

Artspace Conversations

July 2023

This summer, our outgoing Board Chair, Eryn Lidster sat down for a little tête-à-tête with exhibiting artist, Sarah Elise Hall. Below is their conversation.

EL: How are you? What's new?

SEH: Well, my nephews are in town. So today was a day spent looking for turtles by a marsh with a five year old and it was really fun.

EL: Did you find any?

SEH: Yes. One turtle and one incredibly bright green frog.

EL: A...painted turtle? Is that the right word?

SEH: No, I think it was a snapping turtle.

EL: They scare me a little bit.

SEH: The bigger ones scare me. They're totally like dinosaurs.

EL: Yeah, turtles and alligators. Rhino's make me think of dinosaurs, and...is it white rhinos that are soon to be extinct? So devastating.

SEH: Yeah, we could chat for hours about that. I tell you, my young nephews are super aware of the different upcoming mass extinctions. And they're worried that the penguins are going to become extinct because, you know, Antarctica is melting. It's very sad.

EL: Yeah... I'm thinking about your work now and you're kind of engaged with these things. Did you end up doing a lot of research as a part of your process? Can you sit with that for long? It's so heavy.

SEH: Yes, I spend a lot of time reading, but for some reason never while I'm making work. I have these periods in the studio where I'm really just in the visual part of my brain, kind of trying to figure out what makes sense spatially and with colour and material. When I'm not doing that, those are the periods where I just sink into books and do the research. I get pretty overwhelmed if I spend too much time reading about the state of, you know, our consumerist, capitalist world, and how much of a force it is and how impossible it seems to change directions. At a certain point, I just have to stop reading and then I start making stuff.

EL: You've said you're a process-based artist, that the process is a prominent aspect of the completed work, and you've kinda invented this process and set of rules. How did that start? What do the rules look like for you? And how do you find them?

SEH: I feel like it was pretty intuitive. Initially I was really bothered by the amount of plastic garbage I was seeing in my neighbourhood. You know, it's just everywhere, I was in an industrial neighbourhood in Brooklyn, and it was spilling out over the dumpsters. I started to work with the plastic waste because I wanted to find a way to express my concern with the issue, and honestly, I was also going through a period of being pretty broke. So I mean, to some extent I was working with the material that was available to me. So that's how it started. I was looking at what was bothering me in the environment and I was also trying to find a more economical way to produce work. And so I started experimenting, because when you're experimenting with garbage, you know, if it doesn't work, it doesn't matter. There's no pressure, right? There's nothing lost.

EL: Like you're not spending a fortune on paint.

SEH: Exactly! There you're like, every brushstroke matters! So that's kind of where it started. And then I just allowed myself to experiment for quite a while. The great thing about the studio I had in Brooklyn was how busy it was, and how many artists worked in the building. I started having these conversations with various artists who would pop into my studio. And I was encouraged by that. These experiments seemed to be generating interesting conversations about waste and the idea of fossilisation kind of came up. It seemed evident to, I guess, quite a few people. So, I was using the plastic waste as the mould, and I was casting with plaster, a super cheap material. I kept finding Tupperware containers and bins, so those are the forms I was first using. And then, after some time had passed and I had a little more cash flow, I thought it would be really interesting if I aligned the material I was using to make the relief sculptures with the geological materials fossils can be found in. And so that's when I decided to start using marble.

EL: You mentioned a few other things about marble in an earlier conversation.

SEH: Yes, I liked the connection between marble and limestone and their connection to fossils, but the material also has a connection to art history and sculpture such as Greek and Roman sculpture. These days it's also used as an industrial material in kitchen countertops and floors... very industrial, and the forms I work with are also industrial in nature. It's a material very densely layered with meaning and history. Yeah, so I sort of like these connections.

EL: Has it influenced your feelings around materials...do you find them more precious now? Or is that feeling of them not being precious maintained?

SEH: Hmm. In a way, it's less precious, because marble is strong, an inherently stronger material than plaster. And so it's less fragile, and perhaps less precious because I have to be less careful with it even though it's more expensive. But I think I tend to let go of preciousness when I'm in the studio in general, because for me that would be creatively crippling, being focused on cost of materials, mistakes and waste of studio resources. So I kind of put those concerns on the shelf.

EL: I think I could feel that when we were walking around, and you were touching things. This engagement, in the gallery space with the objects, I think, added to that in an interesting way.

SEH: Oh, that's interesting. Well, it's true, I'm sure that's not a typical thing. When you go through a gallery, you don't usually touch the work!

EL: I feel like the artist-run centre kind of space, tries to break the rules a little bit more. Is this the first time you've shown in an artist-run centre?

SEH: Yes, it's my first time. It's not my first time in a public gallery that's not commercially motivated, but it is my first time in an artist-run centre. Which is very cool.

EL: What are the differences for you, your experiences of commercial spaces and other public spaces and artist-run centres?

SEH: Well, I think the main thing is you don't have the same kind of pressure to create a finished product, that you can continue to experiment, and then failure can actually be part of the exhibition. I mean, I suppose you could do that in a commercial gallery, but it's generally not a thing that you see. And I think it's actually a really healthy thing, because you can work through ideas. And I always feel like that's how you make these huge leaps forward, when you allow yourself to experiment and you allow yourself to fail. Then to be able to put that in a public venue and have interactions with the public who might not normally go to art galleries, it's a very positive experience. I think you can learn a lot that way as an artist.

EL: It feels very vulnerable, showing your mistakes. And I wonder, do you...do you see that in the show? Do you see something and feel like: I want to keep working on this idea?

SEH: Yes, well, I'd say that about the big print. It was a huge experiment, and I had no idea if it was going to work. And I do like it, but I feel like it's sort of at the beginning of the journey. Like, this is a seed that's going to grow into something and I don't know what that is yet. This whole experience at Artspace provided me with the opportunity, time and space, to get this far with it. I find it kind of exciting. And it's been really interesting to get people's responses to it. And, I imagine that this kind of large-scale printmaking is something that will continue to develop in my studio practice. I don't know that it's totally successful, but it's... interesting, and I'm happy to have been able to show it in a public space.

EL: I feel like every time we talk about your work, something sparks, like there's a different idea that I end up with. I'm wondering if responses from people engaging with your work influences what you're doing, if the kinds of conversations we're having with folks who use the space and what they see in the work becomes a part of the process for you?

SEH: Yes, I think that's fair to say. Like your observations about this sort of cyclical connection to petroleum based material, plastics and fossils... to oil, which comes from long dead life, being extracted from the ground and then transformed into plastic, eventually going back into the earth, and potentially fossilising. I mean, that really stuck with me, and I think it will continue to work its way through my art.

The big blue print is called Topography 1, which I feel was influenced by our conversation too. I found myself thinking in different ways about geological history and land, and these kinds of grand narratives that take place in very slow, unfolding timelines.

At the beginning, my practice was much more object based. I was thinking about minimalism, you know, I was thinking about repetition of form and the history of minimalism, and how repetition suggests the passage of time, but from a more sort of philosophical perspective, as opposed to the sort of grand stage of geological history. I feel like the longer I've been working and the more conversations I've had with people, the bigger the narrative element gets in my work, which is exciting.

EL: This is one of the reasons I really wanted to do this and have this conversation, because the object on the wall is quite minimal. But there's so much you're exploring. I remember being new to the art world, and being quite intimidated by the spaces and by the work and often by minimalist work. I felt like I didn't have the vocabulary or understanding of the context in which it's being presented. I'm curious what you would say, in this kind of public space, where we have a lot of folks coming in who might not have experienced a gallery or this kind of work before. Yeah, what you might say to that person, or what you're hoping that they experience in the space?

SEH: All I really want people to do is use their eyes and look at what is in front of them, you know? I feel like one thing that can bother me these days is the emphasis on text explaining the work in a gallery. Didactic panels on the wall beside the work explaining things in detail, encouraging the audience to read before they look, so that people don't learn to trust their visual abilities and instincts. I feel like text tells people that there's only one way to see something, and I don't want to do that with my work. So that's why there's no text on the wall in this show. My hope is that people can be comfortable coming in and just having a visual experience. There is an exhibition text printed on paper that they can reference if they want, so my ideas and process are available to curious people, but I would like to encourage people to come in and just look, and respond in whatever way that they do, and know that their response is actually totally fine. They don't like it. That's okay. They come up with ideas or see things that I wasn't thinking about while making the work, also okay. Like, that it is basically all okay. All responses are fine. It's intended to just be an experience that somebody has kind of intimately with objects, with no rules.

EL: Ah, that feels like such a lovely invitation.