

Interview with Mixed Media Artist:

Debra Eck



Location **Jamestown, NY USA**

Website <http://debraeck.com/index.html>

<https://www.redbubble.com/people/dryadart/shop?>

Ingredients

- Paper Art
- Textiles
- Mixed Media
- Installation
- Sculpture

Preparation

1. Artistic Weapon of Choice:

So many things! I work with paper, thread, textiles, found objects, repurposed text. I guess whatever seems appropriate for the job at hand.

2. If you don't mind telling us about how you approach your work, for example do you create sketches or Photoshop references first, do you go right to attacking the media, etc.

I do sketches, and I keep a sketchbook - I have all of mine going back to high school, but that's a place to store ideas, theory, process notes etc, as much as a place to draw. I don't know really how people think without a sketchbook! How much sketching depends on the project - for example my installation the Secret Garden was based on the flora and fauna of Yorkshire, so I did a lot of reading and research and made a lot of drawings - and then more drawings to simplify that research down to silhouettes for the cut paper. But on a project like women hold up half the sky I just started knitting and learned as I went how the materials could carry the idea I had in mind.

3. How did you get your start in the art world?

Yikes! Well I was always fiddling with stuff as a kid, I made doll furniture from boxes and yogurt cartons, and sewed and gardened - well actually I spent a lot of time drawing in dirt - like Zen gardening maybe. So I'd say I've always been a maker and interested in materiality. I dropped out of college the first time, got married, moved to America, had 3 kids and stayed home with them. Then I went back to school. I started at JCC, then transferred to UB, and then I left my husband and kids in the states while I went back to the UK for a year to do my Masters. I started showing my work, I was quite lucky because JCC offered me some space to show some things I was working on during my Masters. and then included my work in a joint show, I scored a solo show at a local library. So that gave me a lot of forward momentum at first. Otherwise I just kept plugging away - sending in work to open calls - collecting rejection notes - I even made a sculpture with them one year because I had so many. It's hard, you have to keep the hamster wheel spinning, if you stop it feels like you are back at square one again. And you have to cram all that around making a living and making studio time so you have work!

So much chaos!

4. I tend to think of you as a book and paper artist. I know you also like to fuse some textile art in there. How did it come about for you to start mixing these two seemingly different forms? Do you experiment with other art

forms and media?

Well I started as a painter, but before I even finished my undergraduate work it became pretty clear that I was more interested in installation and sculpture. I am really a conceptual artist -



Debra Eck work "Women Hold Up Half the Sky" at Stay Gold 2018 @ the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, New York. Image taken by and property of carmen ml brown.

I am more interested in ideas, so I will work with whatever material suits the ideas. Because so much of my work is about the lives of women, I guess the move into textiles was probably inevitable. I also love process and traditional forms, so etching or book binding or embroidery. I like feeling that connection to the past.

5. Who/what are your influences? (This does not need to be limited to other artists, if licking lead paint inspires you then by all means...)

Well I absolutely love the work of Lee Bontecou and I admire that she walked away from the art world and just kept making work for herself because I think at the end of the day it is the work that is important. I could make a long list of work I really love, people like Leslie Dill,

Doris Salcedo, Eva Hesse, and many of the second wave feminist artists. I'm influenced by artists whose work is rooted in process and the natural world like Alice Fox, Andy Goldsworthy and India Flint. I'm still fascinated by first wave feminism, and the intersection with spiritualism, Arts & Crafts, women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Candace Wheeler and Victoria Woodhull, who operated on the radical fringes of the movement and advocated for crazy things like equal pay not just suffrage. I think their underestimation of the forces of capital still has a lot to teach us.



So many of those artists I have not heard of with the exceptions of Andrew Goldworthy and Ava Hesse, I guess I have some research to do this weekend!

6. If you weren't an artist, what is another career path you may have taken?

I'd probably be a scientist - I find Physics fascinating, and I like Maths. I think there's a strong correlation between the scientist and the artist in terms of creativity and abstract thinking.

7. Of your own work, what would you say is your favorite and why?

Can people honestly choose? I guess I have a great fondness for my senior thesis piece, transcending reason, because it set me on the trajectory that has shaped the rest of my working life and those themes, the lives of women, what constitutes normal, and the use of space and materials are still important to me. It represents that A Ha Moment, where you run into an idea that consumes you. It also took hours and hours to make, another theme in my work, time and labor.

Do you have any misunderstood works?

I'm not sure. I'm not really very concerned about interpretation. I know what I am trying to say - hearing what people see is pretty interesting to me. What's important to me is making the work and working through my ideas.

8. Do you have a studio space? Can you show us what it looks like? Any tips on sorting/organizing or are you of the mindset that creation comes from chaos like myself?

I do have a studio, I'm lucky to live in a big Victorian house and my studio occupies the whole third floor - I'm literally the madwoman in the attic. My space is divided up by media - so I have what I think of as a messy area where I print and occasionally paint, and glue things, and a separate area where I cut paper, and bind books, which I try to keep free of contaminants! I'm a Capricorn so I am a pretty obsessive organizer, but when I am working I make a mess. Sometimes cleaning my studio clears my mind and lets new work percolate.



9. Would a successful artist such as yourself have advice for underlings trying to break out into the world?

Define success on your own terms. I think the art world is dominated by the forces of capitalism, the big players buy as investment - not out of love, liking the work is incidental. Arno Minkkinen once gave a commencement address which is often called the Helsinki Bus Theory, I think its good advice - stay on the fucking bus - do your work, keep doing your work, support that work however you have to so it is not affected by the need to sell the work. And keep sending it out into the world - I start each year aiming to accumulate 100 rejections - because then I know I have put my work in front of a lot of eyes. And don't take it personally - listen to feedback as long as it is not malicious, cultivate a circle of people you trust - and listen to them, but at the end of the day - it is your work, only you know if you are doing it right.

That is all very good advice! Even just the first sentence says so much. Success shouldn't be about money but pouring your artistic soul into the chaos of the world.



10. Lastly: Do you have any upcoming shows, events or projects you would like to plug?

After two solo shows last year, this year I'm just playing in my studio. But I am working with a local not-for-profit to create a new adult art space, I am very excited about that. I deeply believe that we are all born creative, and that making reminds us we can change the world, by transforming materials into an object. It subverts capitalism when we make something for ourselves or repair something that is broken. I also believe that art is part of our most ancient selves, we have used it to make sense of the world since the dawn of humanity. If I can

