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IN THE STUDIO

Pae White, an artist 'in the world'

The Pasadena native has made her name with large-scale commissions. Now she'd like to go small.

April 18, 2010 | By Susan Emerling

Pae White's cluttered hilltop studio in Pasadena feels like the calm after a storm. About the size of a two-car garage, it is filled with muted California sunshine and animated by the sound of White's dog barking at gardeners working on the beautifully landscaped property, next to Ernest E. Debs Park.

On a recent visit, White, who has an exotic, natural beauty with long curly hair and prominent almond-shaped eyes, sat at an enormous table scattered with the evidence from a period of intense productivity. Discarded sheets of printed plastic and test strips from a digital weaver in Belgium, which she finds "compelling" because of their randomness, are heaped on the chairs and floor. Nearby is a stack of plastic boxes filled with a portion of her vast collection of Vera scarves. In the corner, a new industrial laser nudges a vintage card table. Paolo Soleri wind chimes hang overhead and swatches of metallic paint are daubed on the windowpane behind her.

FOR THE RECORD:

Pae White: An article in Sunday's Arts & Books section about artist Pae White said she lives in Pasadena; it's Montecito Heights. Also, it said that a tapestry she had in the Whitney Biennial was 30 feet long; it was 40 feet long. —

Though she makes self-deprecating jokes about the anxiety that often accompanies her creative endeavors -- "I always say to myself, why do I get into this situation where I have no idea how to do this?" -- it is also clear that she thrives on the risk associated with testing unproven fabrication techniques on the large-scale, high-visibility, site-specific projects that have dominated her agenda of the last few years.

Still, she fantasizes about returning to the kind of meditative process she employed when she used to make more of her work by hand. A 2004 project for the Hammer Museum, which she once referred to as a "waterfall on pause," was created from thousands of hand-cut orbs of paper suspended on string. These days, she sees herself as an artist who "plans and executes" ideas that she archives in thick scrapbooks of found photographs and ephemera.

This backlog of potential projects is probably a good thing considering the pace at which she is racking up her international art-world bona fides. In February at the Whitney Biennial, she debuted a 30-foot-long wall-hung tapestry based on a photograph of seductively swirling white smoke set against a rich black background. A few months earlier, she presented a "tent city" the size of a football field at Art Basel Miami. By day the mutating sculpture appeared to be a cluster of colorful geometries; by night, it morphed into a warren of glowing tenements.

Before that, she was prominently featured in the 2009 Venice Biennale, with a piece titled "Weaving, Unsung," in which she transformed a section of the voluminous 13th century Arsenale into an imaginary aviary with bird-seed encrusted chandeliers and a brightly colored dropped ceiling made of string that she has described as being a "ghost tapestry." She hired traditional Venetian bird callers to animate the space and to beckon the city's avian population.

A curtain she designed for the New Opera House in Oslo, Norway, is an example of White's sophisticated sense of illusion and wit. Featuring a supersized image of crinkled aluminum foil, the curtain is both a dazzling abstract design and a hilarious commentary on all those irritating noises that take on outsized importance during the silent decorum of high art. It also makes a mockery of the viewer's expectations of reflective surfaces and toys with the idea of monumental metal sculpture.

Though humor is rarely White's goal, it often surfaces from her predilection to anthropomorphize inanimate objects. The scale and history of the tapestry medium allows "cotton to fantasize about being something more," while the aluminum foil from her kitchen drawer takes on a heroic stature. "This grandiosity of making high theater out of this basic, humble material is something I love," she says.

Gary Carrion-Murayari, associate curator of the Whitney Biennial, said, "Pae often tries to break down illusion, and it makes things funny and exposes them at the same time. There is a sense of joy in her work that I think is unique among contemporary artists."

Like her humble kitchen foil, White has also dreamed herself onto a grand stage while remaining a remarkably loyal Angeleno. Born and raised in Pasadena, she attended Scripps College and then received an MFA from Art Center College of Design. She ultimately married her junior high crush, architect Tom Marble, with whom she shares a modernist abode with bold decorative flourishes of their combined design and which houses both her studio and his architectural practice.

Her inspirations to pursue a career as an artist are profoundly of, and about, Los Angeles.

The late painter and architect Millard Sheets was the grandfather of her elementary school best friend and the first artist she visited in a working studio. "I was amazed because this was a person who was a professional and supported himself doing art," she says.

Years later, her understanding of life as an artist was updated by working as Mike Kelley's assistant and being asked to take on his business correspondence. "I had no idea what he was talking about," recalls White. "It was an important education for me. In order for art to be an occupation, you have to be in the world. You have to take responsibility for the viewer and address ideas about space, lights, history, all the contingencies. It wasn't just the pleasure of making art as a kid and showing one's parent."

White has more large-scale public commissions looming, including a multi-layered neon sculpture for the Gloucester Road tube station in London, scheduled to open this summer. The piece will consist of the colors of light that most closely emulate daylight and that are used to treat seasonal affective disorder. As commuters pass through the station, White hopes they will enjoy not only the decorative beauty of the sculpture but a brief dose of the light's ability "to minimize seasonal depression."

Squeezed between larger projects, she is taking a breather to focus on a miniature scale, with a proposed edition of accurately rendered but severely damaged butterfly parts she calls "butterfly crumbs." Working with her long-time assistant, Amy Robinson, she is testing iridescent nail polishes to try to replicate nature's stymieing complexities. She wants the object to have "the verisimilitude but also the durability to shake around in the box like a broken butterfly."

Suddenly, White's small project has taken on the risk of failure inherent in her biggest commissions. "We're setting out to do the impossible," says White. "It's an exercise in torture."

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