

in conversation

This email interview was held between Mandy Conidaris and Mem Sevenster in December 2013 after Mandy had visited Mem's studio in November and they had discussed her work at length.

MC - Your work for the last two years has related to aspects of your personal journey with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). It must have taken a lot of courage to turn that trauma into creative visual artwork. At what point did you feel ready to make these artworks? Do you remember a specific trigger?

MS - The public tends to label people with quirky habits as being obsessive compulsive. Most people have a misconception about the difference between these quirks and OCD as a mental illness. There is still a huge stigma associated with mental illness because people in general are misinformed. My intention was to encourage debate around OCD. I became psychotic because my OCD was not diagnosed and treated. While I was in hospital I studied an OCD self-help book. I started to underline all the five letter words in this book. The book became the trigger for this body of work. It took a lot of courage to be so open about my illness but I had to be open in order to express myself and to explain my thoughts and art making processes.

MC - One of your creative influences is the work of Yayoi Kusama who also has an obsessive disorder – it must have been inspiring for you to discover another artist working with a similar issue, as it is often not easy to reveal such an intimate aspect of yourself through your artwork?

MS - Kusama and I suffer from the same illness. I am inspired by her as an individual and as an artist. In an interview with Kusama, she stated that she relies on her own interior imagination to make her work and that she makes work in order to gain spiritual stability and to release herself from psychosomatic anxiety. I strongly identify with this notion.

MC - First I'd like to speak with you about your 2012 exhibition *FIVEL ETTER WORDS OTHER TUNES*, in particular your wall installation, *Redemption Wall*. Several questions here in one! Although you already had a significant understanding of the processes and manifestations of OCD, your thinking processes must have been enhanced by your thorough research around Jungian visual symbolism and, for example, Dada poetry. Yet in *FIVEL ETTER WORDS*, because of your pressing fixation with the number five, your work has the sense of being made in a mode of almost automatic obsession. Did your making, thinking and research happen in parallel? Or did one aspect evolve first?

MS - Automatism is the nature of obsession and compulsion and therefore will always be a characteristic of my art work. When I collect objects, images or words I do so instinctively and obsessively but when I assemble these into art works my thinking processes are fuelled by my research.

MC - My understanding is that the starting point for FIVE LETTER WORDS came around because, due to your fixation on the number five, you began to underline all the five letter words in an OCD self-help book. Your natural impulse after this was to paper a wall with these pages. Would you say that this act of underlining in this specific book not only negates the purpose of the book but reinforces – in fact almost acknowledges – the realities of OCD?

MS - Yes, definitely. An understanding of the physiology, psychology and biochemistry behind OCD does not enable the sufferer to repress the symptoms. Medication and certain behavioural therapies such as Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) can help to control the symptoms but OCD is an incurable illness.

MC - Your underlining extended to dictionaries, which were exhibited as part of the overall installation?

MS - In relation to my OCD I am an automaton. This loss of control causes the psychosomatic anxiety which I referred to previously. My discovered therapeutic methodology is to perform purposeful activities such as creating systems, groupings or collections and to categorize, document, tag or archive these in order to counteract this loss of conscious thought and action. Dictionaries are alphabetically grouped word archives and I created a secondary word system by underlining all the five letter words. Although my intention is to gain control purposefully, the actual execution of these actions always becomes obsessive again and ultimately I lose control again.

MC - Could you describe the Dada influence in the creation of your poetry?

MS - Two years ago I was on a flight from Miami to the Bahamas. I read an article about Cuba in the inflight magazine. I automatically began to underline all the five letter words on the two pages in front of me. I then wrote all those five letter words down in the empty column next to the article and with those words I wrote a poem. While doing research I discovered that Tristan Zara had formulated a system for creating Dada poems which reflects my ritualised way of creating ready-made poems.

MC - During your research, you decided to adopt the visual symbols of the Red Horse, a dice with five dots on each side, the symbol for copper, a pentagram and the musical symbol *dal segno*. Could you describe how these symbols related to your experience with OCD?

MS - The red horse carries several meanings in my work but most significant are the psychological interpretations. Sigmund Freud describes the ego-id conflict of the mind as the horse guiding the rider rather than the rider guiding the horse. According to Carl Jung, wild horses symbolize the uncontrollable instinctive drives that erupt from the subconscious. He maintains that the shadow contains the unconscious aspects of a

personality that have been lost, rejected or non-integrated. Since reason guides behaviour, in OCD the compulsive behaviour of the id becomes disruptive and steers reason off track.

The dice with five dots on each side offers only a fixed, predictable outcome as with OCD. *Dal Segno* instructs the musician to repeat a passage of music continuously, as my brain 'instructs' me to chant and count repetitively. The copper rods are ambiguous, suggesting both potential conductors of Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT), yet protection against lightning: standing for OCD medication that protects the affected person from ECT. The pentagram is also a sign of protection, and here refers to redemptive religious rituals and behavioural rituals provoked by OCD.

MC - Despite research, the making process played a large part in your final presentation. Did you find different ideas suggested themselves during the act of making, or afterwards while you were reflecting on what you had created? Or both?

MS - I would say both. The ideas for *Redemption Wall* originated from the underlined five letter word pages in the OCD self-help book. I realized how futile it was to try and control my obsessions and compulsions even while being medicated, but it I also realized that I benefitted from the feeling of being in control of this system of five letter words that I have created. The transference of this idea to dictionaries felt like the logical next step. I have been collecting 'things' for a long time but now decided to specifically collect five letter word objects and images. When it came to the actual execution of *Redemption Wall* however the process of automatism took over again. I transferred the systems and collections which I have obsessively accumulated onto the wall and allowed the work to gestate from there. I realized afterwards that I subconsciously created links between words, objects and images.

MC - What would you say your main intention was when making the works for FIVE LETTER WORDS, and do you feel that the work expresses these intentions?

MS - My main intension was to visualise my inner obsessive, compulsive landscape and I knew by doing so I would initiate a dialogue about OCD. My work did express this intention and viewers responded strongly to this work.

MC - After the work was installed, how did you assess your installation from the perspective of its meanings to you, namely the memories it evoked of your thought processes during the making: conceptual, technical, personal, and your larger life experiences?

MS - I feel that the work was very successful on all of these levels. I think when an artist speaks honestly from a place of personal experience there is a sense of authenticity to the work. I realized that I have come a long way since I was being diagnosed and hospitalised, and although it was at times a very painful process, it was also very therapeutic and healing.

MC - You had much positive reaction to the work. At the time, was the work's significance to the viewer important to you?

MS - It was important to me because I wanted to create an awareness about OCD.

MC - Moving onto the new works created for outoftheCUBE, I've spent a lot of time looking at these five images & the details in them, and am really amazed at how sophisticated the juxtaposition of images and text is. This group of exhibitions is going to come under the general curatorial title of 'Gestation', which I feel is relevant for your work, as I see the creating of FIVE LETTER WORDS, in particular your *Redemption Wall* (see pdf catalogue) as a kind of period of gestation. It was a time of exploring your OCD in a creative way. This must have been important to you.

MS - Creatively it was a very important time for me because I want my art to evolve. Like Kusama, I work with a concept that is very personal, and as such it is a topic which I will keep working with in the future because my illness, to a great extent, is a characteristic of my work and dictates my working methodologies. I do become bored easily and I need variation, innovation and a constant shift to keep me interested.

MC - As an installation - which consisted of your underlined pages wallpapered to the gallery wall and so unable to ever be exactly reproduced - the *Redemption Wall* existed as a moment in time. I see your new works, which represent fragments of the *Redemption Wall*, as tangible extensions of this, a kind of 'coming off the wall and out into the world' in the form of mixed media, two-dimensional works, using collage, assemblage, and mark-making. It feels as though you are ready to share this creative exploration with the broader world, and could you speak a little about your intention in this regard?

MS - The new works are definitely extensions of the *Redemption Wall* and I incorporated actual pages, images and objects from it into these works. It was however my intention that these works should become new independent art works.

MC - As with all organic processes, from gestation to the resulting new life and onwards there are shifts and changes as we adapt to new and changing situations, occurrences and influences. In *Redemption Wall* you made extensive use of five symbols – the red horse, dice, the symbol for copper, pentagram and the *Dal Segno* symbol. Have you started to use any new symbols as well, and if so what are they and what are their significance to you?

MS - I did not use any new symbols as such, but I shifted the focus in these works to the subconscious links or connections between the five letter words, images and objects which I detected in *Redemption Wall* after its completion. I found it rather interesting that I created links between seemingly unrelated things and wanted to explore this idea more.

MC - You have said you travel a lot. Turning to our conversation last month, you described your passion/obsession with collecting small artefacts on your travels. Could you speak a little about this?

MS - I collect objects which I feel a connection with, and many of them have an interesting history. The connection might be that it is a five letter word object or it could be linked meaningful to other objects, images or words in a specific artwork. Sometimes a single object would become the artwork. Some of these objects are very rare and expensive, for example the crucified figure in the bottle. It could also be a cheap, mass produced, second hand thrift shop find like the Spanish dancer doll. The effects of existence or time on objects and humans, and the subsequent fragility as a result thereof, attract my interest and I often highlight this in my work.

MC - I discussed with you that I had started reading other meanings into your work based on some of the imagery and objects you used. Could you comment on the small crucifixion artefact in the bottle and why you came to use it?

MS - Folk artists have created miniatures such as crucifixion scenes in glass bottles since the 1700's. This object is a beautiful example of this art form. This bottle is an original object and it is quite old but I am not sure when exactly it was created. I bought it from a collector and decided to create an artwork around it. The object contains many five letter words such as Jesus, cross, blood, thorn, glass etc. It also refers to religious beliefs and rituals which I have earlier discussed around the relevance of in *Redemption Wall*. In this work the object is linked to many other images, words and ideas to create many different interpretations.

MC - Some parts of the work seem to relate to women and medical interventions. They seem to be less about ECT and now about an artificial medical 'restructuring' of the body? Are they linked to social expectations of fitting into the norm, or did you have another intention?

MS - I have always been drawn to the absurd, bizarre and dark side of human nature and also to the mythical, mystical and spiritual aspects of our existence and am therefore also drawn to imagery and objects relating to these things. In *Redemption Wall* I specifically used imagery relating to ECT, but in these works I used unrelated images which could be linked to each other in some interesting, bizarre or even humorous way. It is up to the viewer to discover these links.

MC - Finally, linked to the last question about your imagery, some parts of the work seem to refer to stereotyping and/or abuse of women? For example, for me the image of the naked bride under the wedding veil visually bounces back and forth against the little doll which seems to have sexual connotations, the Madonna/whore dichotomy. I read this because of the red costume, being tied, the juxtaposition of the bride, the knees etc.) or

even the role of an abused woman (the stitches on the legs speaking of wounds). Could you comment on this?

MS - I used specific words or phrases, wordplay, and connecting lines to suggest possible links between images and objects. Many of the above mentioned interpretations could be relevant but I specifically intended for it to be more open-ended. These works could be seen as puzzles and it is up to the viewer to find the links.

MC - In relation to your construction of *Redemption Wall*, I also sense - not necessarily your intention, just again I'm responding visually to the work - more work with string rather than line in these new works, which speaks to me of suspension, and by association, to sacrifice (the Crucifixion) and/or a loss of control?

MS - String by implication has many different meanings or interpretations such as thread, string together, string along, unstrung, tangle, untangle or any of the above, and the juxtaposition of objects, words and images suggest possible interpretations.

MC - Your work is physically fragile and needs careful handling. Would you say that this speaks too of the way people with OCD need to exist with people sensitive to their condition?

MS - No. I think the materials and objects that I use and the way in which I assemble the art works make them physically fragile.

MC - I think my responses show just how open-ended an interpretation of your work may be, despite your own creative intention. It is a privilege to exhibit these works on outoftheCUBE.

Thank you Mem.