



Studio view of *The Vertical Shadows* in progress, Variable dimensions, Various mediums including paint, cloth, wood, cardboard, plaster and wax, 2008.

# ART

Q AND A WITH VIOLET SHURAKA

**You grew up in Mexico City and Vancouver, Canada, then went to undergrad and graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago. Do you feel that being in Chicago influences your work at all? If so, how? Does it matter where you are for you to maintain an art practice?**

I was born in Mexico City and when I was a teenager my entire family moved to Vancouver, British Columbia. In a nutshell, the eventfulness of that move at that particular point in my development—from one culture to another, from one language to another, and from one perceptual space to another—is more significantly generative of my thinking as an artist than the city of Chicago has been up to now.

This may be a small thing, but important nonetheless: I remember that when I first moved to Chicago I could not relate to the flatness of the land. Many friends who grew up in the Midwest crave the openness of the prairies, but I have not had such craving; at least not yet. When I first arrived in Chicago, I could not understand how I was going to survive without mountains nearby: mountains as points of orientation but also as markers of comparative proportion, of geographical heterogeneity. But Lake Michigan and the big Midwestern sky became points of phenomenological reference. I think that wherever I may live, I would look for these types of points of reference. Like so many people with whom I went to school, I used to see myself as someone with one foot out of the Chicago door. It took a while, but now I can fathom life in Chicago as creatively challenging in the long term. In some ways Chicago can be very cosmopolitan: think of all the architectural landmarks in the city that are of both home-grown and international significance. At the same time Chicago can feel very regional; this can cut both ways, as insular or locally fulfilling and expansive.

As far as what I need in order to maintain an art practice, I need the confluence of a few things, all of which point to stability, stimulation and space. I have stepchildren (they are

teenagers) and my husband is a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago. The stability and stimulation that come from my family life help me maintain a discipline. They provide the foundation for the mental and physical space in which imaginative and critical work unfolds. Several years ago I began to teach at a public university, the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). I had gone to private schools, Hampshire College and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My students at UIC are mostly commuters, unlike the students at the schools that I attended, who came from all parts of the North American hemisphere and beyond. I have learned the most about Chicago's multiple identities from my students. Chicago is not just one definitive place or one cultural environment. The art scene here can be small, but it seems to be ever changing. And I have a great studio. I am very much a studio artist, so, wherever I go, I need a studio space to continue working.

**Tell me a little about the process of creating a new work. What inspires you to begin an artwork? Do you sketch out your ideas with a drawing first? Do you ever work a composition out on a computer before you begin to create your piece?**

I see much of what I do as drawing—in my use of thread and other kinds of linear elements, but also in my activation of materials in a combinatory way. That is, I see my works, the so-called end results, as splintering off from acts of drawing, even when there are no preliminary drawings to speak of. Having said that, sometimes I have an idea for years and it takes me that long to figure out how I want to execute it. This applies mainly to how I make my sewn artist's books. For example, in the book *The Waves*, I remember reading years ago that in her novel of that name, Virginia Woolf wanted to explore rhythm rather than plot. That search for rhythm without plot in the foreground fully resonates with my thoughts on the structure of the book form itself. I see the structure of the book as a site

where movement yields to movement from one pair of pages to another. This produces a rhythm that may be altered according to the placement of elements—textual or otherwise—in the pages. What interests me is the conceivable emergence of movement through structure. It is like moving through architecture, but at another scale.

To answer your question in a more general sense, at the inception of a project, I engage directly with manual processes to generate structures and images. I begin by attending to concrete material properties and potentials; like I said, the filaments of thread, but also the strangely brittle robustness of plaster, or the lustrous shimmer of graphite. These properties are amplified in the dynamic tension of the results: I reconfigure and combine materials, and arrive at resolutions for which there is no prior blueprint or drawing. My process relies on both gained proficiency and spontaneous exploration, and it unfolds within the context of the studio. Like I said, for me the studio is a laboratory where I experiment and discover the multivalent possibilities of making art. Over time, I have come to realize that one of the reasons I make things by hand is to participate formally and critically in the voluptuousness of the materially proximate world. I use the word "voluptuousness" here in the spirit of Mario Rossi's philosophical proposal: the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking.

**Have you always explored time, death, space, clouds and weather, and ontology as subjects in your work? Does incorporating and working through such heavy themes and questions about the universe in your work help you to feel more at ease in daily life?**

Philosophical questions concerning the nature of reality and how we attempt to make sense of it are at the thematic core of my research. I believe that I am in good company, for these themes have concerned poets, theologians, skeptics, scientists, and artists for millennia.

## DIANNA FRID



Untitled #4 (Refraction of Bolts), detail, 7 feet x 24 inches x 30 inches, Cardboard, wood, cloth, plaster, plastic paint and ink, paper, acrylic, wax, rubber and, papier-mache, From the series *The Vertical Shadows*, 2008.



Template #2 for *The Forces that Shape Them*, 9 x 15 inches, Cloth, adhesives, metal, graphite, 2009.

I do not categorize these themes as heavy or, for that matter, optimistic. Ontological questions are as perennial as questions about the origin of the universe and the relative brevity of human life in relation to geological time. I see these themes as factual and at the same time mysterious. My works are not illustrations of these themes. Instead, they are explorations into the nature of how these themes are given form. For example, on the one hand, there are the clouds in the sky. On the other

hand, the clouds are part of a classification system created by human beings: the clouds are named and subsequently understood by these names. The themes of inscription (naming) and description of phenomena are part of what I explore. But I do not perceive them emotionally as heavy or light, scary or consoling. Having said that, all this might look emotionally different if, like in Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*, a planet was about to crash into the Earth and annihilate us.

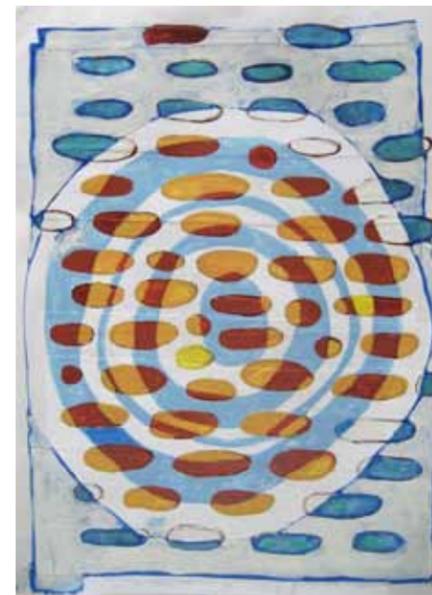
**What factors into the process of selecting materials, size, and subject matter for a specific piece, since you work in so many mediums—sculpture, site-specific installation, collage, works on paper, painting, drawing, book arts, sewing?**

So much of my work amounts to the acknowledgement of materiality. Given that our humanity is manifested within a tangibly physical world, my research starts from the perspective of the material properties of this world. In my work, not only materials but also spaces are catalysts that, when activated, alert us to their physical presence and properties, to their—and our—phenomenological potentials. I suppose that I want to remain alert to such potentials, and thus to provoke self-reflectivity in relation to the sensuous, material world. As you point out, scales shift dramatically in my work, from the intimate scale of the hand-held book to site-specific architectural installations that can be entered. Each of these scales—and everything in between—does something different perceptually, materially, in relation to our subjectivity and our bodies.

**You frequently work with materials which are associated with craft making and children's art, such as colored construction paper, papier-mache, and cardboard. These materials are mostly thought of as ephemeral and flimsy but they can also be fragile and quite beautiful. Is there a particular reason why you began incorporating these materials into your work, what draws you to them? Do you like to use "throw-away" materials to contrast/counterbalance the very large themes which you are addressing in the work you are creating?**

I do not think of materials hierarchically and this is how I want my work to be positioned: sensuously but also politically. There is an assumption that we all see materials on a shared or unquestioned hierarchical scale. What is throw-away for someone may be generative in a very sophisticated way for me, or vice versa. There are many historical precedents for this. One important example can be found in the work of the artists who constituted the Arte Povera movement (not to mention the artists who influenced that movement such as Lucio Fontana and Antoni Tàpies). Each of the Arte Povera artists is very different from the next, but they shared a clarity about eliminating material hierarchies. This was radical in the 1960's, but it is curious that the question of hierarchy still pops up—I infer from this that the question is unresolved. There is so much noisy bling in art today that gets championed. Think of Damien Hirst's diamond skull and there you have it: spectacle.

In addition to Arte Povera, I am drawn to off-center lineages of textile design and cloth. The question of craft is tangled up with questions of hierarchy, but also of categorization, of value, of labor, of functionality, of gender, and of tradition. This is why I find the general question irrelevant to my work: I make sculptures and drawings and books that do not, for instance, deal thematically with questions of gender



Page 4 left: *Let Us First Deal With Air*, 12 x 9 inches, Mixed media on paper, From the series *Engines of Weather*, 2008; middle: *Dislocation of Snow*, 12 x 9 inches, Mixed media on paper, From the series *Engines of Weather*, 2008; right: *Sometimes Gather, Sometimes Disperse, and Sometimes Remain Motionless*, 12 x 9 inches, Mixed media on paper, From the series *Engines of Weather*, 2008.



or tradition. I do not make craft wares, even though much of what I make is the result of honing and un-honing what I know technically and manually vis-à-vis what I find intellectually stimulating. My work challenges any position that addresses the aesthetic dimension of art as superfluous. It is odd to me that intelligent people would think that the intellectual and the sensual are extricable from each other, as if work that gives pleasure and joy cannot also be smart and analytical.

**Do you feel that by using the materials associated with children's artmaking that you are creating a 'world of wonder' as you may have when younger (while playing with art materials)—during a time when you were more innocent and less knowledgeable about the ways of the world?**

I do not see my work as naïve or childlike. I do not think that any given materials belong to children or adults in general. Thought, analysis, the honing of skills, the deployment of materials to tackle complex ideas—these are all part of my long-term project and they did not emerge spontaneously out of thin air. The spontaneity you see in my work is honed. Besides, I do not think children are necessarily "innocent." My work arrives at resolutions in very particular ways from project to project. I may not always know what I am doing, but this does not mean that I am "child-like" or an ingénue.

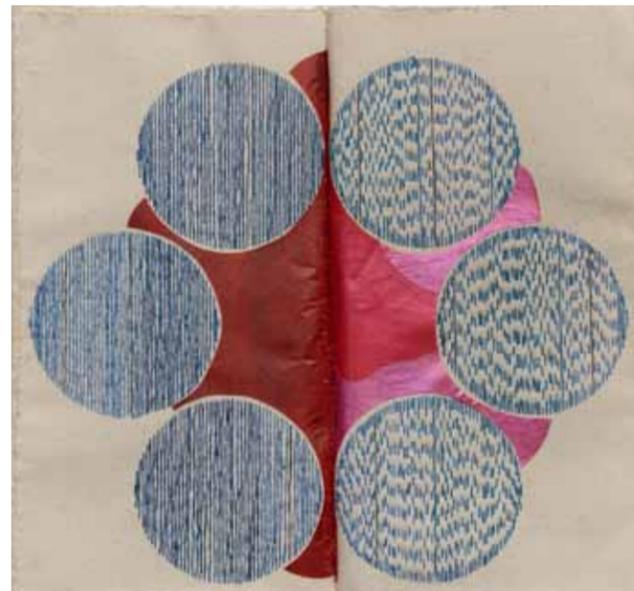
**Could you tell us a bit about the *Vertical Shadows* and *Engines of Weather* installation? What are these sculptural objects that populate the installation? Are they meant to represent architecture and/or phenomena related to the weather or both? Could you tell us a bit about the pieces *Untitled #4 (Refraction of Bolts)* and *Untitled #2 (Cumulonimbus)* specifically?**

*The Vertical Shadows* sculptures and *The Engines of Weather* 2-D collages are two related bodies of work that I first exhibited in 2008. I started to make the sculptures in 2006 after I got my current job teaching sculpture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I started to make the *Vertical Shadows* for many reasons but I confess that an important one had to do with the fact that if I was going to teach sculpture, I wanted to use my studio practice to revisit making sculpture in the most physical and in-the-round sense. For a while I had been looking at Brancusi's use of the base. I was intrigued by the fact that sometimes it took him many years to pair up a constructed pediment with a particular cast or carving. He did this formally but also strategically as a separate but related way to control—to whatever extent—the framing of his smaller, materially finer, abstract figurations. One might think that my looking at Brancusi was a retro move, not only after the prevalence of the Duchampian ready-made that has become so ubiquitous, but also after all the critically challenging work from the 60's and 70's that broke away from earlier conventions of sculpture and situated art in the expanded field. I intuited that I needed to move non-linearly and interpretively towards Brancusi's base. In retrospect I recognize that I wanted to think about the intersection of sculpture, pattern, architecture (think of mosaics and tiles), the miniature model, abstraction and representation. The *Vertical Shadows* became my vehicles for these multiple explorations. But before I had articulated all these things out loud, I simply started to make the bases with no sense of what they would, so to speak, support. I started to make shapes from geometrical solids (such as cubes and octahedrons), and these became the foundation for the stacked shapes that were to become the *Vertical Shadows*.

While I worked on these in a thematically open way, I was reading a book about the history of how clouds got their names. I have been interested in nomenclature and onomastics (the field of linguistics that looks at how places get their names) and I had already explored the subject of naming in earlier works (*The Field* from 2003; and the artist's book *The Ascents* from 2001). Reading about how the clouds got their current names influenced the way the content of the pieces took form. Before 1803 it was commonly believed that there were hundreds of types of clouds. That year, the English amateur meteorologist Luke Howard published *On the Modification of Clouds*, which used a Latin taxonomy to establish three principal categories of clouds: cumulus, stratus and cirrus; and two subcategories: cirrostratus and stratocumulus. Nimbus was added later, to describe the potential of precipitation.

In any case, I started to make the bases first and the subject matter for the sculptures came later. I made a lot of horrible pieces that I threw away until I began to arrive at the overarching structure for the project. By the time I got to work on #4, *The Refraction of Bolts*, the cloud-like forms had moved downward into the edges of the base, and the bolts occupied the top. It is a sign that the subject of the work was decentralized, that the "what is the work about" question became less important and hopefully less over-determined.

For the *Vertical Shadows* I used materials, colors and patterns as a way to connect or relate the stacked volumes to each other, while still maintaining their modularity. It is not as if I was trying to use every color I could. I was trying to establish connections at the edges of each pattern and shape. I understood this from looking at how textiles and tiles are used in costuming and in architecture. Patterns complement each other, sometimes acting



Page views from *The Comets*, Canvas, cloth, embroidery floss, aluminum, adhesives, paper, acrylic paint, Unique Book, 2011, Closed 11.25 x 6 inches; Open 11.25 x 11.75 inches.

to create the illusion of volume, sometimes to generate sensual pleasure through a reiteration of form, sometimes by creating provocative clashes and disjunctions.

Building sculptures can take me a long time. I often have to plan aspects of a given work, for example its proportions, quite methodically. Or I must wait for plaster to dry. Or build something slowly only to find out that it fails and has to be re-built. *The Engines of Weather* are small works on paper that were rapid antidotes to the slowness of the sculptures. I had materials around the studio (like pieces of painted paper and sheets of metal with adhesives) and I began to make small two-dimensional diagrammatic abstractions with them. At times I would paint over an intricate pattern completely and start again, but I would leave a trace of the buried layer underneath. At other times the pieces seemed to happen spontaneously. I was fully submerged in making the two bodies of work simultaneously, so they clearly inflected each other. However, I approached the titling of the works quite differently. The titles of the sculptures are more or less descriptive of what you see. The titles of the *Engines of Weather* are evocations of the phenomena of weather and how it is described meteorologically. As someone who has studied how things and places get their names, I am definitely invested and implicated in the naming process through the titling of my works.

**Are you attempting to make sense of the repetition of forms in the physical world with the patterns you create in your artwork? Do the patterns correlate to any theories or ideas about what makes up the universe (molecules, elementary particles, etc...)?**

We can address pattern from so many perspectives. There is the optical perspective, of course. Others have interpreted my work as a reflection of the patterns that occur in natural phenomena. But there is another way of addressing pattern. Pattern can be an index of a thought as well as of a manual process. Lately I have been reassessing the series of actions that I repeat again and again in the making of my work. These actions can be quite monotonous and boring. But after crossing a certain threshold of boredom I find that on the other side repetitive actions become trance-inducing. Embroidering, cutting, stacking, sanding, all of these repeated types of action can, at the best of moments, make time disappear or stretch. While making the work I have become interested in the possibility of getting to a place through the process where the "self" can get lost. It doesn't happen all the time, but when it happens sometimes I can look at the work with some detachment and see with a clarity that I could not have anticipated or planned.

**Text shows up frequently in your work, especially in your artist's books. Have you had any graphic design or typography training? How do stories, or fragments of text, from popular media (such as a line from an obituary, a line from a classic work of literature or poem, a word from a dictionary, a touching newspaper story) make its way into one of your works?**

I did not have any formal graphic design training but early on I looked closely at how books are designed. The book is the perfect technology. I don't think anything can be done to improve it, but much can be done within the parameters of its structure. Text and language

unfold visually and/or temporally in a sequential way. In a book you can move backwards and in non-linear ways to disrupt or evade a sequence, while acknowledging that it is there at all times, in a physically tangible sense. I am drawn to how books make me self-aware of language's materiality. The materiality of language is part of what I try to address in several of my artist's books. The translation from one type of materiality to another is also part of what I think about when I use words taken from a page and then give them visual and conceptual import in a newly translated form. In the instances where I use words from, say, the *Odyssey*, my work merges appropriation and ekphrasis.

**You have been producing books since 1999. How many have you made? What are a couple of your favorites and what do you like about these books in particular? Could you discuss what *The Artery Archives* entail?**

I began to make books circa 1992, as a way to give enduring form to ephemeral works that had been documented photographically. These included interviews and performance works that I did collaboratively when, for a very short spell of time, I lived in Oaxaca, Mexico in the early 1990's. I came up with the name *Artery Archives* at around that time. I cannot remember why I chose that name...something about the alliteration perhaps, in addition to the expansive meaning of the concept of an archive: where one book is only a part of a collective organism. To this date I think of my books as one larger work...When I moved to New York in 1995 (I lived in NY for little over four years) I did not have a studio space at first and making sewn sculptures—this is how I thought of the books—was a way of addressing

topics of whatever magnitude at a small and intimate scale. I continue to make the books today, sometimes in bouts, sometimes with large pauses between one book and the next.

**What artists would you cite as influences? Are there any modern abstract painters that you admire? What type of visual art are you most drawn to?**

I gravitate to the work of various artists, and am, if anything, drawn with even greater intensity to the work of writers. My experience reading and re-reading the books of Clarice Lispector remains an important point of reference and orientation. I am self-conscious that I am reading Lispector in translation (from Portuguese to English or Spanish) and such "reading-in-translation" is in itself also a valuable point of reference. As I said earlier, some of the *Arte Povera* artists remain important to me: Alighiero Boetti and Giuseppe Penone in particular. I was really interested in what Catherine de Zegher was doing curatorially at the Drawing Center, and her show "3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing, Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin" was a revelation. So was her co-curated show "On Line" at MOMA from 2009. As far as contemporary artists, lately I have been looking at Sergei Jensen's fabric paintings, at Phyllida Barlow's and Karla Black's sculptures and at Sheila Hicks' tiny weavings.

**Tell us a bit about your residency at The Wall House 2 Foundation in Groningen, Netherlands? (You were working on a site-specific project for 2013?)**

I spent a few weeks at the Wall House this summer to begin to imagine a project for the summer of 2013. The Wall House Foundation project, which is titled *The Inside from the*

*Inside*, is a response to the architecture of the late John Hejduk, who designed the *Wall House # 2* in 1972. Of the many theoretical houses that Hejduk designed, the *Wall House # 2* is one of the few ever built (it was completed posthumously in 2001). Hejduk, who was also a poet and a draftsman, was deeply engaged with language and drawing as foundations for envisioning buildings. *The Wall House* generates questions about the relationship between drawing, poetic symbolism and what a dwelling can be; it also prompts me to address the connections between Hejduk's imaginative conception of the house and the signals he left in it to encourage us to perceive space in mysterious ways.

At the center of my project is a large graphite wall installation. This three-floor drawing will act as an interior connective tissue between vertically stacked rooms. The rooms are only accessible by crossing a threshold marked by the wall that gives the building its name, and by ascending or descending a staircase. My exhibition will be an intervention that models a different kind of link between "insides". The artist's books play an important role in conveying this interiority. Artist's books, in their modest scale, can temporarily "ingest" a person (I am borrowing the figurative use of ingestion from Hejduk). The traversal of an artist's book is a sequential traversal of spaces. Like rooms in a building, the traversal of the book's space is given meaning by the manner in which a sequence generates content.

Although I have made projects for architecture before—notably *skylight and spectra* for the 400 square meter atrium of the Neues Kunstforum in Cologne—*The Inside from the Inside* marks the first time that I will respond to a considerable architectural landmark. On the one hand,

this is a rare opportunity to showcase a firmly researched and materially poetic dialogue with John Hejduk's legacy. On the other hand, it will be a pivotal work that will allow me to join together facets of my practice—artist's books, drawing, poetry and installation—within one unified site.

**What are your future plans. Do you have any shows coming up in Chicago, New York or beyond?**

Depending on funding the project at the *Wall House* may become large and involve other artists in an inter-disciplinary sense, so this is where most of my outward energies have been focused. However, I have started new work in the studio (some large drawings and smaller sculptures). While nothing is scheduled, I have been lucky that there is ongoing interest in showing my work both here and in New York in the near future. I do not like to repeat myself again and again, and this is why having a lot of time between exhibitions can be not only convenient but, above all, creatively important. This summer I will be making some new lithographs with Bud Shark, a master printer who has a studio outside of Lyons in Colorado. I have worked with Bud Shark before and have had one of my most satisfying collaborative experiences as an artist doing that. Before I worked with him I told him that I knew nothing about printmaking in general and lithography in particular; he told me that this is why he was interested in working with me.

**What could you imagine doing if you did not create art?**

Horticulture. Or being a social worker. I suppose that being an art educator at a public university like UIC already in a sense involves aspects of both.