

## **An Interview with Tau Lewis**

On the occasion of her exhibition, *when last you found me here*,  
At the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University, Kingston,  
Ontario, August 25<sup>th</sup> – December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018

**Interviewed by:** Sally Kim, Charlotte Parent, and Carina Profir, Masters candidates in Art Conservation, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, under the supervision of Emy Kim, Assistant Professor of Artifacts Conservation

**Interviewed via:** email correspondence

**November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

### ***(1) How do you repair your sculptures when they are damaged?***

This depends on the type of construction. Part of my practice is fabric based, part of it is assemblage, and part of it is plaster based. So this is determined by the type of damage and to what material. Everything degrades in life! The works on display at the Agnes are some of the more fragile constructions of mine, because their exteriors are made out of plaster.

Sometimes fine lines and cracks develop on the surface of the plaster, this is due to movement and impact, sometimes even temperature (I once had a plaster sculpture crack because it was kept outside for an exhibition during the winter) they can be repaired by filling in with more plaster, but if they are small, I might choose to let them be. For a larger crack in the surface, I've repaired with construction adhesive, tinted to match the colour of the plaster.

### ***(2) How do you use foam sealant to make your sculptures?***

This is a new technique I've been testing out on the more recent plaster works. Two of the sculptures in the Agnes exhibition have foam sealant parts. I use the foam to fill the limbs, and more fragile parts of the sculpture like fingers and toes, which would otherwise remain hollow. This makes them less susceptible to impact damage, and they remain very lightweight.

### ***(3) What happens if a part of I the spirit conductor come to tell you we were here before this (2018), like a finger, is broken off?***

I'd reattach the finger using a construction adhesive or possibly create a new one. If the sculpture is in a collection or exhibition where I can't easily travel to do a repair, an art restorer would also be able to repair the piece if the original finger were still there.

***What happens if one of the found objects, like the dragonfly, has been damaged, stolen, lost, etc.?***

Then the sculpture exists without that component. If I revisit the sculpture for any reason, I may or may not choose to replace the dragonfly with another object. Since the dragonfly is an organic material I expect that it would degrade/ disintegrate over time.

***What should the owner/institution looking after it do?***

Let it be in the time being and notify my gallery of the details.

**Follow-up question, November 23<sup>rd</sup>:**

***If damage happens to your objects when you are no longer around to fix the damage yourself, could a conservator act according to your previous answers? For example: Finger – reattach the finger, or reconstruct it if it is lost. Dragonfly – let the sculpture exist without the missing dragonfly.***

Yes, a conservator can act accordingly. They also might have their own protocol or suggestion based on materials, which I would be appreciative and welcome, especially if not able to repair the sculpture myself.

***(4) What are the guidelines that you give to collectors regarding the care of your objects? Is this a document you are willing to share with us?***

This again varies based on what kind of sculpture the collector is living with. Some of the more figural works that I create are very personal, energetically charged objects. The main thing that I ask is that they are treated that way. I retain the rights to visit the works because I still consider them mine. I want them to be lived with, to not spend their lives in storage containers. I also reserve the right to modify or change an artwork if it is in need of repair or has degraded. And similar to many artists, I want to be made aware of potential re-sale or donation of artworks.

**Follow-up question, November 23<sup>rd</sup>:**

***What if a museum (rather than a private owner) acquires one of the sculptures? Would it be acceptable for it to live in a typical museum storeroom when not exhibited? If not, how could the storage conditions be changes to make the environment one that is suitable for your sculptures, if possible?***

That's a reality and sacrifice of the art world. Not everything can be displayed all the time which I understand. Not all of my sculptures are the same. Some of them I'm less uncomfortable with having been kept in storage. I also make the final call on where the work is going. So a museum would not acquire something unless I was made aware of the conservation in advance. Museum sales are usually not immediate and they often take time. I would want to consider

whether the benefits of having that sculpture in that museum's collection outweigh the possibility of it being in a store room. That also depends on the sculpture. So I can't give you a definitive answer on that part of the question. I don't think there is anything that can be changed about a store room to make my sculptures more comfortable that would be permissible in a museum, but that might be an interesting thing to think about!

***(5) Do you expect the materials of the sculptures to degrade, or last as long as possible?***

Again, this all depends on the sculpture. There is such a huge range of materials that go into my sculptures. Some of them, I'm aware will degrade. Let's say we are looking at a quilt, and that quilt has pieces of a fur coat sewn into it, and that coat is 60 years old. Its fibres are surely going to degrade.\* I'm not opposed to the collector, or the museum taking efforts to preserve its materials/ the quilt, but I also think it is okay and natural for the piece to change over time as its materials age.\*

I think it gives an object autonomy, the fact that it has a life. The way that I see it is that no artwork is ever complete. Things are supposed to change as they go through life. For example, I made a series of busts, some of them contained live plants inside of them. The collector is implicated with learning how to care for the plant, and also must accept that the artwork is in a constant state of change. If the plant is to become sick or die, I will likely decide to replace the plant, but the artwork is inevitably changed.

***If materials do degrade, is it a threat to the integrity and meaning of the sculptures?***

Not at all in fact I some times celebrate this. Not all artwork needs to be singularly a commodity. I think it's wonderful that things change and go through a process, just like humans. That process is not separate from what the artwork is, it's very much a part of it. There are artists like Cynthia Daignault, who sometimes destroy their artworks after a certain amount of years, and the destruction is done in collaboration with the collector.\*

***(6) If possible, would you mind sharing with us what type of materials make up the secret objects in your sculptures?***

I can't share with you what the objects are because they'd no longer be secret objects. I can tell you things about them. I think of some of these objects as sacrificial, some of them as offerings, and some of them as keepsakes, some of them to imbue the sculpture with life. If you were saying goodbye to someone for an unknown amount of time, what would you give them to provide you both with some comfort? If someone helped you in some way (my practice is a therapy for me), what would you give them to sincerely thank them? I do this for many reasons and one of them is because I have a personal connection to the objects. This is a part of my practice that nobody can access accept me and that's important.

**Follow-up question, November 23<sup>rd</sup>:**

***We understand from you that it would be unacceptable for a conservator to have access to the secret objects inside the sculpture. We understand and respect that “opening” the sculpture and gaining access to the secret objects is off limits to anyone except for you. We were wondering how you would feel about the use of x-radiography on your sculptures? Radiography is used to better understand the manufacture of art objects, or to assess their condition (ex: see cracks in the structure and how far they travel into the material). If radiography of one of your sculptures that contains secret objects was ever necessary, it might reveal what some of the objects are (their shape and the kind of material they are made of). Would that be violating the secret of the sculptures?***

I'm not sure how likely it is that this would ever be a process that one of my artworks undergoes. But I'm not sure I can fully answer this question, because I'm not sure how much information one of these x-rays would reveal. I also think I might feel differently about whether or not this process were violating based on the purpose/ intent, and also who were present during the x-ray. I would prefer this not to happen because the thought of it does feel violating. So I'm going to answer yes. That would be a violation to my artworks. BUT, I would be open to discussing this procedure if it ever was necessary!

*\*Minor grammatical errors have been edited.*