



Zoë Sheehan Saldaña: The Artful Imposter

NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST Zoë Sheehan Saldaña was raised in Hamden, Connecticut, where, apart from some childhood experience teaching herself to cross-stitch from a kit, she hadn't given much thought to making art with fabric. She came to the big city by way of the MFA program at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York, and before that, Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, where Sheehan, like many students, took advantage of a unique campus program called The Art Rental. "It was run by the Allen Memorial Art Museum on campus," she recalls, "and it made works by lots of amazing artists available to students. We could rent a Picasso, a Renoir, or a Warhol at the beginning of the semester and just have it in our dorm room. Looking back, I loved the sense of access. The notion that art should be a part of everyday experience has stayed with me ever since."

These days, Sheehan is hard at work making art that is as highly committed to painstaking handcraft as it is to the free-wheeling, fine-art-for-everyone approach of her "rental" days on campus.

Take *Shoptopping* (2003–2006) for example, a series that Sheehan undertook while living in Vermont. She began the project by first purchasing a number of items from her local Walmart. Back in her studio, she set about carefully copying her purchases one by one, down to the last stitch. A woman's red gingham shirt; a lace trim tank top; three pairs of underwear; a pair of yoga pants. After Sheehan had refabricated the items to a T, she went back to Walmart and hung her versions on the racks—ostensibly for resale. Would some unsuspecting shopper, expecting a mass-produced blouse made in Taiwan, actually realize that she'd in fact purchased a one-of-a-kind Sheehan original? That's anyone's guess. In a move as humble as it was nervy, Sheehan even took the time to remove the manufacturer's labels and sew them back into her own work.

"I'm very interested in the artist as machine," says Sheehan, "our link to the sorts of patient, repetitious behaviors that society generally sees as something that machines 'do better.'" At a time when the market for contemporary art grows

ABOVE, LEFT: Life Jacket (Adult Size), 2009; coated and heat-sealed nylon, polyester webbing, thread, buckle, reflective tape, safety whistle, milkweed fluff; machine- and handstitched; 24" x 18" x 5". Edition of fourteen. *ABOVE, CENTER:* Ball of Twine, 2010; hemp fibers; homespun with a drop spindle; 2½" x 2" x 2". *ABOVE, RIGHT:* Paper Towels, 2009; handmade paper, embossed, folded; each 9" x 9¾" flat; 9" x 3¼" folded. Edition of 130. Created in collaboration with Steve Orlando at Dieu Donn  Papermill, New York. Photos by the artist.

ever more cynical and decadent, a project such as *Shoptopping* begs an important question: who determines an artwork's value?—its maker? its owner? the system? The focus is the same for Sheehan's newest series *Ersatz* (2007–ongoing) in which she turns her attention to ever-more prosaic objects. There are boxes of strikeable matches that Sheehan has whittled, one by one, from aspen she found near her country house; bright orange life jackets (they really float!) that she sewed and stuffed with milkweed she bought from a farmer in Illinois; a bundle of twine she made with a drop spindle from home-

spun hemp fiber. Recently, the artist even manufactured usable paper towels during a residency at Dieu Donne Papermill in New York using wood pulp that she later ran through a letterpress to get just the right texture. Each towel is a gorgeous handmade ringer for the original and sells for less than twenty bucks—a lot for a paper towel, yes, but a bargain for a real handmade work of art. Why rent, when you can own? 🍷

The artist's website is www.zoesheehan.com. To learn more about the Dieu Donne residency program, visit www.dieudonne.org. To learn more about Sheehan's handmade papermaking techniques, turn to the Creative Process article on page 24.

RIGHT: Faded Glory Ruched Shoulder Tank (China Red), 2003; clothing, hanger, photographic print, 30" x 40". *LEFT:* Original Walmart purchased item, *RIGHT:* re-created duplicate; machine- and handstitched.



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Nick Cave, SOUNDSUIT, 2009; human hair, fabric, metal armature; 8' x 36" x 18". Image courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), San Francisco, California. Photo: James Prinz.