

The Strange Case of Shannon Bool



Shannon Bool, Gaza Zebra (1 Version), 2012

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The story of **Shannon Bool** is an interesting one. It's a story of a Canadian artist who had, until now, never exhibited in Canada -- too busy, as she was, living in Berlin, being purchased by **Charles Saatchi**, and exhibiting alongside such international artists as **Simon Fujiwara**, **Keren Cytter**, and **Cyprien Gaillard**. It's the tale of an artist less likely to be chosen for **MASS MoCA's "Oh, Canada"** survey (she wasn't) than to be shown in this summer's lauded international exhibition, "**Made in Germany - Zwei**" (she is). It is, arguably, a strangely itinerant story of success. Of course, the question worth asking, among

Canada's art world savants, is "where have we been, on this?" But it's more fulfilling to simply delight in our arrival at Bool's particular brand of strange and thought-provoking work; she has a few stories to tell of her own.

Daniel Faria is the savvy gallerist responsible for finally alighting Canada to Bool. Exhibiting the artist's first Canadian show at his self-named gallery, this July, he considers our previous blind-spot a simple matter of timing. "She wasn't in Canada that long, really," he says with a slight shrug. "She attended **Emily Carr Art + Design** but felt that Vancouver was too much of just one thing. Then she went to New York's **Cooper Union** for six months but quickly left for Germany. She's been there for over 12 years."

Faria is walking me through Bool's summer solo exhibition, titled "Patterns of Emancipation," as we discuss her unique trajectory. "She was getting a lot of recognition internationally. I guess no one [here] had reached out."

Faria did. "I had seen some of her paintings online, but they don't translate well - oil on silk, for instance, for instance doesn't communicate through the screen. But her German dealer, **Galerie Kadel Willborn**, was at **Basel Miami**, and I completely fell in love with her work there. I got in touch shortly thereafter."

We wind our way through Bool's impressive steel-cut sculptures, which are scaled to replicate the windows of a Berlin-based female prison. "Shannon had been preparing a wall drawing at the prison, working with the inmates, when she decided to produce, too, a work representative of her process -- a uniquely intimate one, in this case, as she developed personal relationships with her apprentices," Faria recalls. "She asked the prisoners for their most prized possessions: tobacco, chocolate, make-up; and in one case, a bath toy, belonging to the young child of an imprisoned mother (children under the age of 3 can stay with their mothers behind bars, in Germany)." Bool cast them in bronze. The window sculptures are ringed with the quiet personal sundries forming charms sparsely hung from their alloyed wrists. It is a work at once profound, anecdotal, formalist, melancholy, abstract, and entirely personal. "It is a portrait of the women, personalized and depersonalized," Faria remarks. "She is a formalist, here, but so elegant, so empathetic. She transcends our notion of what formalism can be."

Besides the sculptures, another story resides. Bool presents a large-scale diptych photogram of collaged transparencies featuring: donkeys donning zebra stripes, a patterned homage to the story of a Ghaza zoo, which, having lost its zebras, simply made do. Proving herself in yet another medium, the muddled mammals bear the traces of their scotch-taped stripes, humbled (as though donkeys had further to go) by their maker's hubris. Again, formal concerns -- surface treatment, context, line, analogue media, and reflexive design -- go anchored in

something far messier, narrative. Bool anchors the show in another story altogether, however, and one at once more difficult and more rewarding to thread loose. A carpet, titled "Casino Runner," spans the length of the opening wall, and spills out across the former autobody repair-shop floor.

Bool's been working on carpets since 2006. It began with her looking at Renaissance painting, and the differences between the Italian and the Northern Renaissance, between "the perspective- and spatially-focused south, and the north, where attention was placed on surface, decorative patterning, and sumptuous detail," Faria says. This led, strangely enough, to Bool's "producing carpets that reference British pubs," Faria reports, amused, "and it sounds like a strange leap, but you can see that it's not. She carried over this concern for cultural divides and exchange, hooking her interest in these pub carpets for their elaborate patterning (because you're either bored or you're drunk in those pubs, right?) and then branching out." Bool found an exceptional casino runner in Reno, at an art deco hotel called the Aztec Inn, which carried Mayan references in its décor. "And, again, she was interested in the dialogue that was happening between different cultures, and its reckoning in design." Bool appropriated the casino carpet pattern and skewed it slightly, so the perspective subtly shifts as the viewer scrolls the length. While her carpets are typically shown on the floor ("they're meant to be walked on and lived with"), this one seems to stand apart. Bool did a knot-by-knot drawing by hand, and then had traditional weavers in Anatolia, Turkey, hand-weave the carpet. "It's all natural plant dyes. This red is cochinita red, it's found in beetles in Latin America. And she tracked it down through the weavers, who'd traveled to find it, and continued this conversation between east and west, bringing certain influences and materials to bear," Faria remarks. The result reads like a palimpsest of ethnic and cultural routing, a history in pop.

A telling image, used for the gallery's exhibition invitation, shows three members of (one assumes) Bool's hand-weaving team, holding the carpet length-wise across, outside a Turkish abode. One man looks to the other, and the middle figure begins to return his gaze, as the third man goes partially obscured by the runner, a little shorter than the rest. Bool is nowhere to be seen, but one supposes she might be standing where we are, looking toward her crew, who hold up an object that, in a sense, looks elsewhere, too.

Luckily, Canada is finally looking at Bool. Her work rewards our acquaintance with storied treasures, and designs us round stories worth having waited for. Bool, despite being from 'from' us, is pulling us out, to elsewhere -- somewhere worth the wait.

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