

MORGAN LEHMAN

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PICNIC



PICNIC#12

Austin Thomas

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Austin Thomas is a multi-disciplinary artist whose drawings, prints, collage, public art works and gallery projects are nurtured by a daily drawing practice, community engagement, and conversations and collaborations with other artists. A solo-exhibition of her drawings and prints from a residency at Guttenberg Arts Center was held earlier this spring at Morgan Lehman Gallery. As an extension of her multimedia art practice, Austin is also a writer and curator, with a recent essay published in a collection by Sharon Loudon (*The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life.*) We met for our picnic at Apartment 38, Austin's recently opened apartment-gallery, exhibiting art in the intimate domestic setting of her private home.

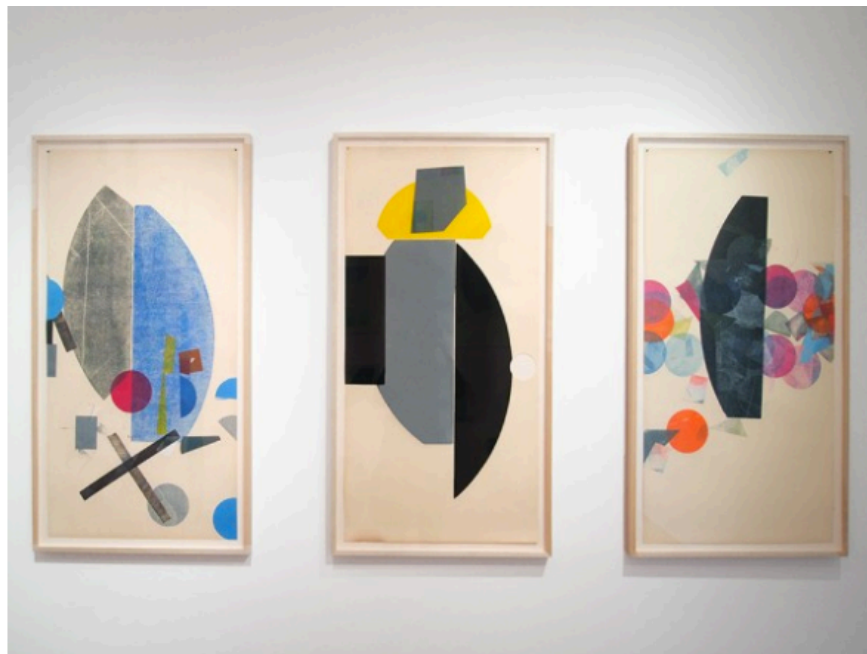
Picnic: There is a lot to catch up on since the last time I saw you was a few years ago, when your gallery, Pocket Utopia, was on the Lower East Side. First I wanted to talk about your solo-exhibition at Morgan

MORGAN LEHMAN

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Lehman because I'm headed there after our picnic. This is a series of drawings and prints you made during a residency at Guttenberg Arts?

Austin: It was named after Guttenberg in Germany, it's a town in New Jersey not far from here. I applied to their print residency and I had never made prints before. When I got there it was very hands off. I had to teach myself a way of printmaking and fast because I was only there 3 months. I wasn't doing something that was revolutionary in terms of printmaking, but I approached it as an artist who is approaching a new task, you invent and you fail and you fix and you move on and you try again. It's all that unfolding to figure it out. I took simple shapes and was inspired by a set of drawings I had been working on where I use stencils. Through trial and error, some of my first prints were really simple rectangles and squares, inspired by Louise Bourgeois, Ellsworth Kelly, Sol Lewitt, Agnes Martin or my own hand. I primarily used these steel templates that I borrowed from the sheet metal shop that I had been working with to fabricate a public art piece that I have in Bushwick. They had these beautiful templates, so I borrowed a bunch of them and used them as printmaking plates. I'd ink up all these different shapes and print on this vintage paper I had been collecting for a while with the idea that the paper itself has its own story.



(Photo: Austin Thomas at Morgan Lehman)

P: The works almost become a performance, because you're not only printmaking you are adapting to new tools and new media as it comes to you. You're creating a new technique and using these metal plates, reinventing this process that you haven't done before. It doesn't surprise me that you'd be a natural printmaker, you've always worked cross-platform in terms of media, you're multifaceted, you draw, you paint, you sculpt, you curate, you write.

A: I make beer. I haven't made beer in a while, but I think that's also about art making. I really feel like everyone is an artist, it's just that some of us get to wear the title, and some of us don't.

P: Do you feel an affection towards one medium more? Or is it more about which one gets the job done for the particular concept?

A: I love drawing, I feel like drawing on anything sort of completes it, drawing in sketchbooks, drawing on paintings, drawing on a community, drawing on the landscape. I also have a daily drawing practice, I start to find drawing as almost a way of thinking, drawing as writing, I have a blog called Drawing on the Utopic. I like to define even cooking as drawing. It's about using the hand, getting in there and being hands on.

P: I like thinking about your public piece as being a “drawing on the landscape,” when and where was your perch installed?

A: In July, it's in a parklet in Bushwick on Humboldt street. My piece is called “Plaza Perch” and it's really a pagoda with two benches with two platforms. You can sit in different places, it has a trellis that matches the building that it's next to. Part of the process of making a public piece is to meet with the community board on how the public art will function, how the plaza will function for the community and they vote on it. No one told me that after you get the project you have to continue proving yourself.

P: Have you been to the perch to see how people interact with it?

A: I go every once in a while and sweep around it and sit. I have a good picture of it during a Saturday night salsa club. They were drumming on the perch and dancing around it.

P: The idea of the perch as a platform for conversation and community ties into your work as a cultural producer and what you're doing here with Apartment 38, bringing people in for art shows, potlucks, and conversation. That seems to be an underlying theme in all your work.

A: So much of my work is about conversation. By talking to other artists and having this platform mature or evolve from running a space or making public work I've noticed that women artists in particular are incredibly generous. I think that's part of who I am as a person, being generous and not seeing the artist as a lone genius in their studio but as an active participant in the world around oneself. Generosity, or being part of a conversation, or being a cultural producer is also a selfish act in a way. You came to me with lunch, I didn't go to you, you came here and you brought me lunch. It's about exchange, it's about giving and taking. There is some sort of feedback loop that happens. With the prints, I didn't just go to a private studio and make prints, and I didn't have someone edition them for me. You're there, the print shop director is there, and other artists are there. It was amazing to be making work not as the cultural producer but as the artist. We started having evening dinners, inviting our

MORGAN LEHMAN

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families, and having field trips to Wave Hill. Making our own art became very social. I guess it sort of stems from not wanting to be lonely, but you do have to be alone with your ideas. You have to nurture one's own ideas by yourself, but then you need to have them resonate, to contextualize them with the world, other artists, other people.

P: Yeah feedback is always helpful, and constructive.

A: It's about making a community for your own work, artists can't exist without an audience in a way. I'm generating my own work, but I'm generating audience too. Having the show at Morgan Lehman and having Apartment 38 open the same night I felt like I couldn't have done this without having that, the connection, the built-in audience. There is an equation there, community numbers are operating at components to something larger, some co-creative thing.

P: You're flexing other muscles, when you come out of such a creative purge you feel like you can't immediately create a whole new series of prints or immediately produce a whole solo-show, you have to switch gears.

A: It's like exercise, it's cross-training for an artist. Yevgeniya Baras, whose part of Regina Rex, says that curating and painting are the same part of the studio practice. She's not compartmentalizing these different activities. Sharon Loudon says that "some artists wear many hats." It's all you as the artist doing these things that make your life better.

P: When I first moved to Brooklyn in 2007, I remember coming to Pocket Utopia when it was on Flushing Avenue in Bushwick, from there you moved to the Lower East Side, then to Chelsea, and were you in New Jersey at some point?

A: Yeah, I was in New Jersey for a little bit too. First Bushwick in 2007, the Lower East Side in 2012, in Chelsea three years ago, and then in Newark as a pop-up, I called it "Post-Pocket Utopia." Bushwick, LES and Chelsea are all neighborhoods of New York City. While Newark is its own city, which is very different, very interesting, it has its own vibrant cultural scene and I learned a lot by being there. I even brewed a beer there called Bad Ass Art Bitch Beer. I did a crowd sourced photography project called #SeeingNewark, thinking again that curating could go beyond the gallery that anyone could participate if they used that hashtag. I did that for six months, then I really had to focus on finishing the public art piece. You can wear multiple hats, as artist, writer, curator, beer maker, mother, etc. but then every once in a while you have to just focus on one thing to complete it and see it to the next level. Finishing the perch required 9 months of just working on that. Taking the pressure off of not running a space or taking this time to nurture the artist, or nurture oneself. We need to support the arts and one way to do that is to go to galleries, to go out and participate, to see live performances. It's nice to be able to do that. It's part of Trump resistance.

MORGAN LEHMAN

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P: You're supporting the gallery, the concept, the people that run it, the artist, and their own community. Just being there physically is important, you don't have to buy something to participate.

A: We write about it, for us we're writers and curators, we share it. Social media has been a big part of what I do, whether writing blogs, social media or just putting it out online.

P: Or being published in print. You recently had an essay come out in Sharon Louden's *The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*. This is the second book in this series that you've contributed to. They both have this underlying theme of *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* what differs between the two books and how do your two essays compare after some years of writing them?

A: The first book, *Living & Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists*, is about how artists live their lives, whether they teach, or work full-time doing something else, making art, or gallery running or whatever. The second book is *The Artist as Cultural Producer*, Sharon wanted to have a book that was a broader survey and be more international in scope. She asked me to be in it for a certain continuity, the two essays are different because there was six years between them. The first essay is a very personal story about being an artist, a mom, having a family, waking up early and fitting your work in between your requirements of the day. The second essay was to a non-art audience, it's much more about the trajectory for me of living and working as a New York artist. I've lived here since 1994 and worked in the community whether for non-profits, other artists, museums, my own spaces, my own art practice, etc. I talk about making beer, opening this space, opening Pocket Utopia in Chelsea, working in Newark and how my studio has moved around. I don't know if it's typical to other artists in other cities but in New York the one thing that is constant is change: your studio moves, your job moves, your apartment changes. It's interesting because it's never stagnant. Other peoples' essays in the book are amazingly inspirational, that book saved me after the election and in that deep January malaise. There are essays by artists in Detroit that bought up land and buildings and are now making a block community. And there is an artist from the Philippines that was caught up in a revolution and affected change just by being a creative thinker. They are so interesting, it's really great. You can relate to every single essay.

P: Yeah, it's nice to have something so honest and not sugar coated, because art is hard.

A: Sharon Louden wanted everyone to be really honest, to tell it like it is. She wanted everyone to lay it out there. She is very much like that, it's so great to have her art here in Apartment 38.

P: That brings it full circle to what we're talking about with conversation, exchange, and generosity. She is including you in this book and you are including her here in this exhibition.

A: Apartment 38 started with the idea of Louise Bourgeois and her open studios. I went to two, you brought work and she would look at it and critique it. It was more about the exchange. The first time I went I brought drawings,

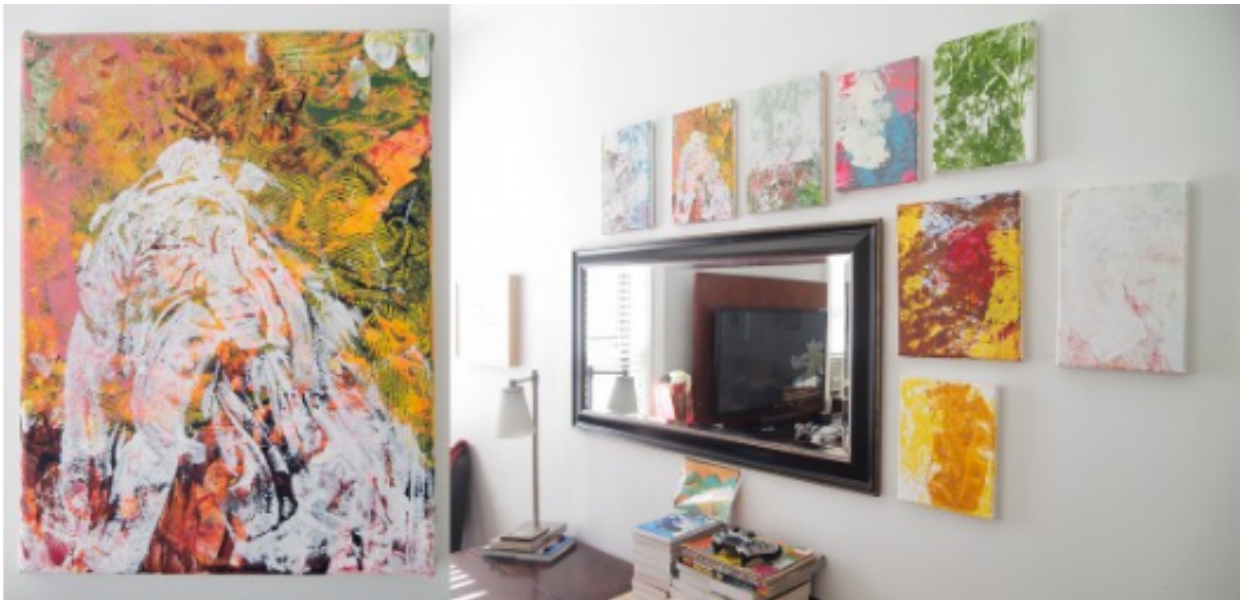
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and I noticed that she liked sweets, she must've had three diet cokes. The second time I went I made a chocolate cake, and I brought it, and I brought some drawings. She had four pieces of cake, and she kept saying "Who made the cake?" By the end of the evening all of the other artists hated me because she was only talking about the cake. I feel like I'm going to live in this apartment forever, I'd like to continue doing two shows a year. It flips the script in a way, you show art, you curate art, you write about art, you have it here in your home and in your studio.

P: This is the first show for Apartment 38?

A: Yes, this show is friends and artists I know. The next one will be a little different. I'm sure you have this experience where you see someone's work and you think you would love to put them into a show, but you don't have an idea or a place yet. With this artist Gilbert Giles, I saw his work and thought if I still had a gallery I would show his work. I've been thinking about doing this apartment gallery for a couple years, he'll be in the next show. Then Mildred Beltre is an artist with a social practice that runs alongside her own drawing and printmaking. Jefferey Meris, who was my co-resident at Guttenberg Arts, makes ceramic based sculpture with a lot of ideas about immigration and his experience of being born in Haiti and growing up in the Bahamas. So those three artists and also Peter Dudek, he makes comical drawings that comment on modernism and middle America architecture. There will be drawing, commentary, comic, international, and experiential work within the domestic setting of Apartment 38. That will open in September.



(Photo: Andrew Schwartz at Apartment 38)

P: How can people come see the shows, do you have open hours?

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A: I've been open by invitation only, something that can be super intimate but also event based where we have an evening screening, or a potluck. It has to be small and intimate, because the apartment is small and two other people live here. It has to be invitation only with the idea that things could happen outside, via our blogs or something could happen at my public piece as an extension, that could be involved in this too. It's not exclusive to this location.

Apartment 38's current exhibition includes artwork by Andrew Schwartz, Sharon Loudon, Sean Morgan, Yevgeniya Baras, Travis Fairclough, Rhia Hurt, Eleanor King, Michele Mirisola and Loren Munk.

While the gallery is currently open by invitation and appointment only you can keep up with exhibitions, satellite events and programs on Austin's blog Drawing on the Utopic. For more information on her work and practice visit her website <http://austinthomas.org/>.