DAPHNE FITZPATRICK: I know that you have a long-term interest in historical re-enactment. What if I were to rename it "hysterical re-enactment?" Do you think that would be fair?

ALLISON SMITH: I can see why you would want to do that. It suggests that you see the phenomenon of Civil War re-enactment as a manifestation of hysteria on the cultural level, or an extreme form of acting out. You're probably also suggesting that there is something hysterically funny about it, or absurd.

I think both are true, that there is something curious and troubling about a culture that attempts to live in the past, in order to keep alive a level of violence and social division that many of us would rather leave behind. At first reading it seems to be a perpetually rehashed performance of nationalism, masculinity, and whiteness that stands in the face of the Civil Rights movement, and is especially charged due to the fact that the majority of re-enactors are fighting for the Confederacy. And yes, there is something comical about the image of these guys down South dressing up in soldier drag and shooting each other up. However I am not interested in just standing back and criticizing or poking fun at re-enactors. I see myself more as an ethnographer, or perhaps an indigenous anthropologist, studying and trying to understand my home society. I myself am the product of a Southern upbringing, and I acknowledge the impact of history on the construction of my identity. But what interests me most about re-enactment are the aesthetic aspects of it, and an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. Many of my ideas come from my collection of mail-order catalogs of re-enactor gear. I am intrigued by the implied meanings of these objects and uniforms, and how they seem to promise a form of time travel. They are more than theatrical props; they are also examples of traditional craft techniques like needlework, leatherwork, punched tin, and wrought iron, "dying" arts that artisan re-enactors are attempting to keep alive as well.

D: So, it's a double-edged sword for you. You are mining a fraught time in American history and finding a type of object-making that you love, yet some of the objects are bound to their original meaning. But, that charge must also draw you in. It's not just the punched tin that interests you—it's also the person you imagine making the lantern. The genteel 19th Century lady doing her embroidery…

A: Yes. I am drawn in to the idea of people making and selling things during that time, and I am doubly drawn in to people re-enacting the making and selling of those same things now. That is sort of what I do as an artist.

D: What strikes me about re-enactment is the provocation of role-playing. History is inherently inaccessible to us, impenetrable. To me, being the 19th Century lady, the soldier, the cowboy, hobo, etc. has to do with a desire to inhabit a different kind of masculinity or femininity that is unavailable to us in the present. Even though we choose different positions on that playing field, I think that's where we mirror each other in our work.

A: Yeah. You have done several projects in which you have cast yourself in the alternate roles of the man-about-town, the flaneur, the cowboy, the hobo…What is the allure for you?

D: It's a very romantic vision of a carefree self that I like. It is being without obligations. No job, no family, no bills. You are pure potentiality. Anything can happen at any time. From the outside, being a woman with this fantasy presents itself with a certain set of problems, since women are not offered this. However, from inside I assume the position is mine to have. I do what I want, fuck it. In my world, where animals wear coats and cats play fiddles, all is possible.

A: That reminds me of the project you did in which you played the role of a colonial boy in the wilds of New York before it became a city. In that series of photographs, you pictured yourself sipping tea with a beaver, setting type with a squirrel, consoling a monkey and sleeping with an owl, among other things.

D: Anthropomorphism is a great love of mine that never goes away. It is how children are taught the basic moral lessons of life. Right now on TV there is an ad for Toys-R-Us that has hundreds of white bunnies singing "Here Comes Peter Cottontail". Fantastic. For me, images of animals bring me to a time when all was right with the world, and in my work I think animal imagery projects a naive gentleness which is something that I would like to hang on to. With those pictures I was also interested in the sleight-of-hand. They were about my desire to make very romantic pastoral scenes relating to the history of painting, and at the same time wanting to make a kind of picture that was truly uncanny. It's a shame that photography began in 1840 because I would like to see photographs from 1640 or 1702, I really would. So that was my attempt to do that; I wanted people to believe the pictures, to be disarmed and hopefully not be sure about what they were looking at. Also, in the pictures there is heartache, an expression of sadness or loss you could say, since ultimately they were impossible.

A: You seem to be offering a good hypothesis for the re-enactment impulse here: this sense of yearning you describe for something lost or impossible to capture. The analogy of a return to childhood is an apt metaphor. There is a place of wonder I often return to in my imagination, a country fair in Waterford, Virginia that I have visited almost every year since childhood. It is a sort of living history event, actually, a juried crafts exhibition in which all of the exhibitors are engaged in American historical craft traditions. The whole town is transformed, as each exhibitor is required to demonstrate their craft in period costume. Blacksmithing, quilting, basket-weaving, candle-making, decorative painting…mixed in with a large encampment of Revolutionary War re-enactors.

D: Your original inspiration. For me it was Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. The way cartoons were drawn which made everything from the child's point of view sort of rounded at the edges. There was always the anvil, the sledgehammer, the mousetrap, the fence—whatever it was it had a kind of plainness and bigness in my vision. The lack of decoration, the simplicity, a vision of the world that takes away the decorative and reduces things down to symbols. I like my sculptures to have that quality. Is Waterford where you first saw "Notion Nannies," the project you are working on now?

A: The artisans at Waterford tend to work out of market stalls and tents, but I can see why you would ask. Notion Nannies were the American version of a particular genre of British peddler dolls that depicted a village character type, a red-cloaked woman holding a basket overflowing with miniature wares. I am working on an elaborate sculpture or self-contained installation in which I am sculpting myself into the role of this 19th Century curiosity. In my version the doll is life-sized, and the objects in her basket represent various craft traditions I'm interested in. There will be objects made of ceramic, glass, tin, things printed and sewn…and within those objects various narratives emerge. As in most of the installations I have produced, many small objects add up to a larger whole. There are lots of double meanings and puns, and a play between recognizably contemporary objects and authentic historical reproductions.

D: What are some of the puns?

A: Since it is a Revolutionary War-era character, I am making aesthetic decisions that evoke that time period, while also pointing to my own set of what I would consider to be revolutionary moments on the margins of art, or examples of art made under extreme circumstances such as in the context of war. The basket will be a container for a conversation that includes formal examples of these things and the conflicting "notions" they raise. A propagandistic ceramic plate from the Russian revolution

next to a coded quilt used on the Underground Railroad, for example.

D: What I like about this idea is that it works on two different visual levels. Firstly, its large scale is aggressive and confrontational like a monolith, yet it is filled with details that seem to invite you in on a more intimate level. Tell me about your ideas of taking that type of looking, which is analogous to shopping, into the realm of art.

A: As a subject I'm interested in the historical shift that takes place when the role of woman changes from that of a producer to a consumer. In the 19th Century, a middle-class woman would sew her own clothes, mend and patch them, fashion them into quilts and then recycle them again into rag rugs. She was producing all the time, in fact producing Art in the opinion of early feminist artists like Miriam Shapiro and Harmony Hammond. Whereas, in the 2Oth Century the same woman purchases and discards her clothes and quilts and rag rugs, which are mass produced and therefore stand in total opposition to the meanings ascribed to "women's work" (labor, authenticity, personal history, etc.) Home-maker turns to home-shopper. This economy of objects is compelling to me, and I use commodified history as an aesthetic palette for my work. I often refer to the marketplace – the Mom-n-Pop general store, the street vendor's pushcart, the outdoor market tent – because I see myself as both producer and consumer and, as in the case of Notion Nanny, as itinerant peddler of wares.

D: Let's get to the conversation about the playing field. I think it is central to us both, though we are at different positions. My position, or fantasy, is more unnamed; it looks to a gender-free zone, or to androgyny. As a child, I assumed I was a boy until about the age of twelve, when I could no longer deny my biological sex and the world needed me to be a girl. In my artwork those wishes and desires come forward again. I remember being seven or eight years old and playing "army". The ultimate fantasy was of being chased and then killed—shot—in a very dramatic fashion. Splayed out on the rocks, I would play out my death. Now the playing-out happens in my work, in collected pictures, clippings, video footage, notes…

A: Earlier today I overheard you telling someone that you were "making notes," that making notes is something you do.

D: That's true. It is something I do and have done pretty seriously since about 1996. The notes are a constant in my art process. Sometimes I go on a note-taking binge and fill a notebook in one night. They are written on scraps of paper, receipts, bank statements, envelopes, napkins, paper bags, whatever. They usually involve—this may sound really corny—my joy of life and all of the things around me that inspire me and that I can't get enough of. My strongest drive is to want everything.

I want to embrace everything and nothing can be left untouched. I have an insatiable appetite. Today's notes involved…well there was this butch dyke I saw today and I noticed that her two front pockets had been worn out and on one side was clearly the outline of her wallet and on the other side was clearly the outline of her cell phone and I thought that was really vivid and sexy and something that I could really relate to and that has always been a big turn-on for me. I'm sure my father had it and other countless men but when the wallet makes a mark, when butch dykes do it, it becomes another phallus, a hard-on…Anyway it's a really important part of my process. I just have piles of these notes. Then something breaks out from the collection of images, and I'll make an object, a sculpture. A fence post, a flaccid canon, a telephone pole… It's all about my original position and the unnamed fantasy of a highly charged masculine attitude. My androgyny is my primary agency. It's my original fight. Born a girl, but fiercely being a boy. And now, trying to figure out the man I could be.

A: Let's talk about your Broadway Walk piece, which seems to bring to mind the idea of a road trip or vision quest, and the film trope of a boy journeying into manhood.

D: Well the term "vision quest" seems pretentious, I don't know. But there were some pretentious moments of the project, so maybe it's appropriate. All I know is that I had a desire to walk the entire length of Broadway, top to bottom, north to south. I had my camera and notebook, and I walked for six separate days to finish it. The main rule was to walk down the street and take as long as I wanted. Which meant I ended up shooting things like the contents of oily puddles, or extreme close-ups of cheeseburgers, bronze statues, beetles walking along twigs, a cigarette burning down to ash, stuff like that. The accumulation of images and objects I photographed presented to me a picture of myself, my desires, attractions, my eye. There were certain repeating themes, like working men, food, signage, animals, and sex - bulging crotches, hard nipples on mannequins, underwear ads…I think when you gather up a whole bunch of stuff you're interested in it's like looking in a mirror. So I guess you could say it was a vision quest. But I wouldn't want to insult an old-time flaneur like Walt Whitman. Mostly, I had a wonderful time. I was an instant hobo. I once found a Halloween costume in a 99-Cent store; on the package was a crude drawing of a bum with a big cigar and it said "Instant Hobo-Hat and Cigar Included". I have always loved that idea—that with only an eight-inch plastic cigar, a piece of black cloth, and a slight shift, you could be free. And on my Broadway Walk, the fantasy worked. It is a powerful feeling when you have nowhere to go.

A: It's funny to imagine you taking on the role of the hobo. It fits. It also makes me think of window shopping. Maybe this sort of illustrates an important difference between our ways of working. Whereas your work involves a kind of role-playing (you mention living out sexual or gender-role fantasies and returning to childhood, for example), my work seems to be more questioning or analytical of this impulse in a broader sense and is also more engaged with notions of craft. I wish there were a better word than "craft" actually—I am thinking about traditional and popular art, the decorative arts, vernacular and folk art, basically looking at objects from a material culture perspective. So I have an interest in tramp art, one of the only truly American folk art forms, in which itinerant men riding the rails would make objects out of recycled cigar boxes and trade them for meals or a place to stay. I have used the techniques of tramp art in several sculptures, but I have never specifically fancied myself as the tramp. I am interested in the idea of tramp art objects as a form of currency, while questioning the currency of such objects in the spectrum of art. It's similar with trench art.

D: What is trench art?

A: Trench art is the name given to a fascinating array of objects made by soldiers from the waste materials of war. A good example is the thousands of World War II artillery shells that soldiers collected illegally from battlefields and fashioned into flower vases. Many of them were decorated in a style similar to Art Nouveau, ironically invoking the idyllic landscape that was being destroyed all around. Like tramp art, soldiers would trade trench art for food and cigarettes. It was a souvenir they could sell to tourists or send home as a love token.

D: The poignancy of it is so potent. It seems to be a collision of several things at once: history, war, the lonely soldier, and the wonderfully charged topic of beauty in the presence of death. Will your own "trench art" be able to carry that charge?

A: I don't think I am trying to convey that same charge. Nothing could compare to the actuality of a bomb being used as an art supply, nor have I survived the level of trauma a soldier would have undergone before making such an object. But I am thinking metaphorically, and I love the idea of making art from the front lines out of whatever is at hand. And we are living in times of war. Again, I think I am more analytical and in my work I am having this conversation with myself about my own battles, be they emotional, psychological, political, or artistic.

D: Tell me about the Muster you are planning for this summer.

A: The Muster is a call to arms/art, in which I am gathering the forces of my artistic community in order to identify what we are fighting for. Based structurally on a battle re-enactment, it begins with a broadsheet and culminates with a weekend event. A muster is an assembly of troops for the purposes of inspection and critique.

Although it will take on aspects of the group crit, the Muster will also have a rally-esque feel and a gaming element. Although I am directing the event, I'm not scripting it. Therefore the outcome will be determined by the participants. Each enlistee will declare a cause and fashion a uniform. Tents filled with hundreds of items of gear, props, and art supplies will be provided.

D: Identity politics was a lively conversation in the early 90s, when you were in art school. Is this a time when that conversation can be restarted?

A: For me and for many of my friends, it is a conversation that never ended. It is about the relationships between the making of art and the construction of identity. I see it happening all over, especially in the queer community, even though the term "identity politics" feels dated and insufficient. I am encouraged by the fact that Grayson Perry won the Turner Prize… According to Confederate re-enactors, the Civil War never actually ended either. Maybe there is some parallel. The Muster will be a good time to see if there is any of that fighting spirit left in us, or if in fact the beer tent proves to be more interesting.

D: I'll be there to find out. **Sk**