



Photo credit: Tom Owens

Gallery Talk

March 7 at 12:15pm

Disco Dozen for Daley Plaza

March 21 at noon

For this performance Claire Ashley has created twelve painted inflatable dancing suit/sculptures in response to the Picasso sculpture in Daley Plaza. A choreographed sequence of unconventional, awkward and extremely absurd dance moves unfolds.

The Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) is dedicated to supporting Chicago's arts and culture community. This includes fostering the development of Chicago's nonprofit arts sector, independent working artists and for-profit arts organizations demonstrating the City of Chicago's commitment to celebrating the arts.

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Claire Ashley

frizzflopsqueezepop

Scottish born, Chicago-based artist Claire Ashley associates the beginnings of her interest in inflatables with the experience of raising children, and in particular her increased awareness of (and anxiety over) such highly-designed pedestrian objects as airbags, bouncy castles and brightly colored plastic toys. The urge to inflate, however, did not occur to Ashley until well after finishing her MFA in 1995 at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she currently teaches in the Contemporary Practices and Painting & Drawing Departments. The inflatables came when creative and intellectual wanderings became equally concerned with the softness of objects and the shrinking of studio time and space to work.

Ashley is drawing from personal, practical and protective experiences of motherhood in her work exhibited here. Yet her overall artistic concerns are as academically engaged with the history of painting as her colleagues' appeals to an aesthetic of "serious" fine art. While familiarity, playfulness and cheerfulness are undoubtedly aspects of Ashley's exaggerated forms, eventually her inflating of the work may also seem a bit curious. This is particularly so when considering that Ashley is an institutionally trained and employed artist inflating abstract canvases, arguably the quintessence of Western Modern Art, with - literally - hot air. After all, did the Greeks not also engage the aesthetic pleasures of ordinariness and scale to sneak a horse into Troy?

Perhaps Ashley's challenging attitude towards the status quo of painting, and its form, becomes most evident in her adoption of a loud, sprawling, and carefree spray-painting style adapted from that of the rebel street vandal. For Ashley, who resides in Oak Park and commutes through graffiti-covered neighborhoods on her way downtown, neon, ersatz and illegally spray-painted street art has quickly become the contemporary painting practice most locally influential to her. Yet, simultaneously, she has also cited the vibrant, almost sickeningly chromatic palettes of The Hairy Who group of 1960s Chicago Imagists as informing her painterly choices.



Chicago Imagists and graffiti artists, at first seeming like unlikely bedfellows, cohere as likewise influences upon Ashley with their shared interests in challenging the sanctity of institutional norms and forms. Whereas Hairy Who artists like Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt draw upon surreal fantasy and lowbrow, domestic subject matter to charge their representational works with rogue content, Chicago graffiti writers like Trixter, Sivel, and Kane One seize upon architecture and unpredictable surfaces in order to boldly reclaim space and self-mythologize. Within Ashley's own practice, the inflatable offers the most useful form upon which to directly and metaphorically expand upon the recalcitrant creative potentials of surreality, domesticity, color, and scale.

Produced with large scraps of PVC coated canvas laboriously hand-sewn, painted, and then inflated by an embedded air-blower into rotund bulbous forms, Ashley's inflatables are intentionally much more impractical, if just as gnarly, as itinerant works like 50x50 Foot Pillow and Clean Air Pod, inhabitable architectural-inflatable created in the 1960s by countercultural artist group Ant Farm. However, as an economical, lightweight and uncommon means by which to produce, store, and transport the kind of large-scale work typically only facilitated by the supports of space, time, and funding; Ashley's project is, perhaps, no less utopian. Indeed, Ashley's recent incorporation of the inflatables into parades, dance works, and participatory outdoor performances, often featuring performers embedded within the inflatable itself, showcase the artist's interest in sneaking absurdist, communal celebration closer into everyday terrain.

Ultimately, however, the production of the inflatables comes back to Ashley's unwavering curiosity in color, paint, and the possibilities of abstraction. Like most art, the proof is in the process: in how aerated paint applied to canvas that is then, itself, aerated can produce washes, blends, textures, and composites of color Ashley could not have possibly produced without allowing the forces of chance, gravity, and tension into and upon her work. That spontaneous moments of intrigue most frequently occur in the unlikeliest details of the canvas (crevices, creases, folds, and stretch-marks) only focuses the daring strangeness and unlikely splendor of Ashley's artwork; as critical as it is pleasurable; as bizarre as it is beautiful.

- *Danny Orendorff, Independent Critic*