

exposure



Diana Gaston in conversation with Stephanie Syjuco & Jo Whaley



Above, Fig 1.: Jo Whaley, *Atomic Tea Party*, from the *Natura Morta* series, c. 1993, Chromogenic photograph, 30" x 24"

Opposite, Fig 2.: Stephanie Syjuco, From the series *The Village* (Small Encampments), *Plowing* (Living Room), 2007, C-print, 18" x 27"

Diana Gaston: Both of you live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area: with Stephanie as a grad of the Art Institute and the MFA program at Stanford, and Jo as a grad of the UC Berkeley MFA program and a visiting faculty member at the San Francisco Art Institute, California College of the Arts, Stanford, and other programs around California: did you two know of one another's work already? Do you share some common ground with some of these Bay Area institutions?

Jo Whaley: Being on the left fringe of the country inspires a liberty to play with tradition and our art institutions have always fostered a rebellious experimentation. Only recently did I become aware of Stephanie Syjuco's work through an exhibit at the Haines gallery in San Francisco. In her freedom to engage in social critique and in her unusual use of materials, I recognize the continuance of the regional art spirit. For example, Pete Voulkos' daring approach to ceramics and the spirited disregard for refinement in the Funk art movement of the '70s, with its mixture of high and low cultural signifiers, are echoed in her approach to art. Stephanie and I come from two different generations, but I can see that the tendency towards the offbeat in the Bay Area art scene still persists.

Collectively, the Bay Area had a significant impact on my development as an artist. In addition to its artists and art institutions, I believe that place itself persuades. By that I mean that location matters and as an artist you will be influenced by your surroundings. Visually, the atmosphere of alternating fog and light and the spectacular natural geography left its mark on me, as did

the intellectual stimulus that comes from the wide ethnic diversity of its population. It has always struck me that the Bay Area, with its Asian influence, is like a contemporary version of fourteenth-century Venice, in that it is a cosmopolitan city on the edge of the sea, poised between the Eastern and the Western state of mind and bathed in an opalescent light. If it sounds magical and exotic, well the Bay Area is.

Stephanie Syjuco: I wasn't aware of Jo's work either, but I see how it makes for a great intersection with mine in that we are both working with manipulating conventions and style to create a contemporary meaning. I do think the "Left Coast" mentality helps to generate a certain freedom, and the local conceptual works from the '70s were a huge early influence on me while I was in school.

I know for me that going to Stanford for grad school was a huge thing—all of a sudden my access to the "academy" was totally opened up and I was always in the library trying to research all the esoteric things that I wanted to cover in my art practice. I felt it was really important to start to try to get more specific about what my ideas were, and especially how they plugged into the larger world of economics, culture, sociology, and history. As fabulous as art school was for me, it took attending the bigger institutions to really help me develop my work because prior to that I felt I was dealing with abstracts instead of realities.

DG: Can you discuss the importance of museum collections and archives in your work and research? I'm thinking here of Jo's reference to still life painting and Stephanie's reference to botanical prints.

JW: Research is an important and very pleasurable aspect of my art practice. Coming to photography through an education in painting, I was naturally exposed to the serious study of art history at UC Berkeley. Between my undergraduate and graduate years

With each of my series, I study the art history as it pertains to that subject. My research goes beyond the visual, however, in that I like to study the subject itself for ideas. For example right now I have returned to an earlier project called "The Theater of Insects," (figs. 10 & 12) which will be published by Chronicle Books in September 2008, and the photographs will be in a traveling exhibit that opens at the same time at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D. C. For this series, I have read extensively on the subject of entomology and have regular conversations with an entomologist, Linda Wiener, who is writing an essay for the book along with Debra Klochko from MOPA, San Diego, where the exhibit will travel. Linda looks at my photographs and comments on them



from an entomologist's point of view and shares her research and musings on the insect world. This in turn leads me to new ideas that I incorporate into photographs. It is fascinating and stimulat-

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I spent six months in Europe with very little money, but thankfully I had an international museum pass. I spent four to six hours a day studying the collections in museums. There is no substitute to seeing art and architecture first hand.

ing. Ironically, I had thought the project complete until I started doing further research.

SS: I had the great fortune to work as a graphics and exhibition designer at a science museum in San Francisco, The Exploratorium, for nearly eight years, during and shortly after my undergraduate



Above, Fig. 3: Stephanie Syjuco, *Detail from Five Days Towards a New Modernism* (After Charlotte Perriand; Beijing), 2007, cardboard, paper, tape, foil, mixed media, 82" x 42" x 22"

Right, Fig. 4: *Installation view of Five Days Towards a New Modernism* (After Charlotte Perriand; Beijing)



Opposite, Fig. 5: Jo Whaley, *After Zurbaran, from the Natura Morta series*, c. 1992, Chromogenic photograph, 24"x30"

schooling. It was a huge influence on me, although it wasn't a traditional museum in the sense of its collecting and displaying tactics—they tried hard to avoid the visuals of a natural history museum world. But I did wind up working mostly with the life sciences department and dealing directly with scientist teams to try to convey complex biological processes in a "friendly" and accessible way to the general public. What resulted was a deep appreciation for historical depiction (since I had to study previous ways of illustration and diagramming), but [it] also gave me the challenge of tweaking and reworking these images for a modern, twenty first-century public.

On a kind of flip side, sometimes not knowing the "right" way to depict something can be a great thing. Like, research can be fabulous, but sometimes I think approximation and estimation can be more interesting—to literally not know if you're depicting a scientific style correctly means you are trying to recall a collective memory about what "scientific" looks like, and that the mistranslations and slippages that happen in making these mistakes is an essential part of the human condition. Here I'm thinking about the sculp-

tures I make based on tiny jpegs downloaded from the Internet ("La Maison Tunisie" and "Five Days Towards a New Modernism" [figs. 3 & 4]). There's not much information there, so you have to improvise and privilege a part of your brain that is more subjective as opposed to specific or "correct."

DG: I'm intrigued by Jo's work with entomologists, and opening up the work to the interpretation of experts outside of the visual arts. Do you find that the way we discuss and interpret and present images is also expanding?

JW: In our times, visual language seems to be very pervasive and persuasive. Images are used extensively in fields outside of art and people today are visually very literate. The collective engagement with the Internet only reinforces the power of images in our culture and makes them instantly available on a global scale, which is very significant. For example, the Abu Ghraib images had a strong immediate impact across the world and were a frightening and sad comment on the war. It is a profound change in visual communication that anyone with a cell phone can take a picture and post it globally.

Stephanie, as someone who uses the Internet for visual research, what do you feel about this issue?

SS: Some of my projects have relied purely on Internet research, and I mostly use it as a space to cull images and deal with it conceptually as a collective collection—a repository of stuff that may or may not all be “true.” While there is no disputing the power of the reported, documentary, or political image, I like the idea that there is an anarchic and chaotic amount of images and information floating around that can seep into people’s sense of collective or shared experience.

The speed in which things can become “out there” or even viral is a double-edged sword, both a positive or negative depending on how [you] utilize the flow. I’m interested in the level of fiction and freeform that is floating around online as much as I am in the “reality” of it.

DG: Both of you demonstrate an element of deliberate artifice in your constructions, a gentle mocking of scientific diagrams and documents, technological advancements, and dubious products. Can you discuss your approach to your constructions?

JW: Art is artifice. Somewhere along the line, I disregarded the fact that photography can be used to record reality. There is the concept that “Theater is the lie that tells the truth.” By being obvious about the fiction, you can engage the viewer in a suspension of disbelief and present ideas that otherwise would be controversial. My approach to photography is to take elements from nature and our urban culture and re-contextualize them on the proscenium stage of the still life. The arrangement of these discordant elements is done by free association and intuition with just a vague notion of an idea. By allowing myself to work loosely and subconsciously, ironies do appear and new questions are posed—questions about the

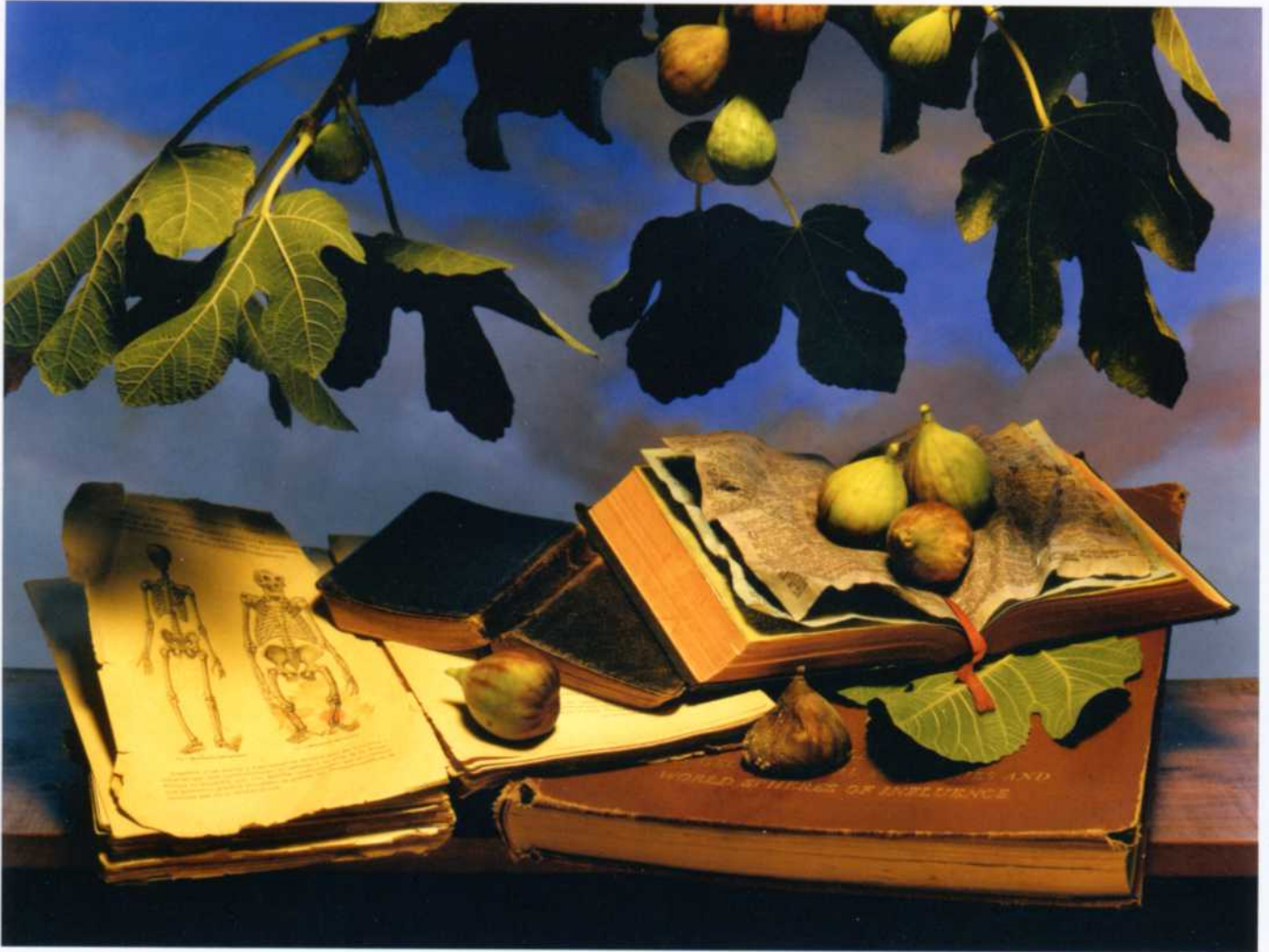


notion of technological advancement and the environment. I see the results as a form of narrative fiction.

SS: I love thinking that the power of style or image can be turned on its head—that using a convention like historical diagrams or wood grain can be altered in such a way to subvert the viewer’s assumptions of its authority. I hand-make most of my sculptural constructions, and at times when the final work is documented I have to take pains to describe that it was handmade and not prefabricated or mass produced. I really enjoy making “fakes” because I don’t see them as fakes at all (or even *trompe l’oeil*, for that matter), but more like a way to strive for the beauty and imperfection of the handmade within a system that cherishes standardization and order.

DG: Let’s discuss your constructions themselves, which are like elaborate performances in miniature. Can you discuss the process of collecting, building, and assembling your specimens/products?

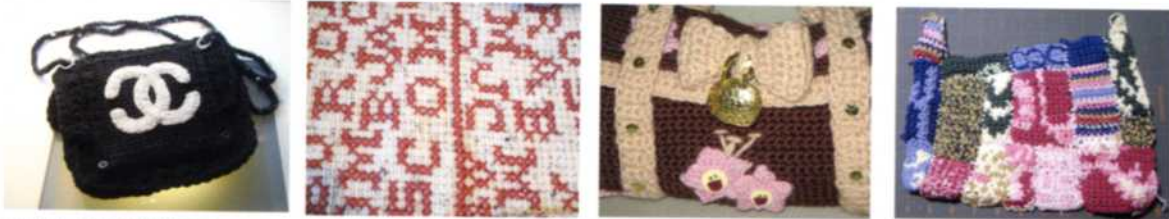
JW: My process is what I call “the theater of photography,” and I agree with Roland Barthes’ assessment when he said, “Pho-



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Above, Fig. 6: Jo Whaley, *Spheres of Influence*, from the *Natura Morta* series, c. 1992, Chromogenic photograph, 24"x30"

Opposite, Fig. 7: Stephanie Syjuco, *Image selections from The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)* collaborative project, 2006



Right, Fig. 8: Stephanie Syjuco, *Installation view of Black Market*, 2005, Paper-mache covered objects, shelves, framed Fuji chromogenic lightjet prints

Below, Fig. 9: Stephanie Syjuco, *Detail of Black Market*, 2005, framed Fuji chromogenic lightjet print, 15" x 20"

Opposite, Fig. 10: Jo Whaley, *Geometrid, Evolution of Light into Dark*, from the *Natura Morta* series, c. 2000. Chromogenic photograph, 30" x 24"



ography is a crude form of theater." Early in my career, I earned a living as a scenic artist, painting sets for Zellerbach Playhouse and the San Francisco Opera and Ballet companies. I still am creating sets, but now it is for the camera. My studio looks like a theatrical scene shop, with backdrops, a prop room, lights, gels, and construction tools. The props which I have collected over the years, I call visual oddities, with each one having a unique attribute. It could be a torn wasp nest or a rusted watch face, with the hands missing. There is some spirit in the object that attracts me. In constructing a still life, I move the elements about by looking abstractly at their color, shape, and form until the magic of the image appears.

The still life objects are as actors on a stage and their position relative to each other establishes a dialogue. The studio lighting is key to animating the inanimate still life and unifying the disparate elements together. The content seems to flow from this subconscious play and I have learned to trust the process, rather than designing the piece before constructing it. Artifice and illusion are part of the

theatrical tradition that fuses the imaginary with real and I have incorporated this practice into photography.

SS: When I first saw Jo's photos, it struck me that both our work is essentially about the meaning of objects and the narratives they play, so I think her metaphor of theater is a perfect one! Despite jumping across other disciplines, I have a tendency to specifically call myself a sculptor even though I also make prints, videos, and drawings. I'm incredibly interested in "object-hood" and how an object is a literal presence, a physical manifestation of an idea or metaphor that insists on being there. They can begin to play a part in a type of fictional role. Even when making images, I try to be conscious that I am essentially a sculptor juxtaposing "things" in different ways, or dealing with the materiality of the image. To me, the "Comparative Morphologies" prints (see cover) became incredibly tactile and not just image-based—which is hard to see as reproductions—as they're printed on a lush paper with deckled edges and try to attain the aura of having both history and future embedded within.

DG: Stephanie, you have definitely spilled out from the 2D photographic frame into sculptural installations. Jo, you construct sculptural objects, however ephemeral they may be, for the camera. Can you discuss the importance of a physical, fully dimensional object to your photographic work?

JW: It is more immediate and intense to do my work physically, rather than say digitally. An opera singer once told me that singing is being inside the music, not outside of it, listening. It is a completely different way of experiencing the composer's work. I feel the same way about creating images. By physically being in the studio, I am within the world of the image, not just viewing it. The experience is more like a waking dream.

Lately, I have been shooting with a digital camera, because it frees me up creatively. Since there is no film cost or processing down time, I can be ever more experimental and see the results of a shoot immediately. However, the sets and lighting effects are still physical and the digital processing is only used for standard darkroom procedures, not to construct the image. I am so happy to be released from the darkroom, with all its chemicals, and find digital photography to be a wonderfully creative tool, yet the reality is that I cannot sit for too long and much prefer to be moving about the studio than being in front of a computer.

SS: For some of the same reasons as Jo, I've been working more and more with digital images lately, as it's just faster and more immediate than film processing and darkroom work. I recently finished a photo project that works better as printed pieces rather than as sculptures or physical/literal tableaux ("The Village [Small Encampments]")(fig. 2). In a similar manner to Jo's projects, they started off as constructed sets and scenes. My decision to choose the photographic route stems mostly from wanting to reference travel and tourist snapshots as well as deal with the medium of photography as a "documentary" or journalistic tool. The resulting images are patently constructed but I think it's more interesting that they were physically created as opposed to digitally constructed—like a small element of "truth" exists in the actual object being made.

DG: You both explore aspects of adaptation, camouflage, and survival in your subject matter and imagery. Can you discuss these ideas and how your work intersects?

JW: My inspiration comes directly from my study of the insect world with its strategies of mimicry, camouflage, and metamorphosis. In an image, if you can show that one object echoes



another visually, then subconsciously the viewer equates the two in their mind, leading to new interpretations. There is a dynamic tension when you successfully fuse two opposing elements in a single piece—beautiful with ugly, light with dark, enchanting with horrific, brashness with subtlety, cool colors with warm, structure with chaos, technology with nature. Embedding both visual and intellectual dichotomies in a single piece adds contrast and reflects the complexity of life.

Both of our works, while different in subject matter do follow a similar strategy in a playful fusing of opposites. What I admire about Stephanie's approach is her mimicry of urban design, with its perfectly machined mass production; yet her work is purposefully hand made, with all the subtle telltale signs of the hand and its inherent imperfections. By combining these two opposing forms of construction, she is creating an engaging social commentary that poses a question and allows for various interpretations.

SS: Loosely speaking, I think I use adaptation and camouflage as a tactic for lulling the viewer into thinking a work is representing one idea, and then exposing a secondary or even third meaning

behind it—the point being that one must look closely to uncover a certain type of complexity in any situation. Speaking again about the “Comparative Morphologies” prints, it was important to me that there was beauty portrayed in the common technological components and that the intersection of nature and technology wasn’t so much of a clash as it was a strange co-mingling.

of art history. I’m trying to figure out what compels one to keep re-looking and re-finding.

JW: In the “Natura Morta” series, I was referencing a historical style. But in the “Theater of Insects” project, I am actually fusing the scientific theory of Industrial Melanism with the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi.



I love how Jo’s “Natura Morta” series directly references historical *vanitas* paintings, as I’ve always been fascinated by the mannered display of objects and their meanings. In a weird way I see the traditional *vanitas* as having an intersection with today’s art-directed commercial store displays or department store windows: objects laid out in an incredibly self-conscious way with a kind of social narrative played out across them based on juxtaposition and style.

Jo, do you see yourself moving forward with reworking historical styles, and if so, which ones? I’m curious about it because in my own work I can’t seem to shake the habit of revisiting specific eras

Each project suggests its own direction and influences based on the imagery itself. I would say that the one unifying theme that weaves itself through my work is the notion of the disconnect between our urban culture and the natural world. This “Global Folly” is in turn exemplified by the classic theme of *vanitas*. Ultimately, decay and entropy take their toll on every human endeavor and all is vanity in the face of Nature.

SS: I see a mix of beauty and an almost gothic sensibility to some of your works. How do you balance the push-pull of seductive surface and a kind of beautiful horror?

JW: I firmly believe in seduction. Art is color, composition, line and form. It is meant to be seductive, like music for the walls. On the other hand, creative forces in the world are always tempered by destructive ones—from the molecular level to world wars. So if, as an artist, one is holding up a mirror to reflect the reality of our times, then there will always be the dichotomy that life itself

Above, Fig. 11: Stephanie Syjuco and Gail Pickering, *I Love Technology and Technology Loves Me*. Installation and performance at the Center for Metamedia, Czech Republic, 1999. Modified and found electronic equipment with mixed media

Opposite, Fig. 12: Jo Whaley, *Cerambycidae*. Selected Writings, from *Theater of Insects*, c. 2003. Chromogenic photograph, 30" x 24"





Top, Fig. 13: Jo Whaley, *Water buffalo and plums, market, still life*, Luang Prabang, Laos, 2006

Above, Fig. 14: Jo Whaley, *Tire Trash Urns*, Luang Prabang, Laos, 2006

presents. The critic Robert Hughes said, "all great art simultaneously stimulates the senses, the imagination and the intellect." I strive for those layers. Seduce and surprise the viewer, then give them something to ponder.

DG: Stephanie, I feel that your work also operates on these multiple levels and I appreciate that your work is enigmatic rather than didactic. For example your piece "Black Market Blowout" is both familiar in its staging, yet mysterious and thought provoking with its enshrouded black objects, which are visually dynamic in their organic shapes and in tension with the clean lines of the shelving.

How do you navigate the commoditization of your work in the art world with the fact that your art is, in part, about the ironies of capitalism and globalization?

SS: Fabulous question! I think this predicament is something I really struggle with, and so far my answer has been to create different works that operate under different distribution channels—I am conscious if I am making "gallery work" that the rules are different than making a work that circulates freely. What's happened is that I have fractured my practice to accommodate this conundrum: whether its through "secret" public artworks that have no direct audience (of which I suppose I can't talk about!), or showing works in a commercial gallery that are essentially not for sale ("The Counterfeit Crochet Project/Critique of a Political Economy") (fig. 7), or making dubiously saleable works out of non-archival materials ("La Maison Tunisie" and "Five Days Towards a New Modernism") (figs. 3 & 4), I try to spread out my tactics and hit as many bases as possible. The adage is true that "capitalism stops at nothing" and I guess the trick is to see if it is at all possible to work within its constraints to turn it upon itself.

JW: You make reference to culling information on the Philippines from the Internet to connect with your birthplace. Have you returned to the Philippines since you were a child? This year I spent a month in Southeast Asia, the experience of which gives me an immediate visceral understanding of some of your work on the exploitation that comes with globalization.

SS: I just got back from a three-week trip to the Philippines, where I participated in an exhibition called "Galleon Trade" that directly referenced both the historical Spanish galleon trade route as well as the current globalized situation. It's only been my second time there as an adult and during this trip I was exposed to a plethora of young artists dealing with complex and exciting issues—they're right in the heart of both the highs and lows that come with

globalization, and they critique it and turn it upside down in clever and humorous ways. Manila especially is a crazy place, a mix of both developing and developed worlds, and I was struck by how the artists there are literally "living it" as opposed to merely depicting it. I can't imagine not going back to see more art there!

JW: That clash of pre-industrial traditions with modern technologies that you describe, I find so stimulating. There is such a huge gulf between our capitalistic consumer culture, with all its privileges and the rough and tumble "Third World," with all its limitations and its ad hoc economies. I see many evidences in your work that are based on this chasm: "La Maison Tunisie," the "Counterfeit Crochet" project, the "Black Market" series. In these projects, I see you celebrating manual skills and ingenuity versus the mechanistic multinational approach to producing consumer goods. I would posit that the notion of modern day piracy in the black market is more than a disrespect for intellectual property and corporate concerns, but rather it comes from a distinct cultural difference in attitude. Free form and using anything and everything available in the production of objects is after all the norm in the third world.

SS: What I find culturally so fascinating about piracy and black markets is that the disregard for international copyright laws circumvents traditional channels of capitalism and creates a means by which folks can directly acquire that which they could not otherwise afford. My main interest in it stems from how DIY ("do-it-yourself") it can be when the average person decides they can claim the authority to make their own version of something, even if it's just a copy. One of my ongoing collaborative works, "The Counterfeit Crochet Project/Critique of a Political Economy," (fig. 7) is both a critique and an homage to the culture of the commodity in that it acknowledges the lure of the high-status object yet urges crafters to hand-make their own translations of them. I like to think that the original is so overrated, anyway.

JW: In the past American artists went to Europe for inspiration, whereas we are both traveling to developing countries (a misnomer in itself), which for me at this time offers greater stimulus. I feel as though I am witnessing an energetic and strange new future. The ingenuity and creative re-use of materials is really inspiring. I see art everywhere; not just that which is sanctioned in museums, but rather art that is in the chaos of the streets. For example, this year in Luang Prabang I noticed unusual trash cans in that small town set in the remote hills of Laos. To my amazement, they were made from large truck tires that had been reformed to the shape of an ancient urn and lid (fig. 14). To me this is art...an inventive re-use of materials that references the past, made by hand, and sensual in form. An anthropologist once said that one of the purposes of art in all cultures was to make special and ritualize the common-

place. This one example of "urban trash urns" illustrates the imagination and resourcefulness of the so-called Third World.

SS: How do you see this visual experience and intake influencing your projects?

JW: Already I use junk in my sets and these travels only reinforce my penchant for refuse and its creative re-use. I have an attraction to manufactured objects that have been partially reclaimed by natural forces: water, fire, earth, and air. Burnt or rusted metal, plastic pitted by the sea, glass turned iridescent in the earth are all candidates for inclusion in my still-lives. They represent literally a fusion between the urban and natural world, as well as the transience of life. Whatever humans create, entropy and decay are not far away.

My travels also free me from thinking of art only in the context of art institutions. Art *should* be everywhere. While still participating in the art world, I feel very free to step outside of it. Some of my images are licensed through Getty to be used as book covers and editorial illustrations, which brings the work into the commonplace. For the "Theater of Insects" project, I am specifically seeking out Natural History Museums to exhibit in. The context makes sense, as actual insect specimens can be shown with the photographs, which will provide a richer experience for the viewer.

Stephanie, you mentioned that you were going to try and pursue returning to the Philippines. Why and how do you see your work changing in the future in response to working there?

SS: The "Galleon Trade" project that I was a part of in Manila was as much about intersecting and interfacing with contemporary Filipino artists as much as it was about showing our work in their context, so we had some amazing dialogues between us and I was privileged to see a range of high-caliber work. I'm extremely excited to go back and pick back up on the dialogues we started, and make work directly in the context of Manila as opposed to "importing" work there. I started a few talks with artists about collaborating, and these seem to me to be the most exciting direction. I'm pretty ready to throw my practice wide open and not think too much about a pre-determined project, but work with others to see what springs up. In the past, I've had successful collaborative endeavors when I've opened myself up to a new situation and was able to step outside of my "known" practice a bit ("I Love Technology and Technology Loves Me," 1999, in collaboration with London artist Gail Pickering in the Czech Republic) (fig. 11).

Specifically, several of us are interested in the idea of a "tropical gothic"—the idea of a dark but playful side to the kitsch and hybridity that is the Philippines, where you have high-rise condominiums and posh shopping malls side-by-side with shanties and slums. Two artists I'm thinking of are video and installation artist Yason Banal

