! We arrived in Eugene in the pouring rain, stayed a few days, decided it was too small a place to start out with nothing and no contacts. Thoroughly damp, we pushed on to Portland. I remember the approach on I-5, looking through the trees and across the river, and having this really hopeful excited feeling because all the trees made the place look friendly and loved. We decided to stay. And I'm very glad we landed here, it's the best city I've ever lived in.

TJN: I'm interested in your work as a painter. You are represented by [Alysia Duckler](#), right?

JS: I am an uneasy painter. I am not a purist and have always been interested in combined media, and I have done a number of installations in my time. I think of myself as an artist who makes images and spaces, and painting is the arena in which I have developed more skills than in say photography or printmaking. If I had any facility with sculptural things I'd love to be a sculptor, but I don't have a good intuitive grasp of the laws of physics. So it's just as well the internet came along because it's all immaterial and I don't have to worry about the things I build falling down and donking someone on the head. And for a few years I put more energy in to web projects and writing, but this spring I've had a renewed interest in working in the studio, and hope to exhibit a body of work in 2007.

TJN: It was such a pleasure to be a visitor to your *Hybrid Painting* class at PNCA. How did you develop that and what have you learned in the process of teaching it?



JS: It was wonderful to have you! That class is part of the Intermedia Department, rather than the Painting Department. It's an Intermedia response to making work that is informed by painting, but which tends to be off canvas and often away from paint. So it's all about experimentation, play, combining media, exploring content, and seeing how far you can stretch the idea of painting. Students work using their bodies in new ways. They explore working on multiple grounds (surfaces) new to them. They work with power tools as mark-making devices. They collaborate with thrift store paintings. There are a lot of projects that open doors for further exploration and development.

That course is relatively new, it's only the second time I've taught it. I'm better known for *Image/Text/Media*, which is a media studies course, and *Dialogue and Process*, which explores existential issues artists face. I also teach *Cyber Art*, which is web design for artists, and *Art and Philosophy*, among other things.

TJN: You keep your docket quite full it seems. I immediately noticed you have worked with a small group of those represented in this year's **Oregon Biennial** on various web projects. I really like the update in [David Eckard's](#) site and [Daniel Duford's](#) is one of my faves (a touch of [Flash](#) without unnecessary flash). The design is clean and simple, with just enough levity and interactivity. Can you say how it's been working with Eckard, [Emily Ginsburg](#), [Pat Boas](#) and others? How do you cultivate your clients?

JS: All those people you mention are also colleagues of mine at PNCA, and it's been fantastic working with them on their websites. A really satisfying part of this web gig is to be able to get to know someone's work, or in the case of my colleagues, get to know their work even better, and figure out the best way to showcase that work in the space of the web. It's about the person, who they are and how they want to appear to the world. It's about education, because I'm often educating clients about aspects of the web along the way. I love demystifying things for people, and I can totally relate to many artists' sense that the Internet is a mysterious place full of technologies they don't understand. I was like that once, and now I'm in the role of being the person who went over to that other side and came back and can now explain it in layman's (lay artists?) terms. It's not like I'm a super-expert about web technologies, I just know enough to make certain things happen and make them work and be inventive and creative with it. Despite the heavy presence of commercialization, the web is still a place of freedom of information and expression, and I want everyone to feel like they can be a part of that, and in their own way, a way that looks like them, not shoehorned into a standard blog like Flickr/Myspace/Google Videos type of format. Because how it looks is important to artists.

As for cultivating clients, so far it's all been word of mouth. I'm now getting clients in the spheres of writing and music and film-making, which is really exciting. The business is picking up fast, and every time I think I should do some active marketing, I don't get the time to organize it because another project lands on my plate! The impression I get is that creative people feel they can trust me to do right by them and their work. I know what it's like to be in their shoes, I know what it's like to put your work out there, all the questions and anxieties that come from that experience. My role is to guide people onto the web, creative people who don't have the knowledge or the time to acquire the knowledge to get themselves there. And because I work collaboratively with my clients, they don't lose control of the process. That's another thing important to creative people. When it's your work, you need to know the person handling it is going to take the time to understand what you want to say with it.

TJN: Those boxed free products always suffer from the hidden (and not so) corporate end goals and ads, etc. You really seem to help an artist showcase their work and break down the complexities of getting right to the core of the work.

And...Speaking of the **Oregon Biennial**... as a Biennial alum yourself, what's your response about the selectees for this year's Biennial as opposed to former years?

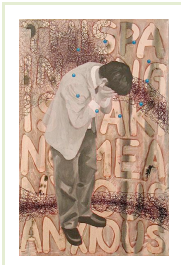
JS: It's good there is such a variety. Some of the selectees are a surprise, but then I'd be more surprised if [Jennifer Gately](#) selected exactly the same people I would have. Then I'd wonder if she was my long lost twin or something. Overall I think it's going to be a really interesting show and I'm looking forward to it. And I am super proud of my friends and clients who have work there!

TJN: Ditto, I think this year's version will be challenging to audiences and will not simply pacify the passive viewer. What's your current pet project?

JS: I'm writing a novel. And learning how to write as I go along. It's been a huge huge thing for me, to fall in love with writing out of the blue. I'd always been firmly grounded in the visual, never had any ambition to write, then bang, this story started spilling out of me in 2001 - a year of upheavals. The fantastic critique group I belong to has taught me so much. I just finished a website for them, too, called the [Intentional Ducati](#). A [short story](#) of mine is on that site, but it has nothing to do with the novel. The novel takes place in Portland during the year leading up to the invasion of Iraq. It's character driven, set against the background of what was happening in the news and on the streets during that time. It's where I've channeled my activism energies, while working out how to make the material accessible and inviting to a general audience.

TJN: Well that's a read and 1/2!

Do you see an aesthetic that can be described as distinctively Pacific Northwest? Are there trends that have emerged in your eye over the last handful of years? And if so, how would you visually describe it for anyone who may never have visited our neck o' the woods?



JS: I see trends manifest at PNCA, but they are as much likely to be generational, I think, as regional. There is a softness, a relative lack of "edge" in newer art around here, which I find emotionally refreshing, but socially insular. But of course as soon as I say that I can think of many counter-examples. There's so much pluralism in art, and concurrently, so much creative stuff happening outside of the artworld, like on the internet, that I don't think it makes much sense to talk about regional art trends, at least not separately from a discussion of emerging technologies, or generational zeitgeists, or social pressures. So a few people are painting intricate doiley-like flowers, or whatever. Those sorts of details pass by quickly. I am more interested in trends in behavior, regional as well as global, and wish I knew more about that. Like I heard Shanghai described as 'the new Prague', and that's really interesting. Ex-pats go there to write novels, and living is cheap and the city is overflowing with cultural excitement and innovation. So much is happening in so many places, and the Internet speeds up cross-pollination.

TJN: Hmmm. I'm not sure I was up on what the "old Prague" was all about. I guess I am overdue travel time to be quite honest.

What's your current guilty pleasure and your biggest pet peeve?

JS: Right now I'm looking around for a new guilty pleasure because I just used the last one all up. For a few months I was addicted to [DaVinci's Inquest](#), which plays nightly on **WGN**. I've seen all seven seasons now, barring a few missed eps. They're on some sort of ongoing rotation, so it's not too late for newbies catch them all! Hands down the best TV drama in a long time.

Pet peeve - or more like pet heartbreak: the corporate news media. And people who lack the will to challenge it. Media corporations have made a farce out of the original mission of the press,

which was to be a cornerstone of democracy, existing to enable the informed public participation in that democracy. The news media is the only private business protected by the Constitution, and media corporations have violated that trust. And so many people shrug their shoulders and say that's the way it is, as if it's a totalitarian state.

TJN: Never give up on finding your own voice within the threads of new media to breach the foibles of the majority. Vive La Revolution!

Parting words?

JS: It's been wonderful experience to respond to such interesting and thoughtful questions. On the rare occasions I get to talk about my work in any kind of public way it's an artist's talk, or I do a fiction reading. Thank you so much for the opportunity to blend several aspects of my life together in one discussion!

fin.

Copyright 2005 OregonLive.com. All Rights Reserved.