

Julie Alpert: Altars, Keepsakes, Squiggles, and Bows

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It's rare that in one exhibition, exuberant masses of color can share space with melting shelves and the occasional English muffin. In the case of Julie Alpert's *Altars, Keepsakes, Squiggles, and Bows*, these pairings are right at home and, in fact, become the starting points for trips down memory lane.

Nearly every surface is encrusted with some degree of ornament, transforming the space into a blissful, slightly chaotic spectacle akin to squeezing the entirety of Sesame Street into Pee-wee's Playhouse. There's an air of fun and a healthy tension between comfort and revulsion spilling out from Alpert's transformation of an otherwise gray-walled gallery. This visual tug of war is key: it is spectacle used in perhaps the best way possible—as enticement towards greater reflection.

In theater, the big picture, viewed from the auditorium seating, hides the blemishes of the actors and stage sets. Alpert's installation eliminates that separation, embedding the audience amidst an illusion of her creation. At this close proximity, every painted bow or cutout spray bottle reveals the evidence of its making. They are imperfect and borderline awkward at times, and in this way: more human and relatable. By investing so much of herself into their creation, and leaving the record of that effort, Alpert imbues a surprising degree of intimacy into her hearts and plywood scissors. It's the difference between a mass-produced sweater and one hand-knit by a friend: before it ever plays wardrobe-witness to the recipient's life, it has already been the object of sustained focus by its creator. Understanding that sense of intimacy for a homespun sweater or for the elaborately constructed handmade elements of her installation does not require much convincing: both are intensely personal.

Alpert further layers in the personal by pulling from her own life as source material. As a child in the 1980s and '90s, she would visit her grandparents' homes where their aesthetic decisions firmly rooted themselves in her memory. Her paternal grandparents' home was elaborately decorated floor to ceiling with a collision of art objects ranging from drawings, prints, bronzes, marble statues, and antique lamps to kitschy horse-and-dog-themed collectibles, tacky posters, and ornately framed oil paintings of the couple. In contrast, her maternal grandparents took a more sparse and orderly approach, preferring neutrally decorated spaces, in which the main flourishes were carefully placed doilies, framed family photos, and scalloped window valances. She has vivid memories of sitting on their plastic-covered couch, an attempt to protect and conserve their furniture that ironically rendered it less functional by making it uncomfortable.

While Alpert draws upon these childhood memories, it would be misleading to say that *Altars, Keepsakes, Squiggles, and Bows* is an attempt to reconstruct a specific moment in time. In this exhibition, Alpert's employment of these and other childhood physical sensations are a communication of feeling, mimicking how we experience memories.

Perhaps this is most plainly evident when she employs cursive. Above the entryway and around the exhibition are the unmistakable loops and arrangements of lines denoting text. Look closely and there's the tall loop of an "l," the low-hanging tail of a "g" or "y," and the obligatory jumble of letters that requires casting back to third-grade Language Arts to identify. Except they never resolve. Alas, you've taken the bait, only to realize after a few failed attempts that you're doing the scribble equivalent of trying to understand a jazz vocalist scatting. Yet much like when Ella Fitzgerald or Cab Calloway plays

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lingual gymnastics, there's no need to fully understand what Alpert's near-text actually says to connect with it.

Similarly, Alpert sources from her own memories to fill out the rest of her space. There's a story behind the aforementioned English muffin, a specific source for the numbers at the entrance, and clear references to grandparent decorations throughout the gallery, yet no one but the artist truly *needs* to know the reasons for their inclusions. There is no key, but the symbols still offer footholds for viewers looking for the familiar. Like memories themselves, certain details stand out as tent poles while the space between is filled with general impressions—clearing the way for feelings and emotional connection. In this way, Alpert gradually eases guests into a nonlinear bath of information where time suspends, and the full picture is only limited by how much imagination viewers invest in their surroundings.

To this end, time is the constant that strings the recurrent themes of this exhibition together: the time Alpert took to make the work, the time it is on view, the time guests invest in it, and the inevitable countdown to the show's demise. Like any exhibition, *Altars, Keepsakes, Squiggles, and Bows* has a limited life span. Its brevity may seem disheartening, however, this short-lived existence is part of the work's purpose, what Alpert refers to as "a way to practice for future loss." After the exhibition closes, the work will only exist in this exact configuration in photographic documentation and as a fuzzy glow in the minds of those who visited. For a show so heavily steeped in nostalgia, the greatest bit of poetic symmetry comes in the recognition that from the outset, Alpert created something designed to become a memory.

About the Artist

Seattle and Tulsa-based artist Julie Alpert makes site-specific installations using found materials and everyday arts and craft supplies. In a single, three-dimensional scene akin to a stage set, she simulates the exuberance and surreality of celebrations and the disappointments that sometimes belong to them. In *Altars, Keepsakes, Squiggles, and Bows*, you're invited to feel the joy and strangeness of life and memory all at the same time.

Alpert has a BA from the University of Maryland, an MFA from the University of Washington, and was a 2019 and 2020 Tulsa Artist Fellow. Other professional honors include a Pollock-Krasner Award, Artist Trust Fellowship, two Artist Trust GAP Grants, two MacDowell Fellowships, and the Roswell Artist in Residence Program. She is married to the artist Andy Arkley and they have three cats: Coconut, Koala, and Baby Cloud.