30 Grand Street . Ground Floor . New York, NY 10013
between Thompson St./6th Ave . subway A/C/E to Canal
hours: Wednesday–Sunday, 12-6pm . phone: 212.334.0204
web: www.christinaray.com . email: info@christinaray.com

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CHRISTINA RAY

Alyssa Dennis
Amalgamation

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A conversation between Alyssa Dennis and Swoon.

Swoon: Your work heavily explores architectural landscapes; can you talk about how you first became interested in architecture and what is the relationship between drawing and architecture for you?

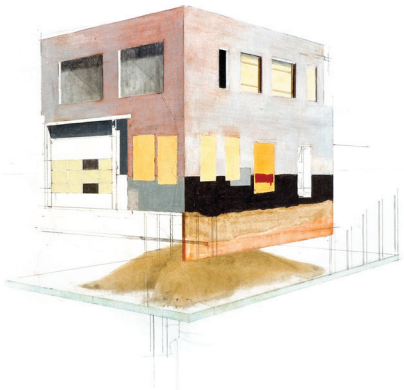
Dennis: As an artist I think I've always been very conscious of how I'd survive if I didn't make any money. So, I started with the house. The questions that spilled out from there were a process of dissection. Where and what are materials made of, etc.? This then led to my interest in Natural Building. I did a few small projects working with straw bales and earthen plasters and then got a full time job with a company building a huge elementary school where all the exterior walls where made of straw bales.

But representing architecture in my work didn't come until much later. When I graduated from undergrad I was drawing mostly figures without any architecture but I think it was just having time post-school to really start living a life of my own. I found myself walking a lot through the streets of Baltimore. I enjoyed looking at how buildings were put together. Baltimore – like most cities – is the perfect environment to witness the timeline or life cycle of our human-made material culture. Seeing the built environment in all its stages from construction to destruction. It's having access to this cycle that I like where one feeds the other and back again.

Representing architectural elements in my work through drawing has always been a way to visualize how I think about constructed space, in layers. Layers of material, of space and of time. I wanted to signify the transient nature of the building process.

Swoon: It's funny that you mention wondering what you would do if you had to construct your own conditions of survival as being something that had a big impact on your work. One of the things that I find interesting about your work is the quality it has of exploring both our potential to build our own environments as we imagine them in the outside world, and also the construction of psychological spaces. Can you talk a little bit about about both of those potentials?

Dennis: I think theorizing about architecture on a psychological level is good practice. We need to be able to daydream about our environment and how it affects our daily interactions – and consider that we are solely responsible for those outcomes. I also think it's what's lacking in the professional field. I feel there is always a formula and obviously a professional architect has to think about engineering and how a building will stand...I don't. The practicality of construction can be a limitation. Ultimately I feel my role as an artist is to be an architectural critic and in this sense I am very much interested in Situationist ideas and the questioning of the urban construct. Also, I believe my work tries to



engage an aspect of the ritual surrounding the construction site/process as if it were some kind of mythic practice.

Swoon: Are there any specific myths, stories or texts that inform your work? What about films? There is something kind of cinematic particularly about your photographs of your sculptural spaces.

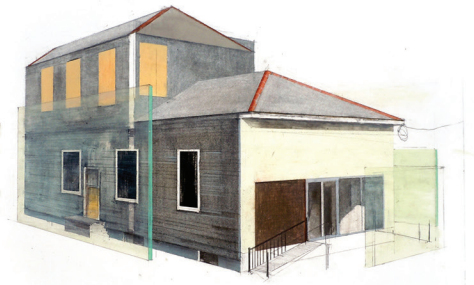
Dennis: The joy of trying to induce myth where culturally there isn't any is a motive for me. I just feel that the urban edifice is too much a means to an end rather than a means in itself. The Test Site drawings, for example, were a reaction against sites in the mid-west where homes are built for the sole purpose of blowing them up to test bombs. I wanted to do a series of drawings about testing the placement of objects or wall formations that referenced a kind of feng shui. Or the same way a group of standing stones or menhirs were once placed as magnetic markers or points of communication and used for ritual purposes among others. I think this is also why people or living things in my work are so sparse – because I like the mystery of thinking about ancient unknown peoples, yet being left with their specifically placed remnants.

I'm incredibly influenced by film and prefer the slow meditative visual landscapes that are almost like a moving painting. Some directors that come to mind are Tarkovsky, Herzog and Chris Marker. I'm also a big fan of Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* where the old and new urban landscapes are clearly defined...and who doesn't like a soundtrack of the click-clack of shoes against concrete?

Swoon: Can you talk a little bit about your ideas of fixed and unfixed spaces?

Dennis: I simply feel as though the best form of constructed space would be modular. Something the average person could take apart and rearrange; spaces that are built in component parts that could be exchanged very easily and without much effort. For example, maybe you wanted to trade a section of your house with someone or buy clip-on additions. Some other examples of unfixed space would be tent structures, shantytowns or nomadic dwellings. I'm particularly interested in how people arrange temporary spaces like tents. Whenever I go camping I love going around and looking at other peoples' camp sites to see how they've organized simple living components.

Addition 4, 2010, mixed media on paper on panel, 20 x 21"



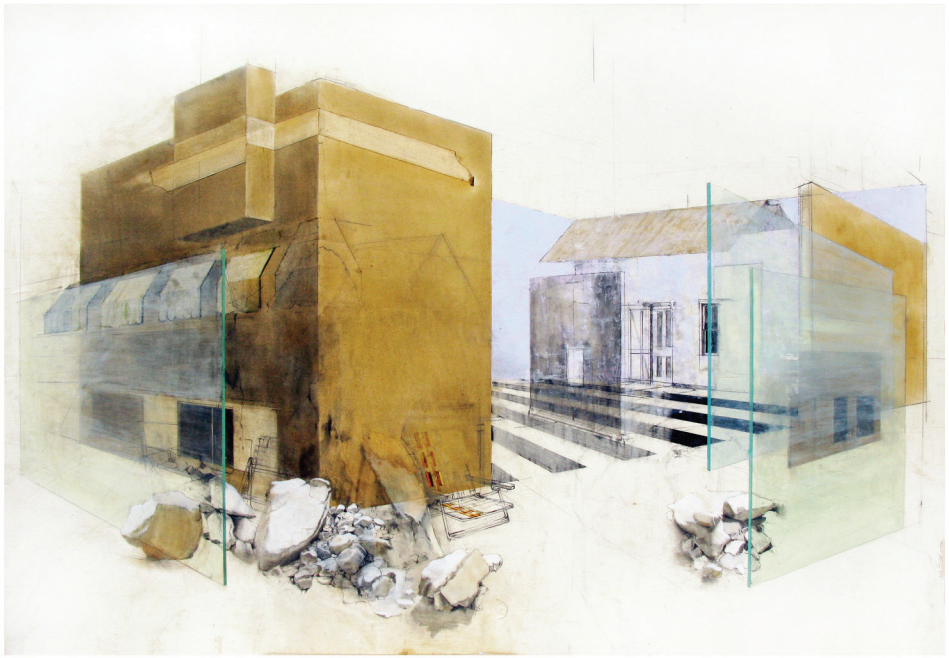
Swoon: Do you see the social questions that are brought up when you consider cities and architecture as something that will play out further in your work?

Dennis: Yes, I would like to incorporate the social concerns I have about architecture in a more direct way. Many of my concerns are about the environment, and they span from the materials we use to build to the food we eat. I've done projects where I take clippings of mint and plant them in overgrown abandoned lots. The idea is to encourage remediation by suggesting that if mint aids digestion in humans it could also aid the digestion of a defunct urban space. I saw this as a form of tagging that would also attract pedestrian harvesters. I have also started using recycled acrylic sheets to make architectural structures for a piece called Stripped Opacity Construction Playground. This piece explores many concepts, one of which is our high consumption of plastics.

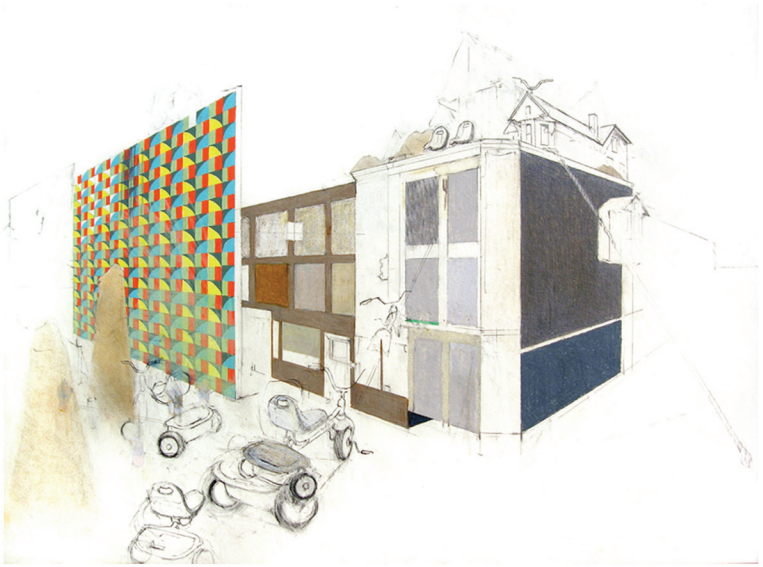
Swoon: What are you most excited about right now, and what are you working on next?

Dennis: I'm most excited about the last piece I mentioned, Stripped Opacity Construction Playground. The sculpture is made in component pieces that can be arranged and rearranged many times in many different situations or settings. The surfaces of the acrylic have retained scratches and other debris, which work to reflect color and light but also mimic the rough, agitated surfaces of the drawings. Some areas are filled with several different colored pigments to resemble the geologic cross sections that are visible, for example, when sections of mountains are cut for road access or during archaeological digs. Other materials include handmade miniature bricks, miniature trash, miniature houses, saw dust, clay dust, thread, paper cones, paper maché balls and other found objects. It embodies so much of what I've been thinking about in the drawings; aspects of modularity and layering. When installed, the piece reflects a kind of ethereal nature that is reminiscent of a shrine. Sculpture also engages three-dimensional space, which is something I couldn't go on talking about without creatively exploring three instead of two dimensions. I'm also excited to explore more my love of urban edible plants. Many plants that can be found in abandoned lots can be eaten or used for medicinal purposes. I would like to do a few projects that speak about this to then provide solutions to the continuous problem of food deserts in urban areas.

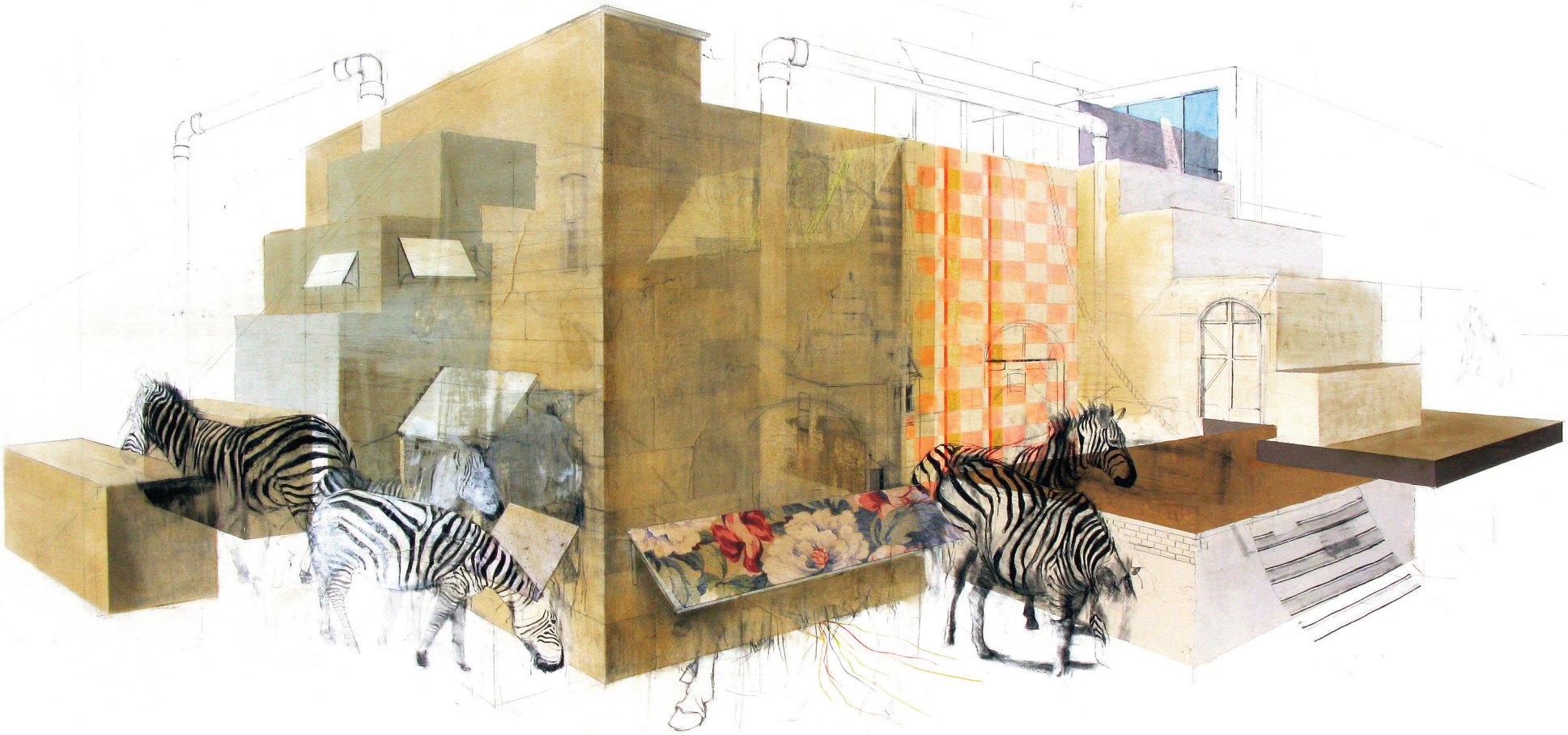
Addition 2, 2010, mixed media on paper on panel, 20 x 21"



Sediment Brake, 2009, mixed media on panel, 38 x 58”



Menhir and Concrete, 2009, mixed media on paper on canvas, 20 x 16”



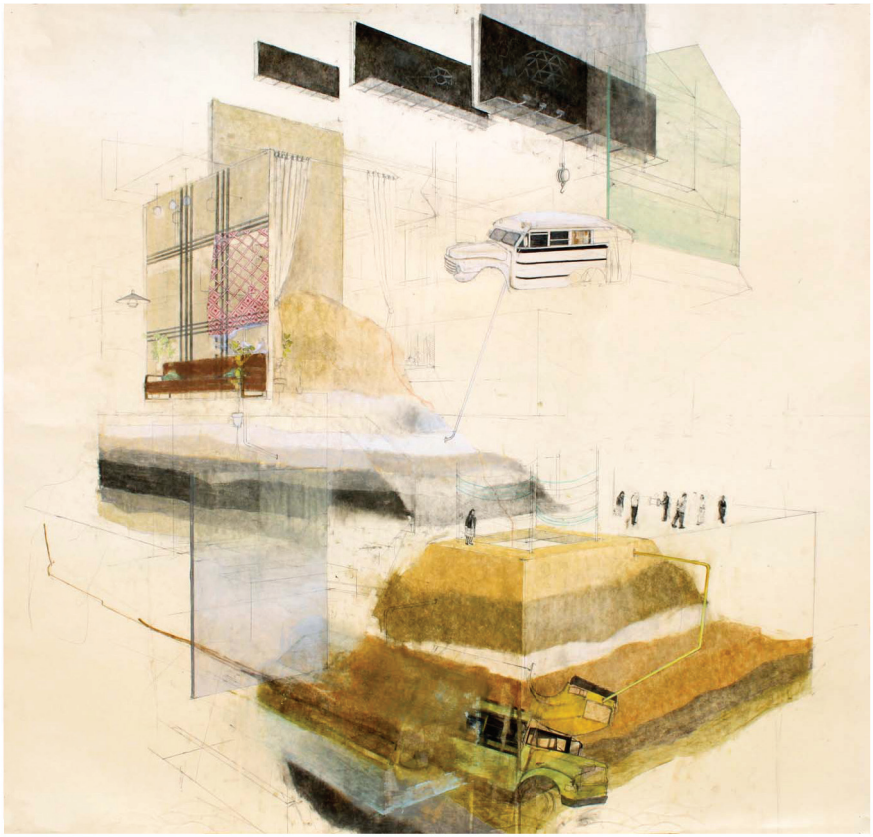
Integration Attempt, 2009, mixed media on paper on canvas, 38 x 75"

Test Site 1, 2009, mixed media on paper on canvas, 21 x 38”

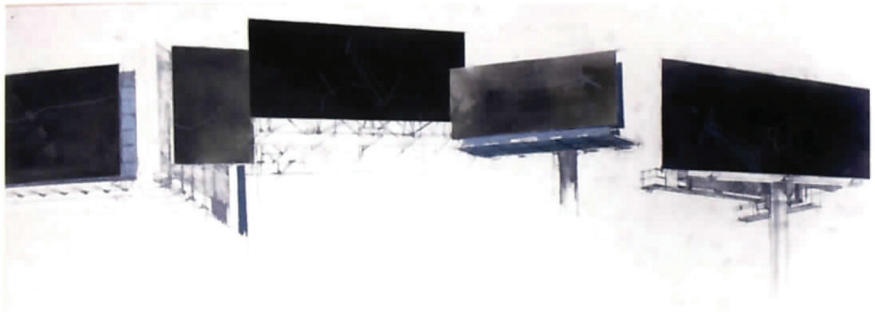
Test Site 3, 2009, mixed media on paper on canvas, 20 x 37”

Bale House, 2008, mixed media, 24 x 36"

Waste Race, 2009, mixed media on paper on canvas, 24 x 33"



Excavation Transfer, 2011, mixed media on paper on panel, 42 x 44"



About Alyssa Dennis

Alyssa Dennis (b. 1980, Springfield, MA) holds a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Tulane University, a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Maryland Institute of Art and completed residencies at Oxbow, Art Institute of Chicago, MI and Conecta, University of Maryland College Park, MD. Dennis has exhibited nationally and internationally including a recent show at the Parse Gallery, New Orleans, LA. She is the recipient of multiple grants and awards including a nominations for the Joan Mitchell Foundation and recent a recipient of the Tulane University Summer Fellowship in 2010. Dennis' work has garnered critical attention in various magazines including Architect Magazine and Urbanite Magazine among others. She currently resides in Baltimore and is a collaborator with renowned artist Swoon on large scale public and museum projects.

CHRISTINA RAY is an innovative gallery and creative catalyst in New York. Our mission, grounded by the concept of psychogeography, is to discover and present the most important contemporary artists exploring the relationship between people and places.

Billboards, 2010, mixed media on paper on panel, 11 x 22"

Cover: *Mapping*, 2010, mixed media on paper on canvas, 22 x 34"