

Caroline Wells Chandler

By Lauren Britton

Caroline Wells Chandler's latest exhibition *Homunculus* is on view at Field Projects Gallery in Chelsea. Working with and against kitsch, his works employ the selfie; craft store tchotchkes and little kids food like Lucky Charms or Swedish Fish. Through the discussion of inside and outside of the frame of Chandler's older works; this interview, conducted at in Chandler's studio, offers a look into the formal and personal impetus for his work. Pulling from formal decisions based on personal experiences, Chandler references: being a kid pining for stuff from Michaels and going out for pizza with his partner as impetus for the work. In this interview Caroline and I discuss his expansive process in arriving at an object or image.

Lauren Britton: These are a little older, right?



can you find the christmas mouse?, 2010

muddy puss, 2010

Caroline Wells Chandler: I did these before I started using the blankets. I was working out my material language; I look at them as like an alphabet.

Lauren: When did you start using blankets?

Caroline: It was towards the end of grad school, 2011. I was working with materials from Michael's and JoAnn's and I found they had started carrying these really large blankets. I thought they were fantastic. I tend to gather a lot of stuff and stare at it for a while until it tells me what to do with it. Even with this blanket, I had that one the longest, that was the hardest of them to make work.



sweet tooth, 2013

My biggest problem was: how do you deal with an American eagle? It's really intense. I really try to kill things a few times before I'm done with them; I knew at that point I wanted it to be a purple, orange and pink color palette.

Lauren: Do you often start with a palette in mind in creating your works and see what objects you have to fit into that?

Caroline: Yeah, I will look for food first, since everything is casted.

Lauren: I didn't realize that. That was something I was wondering. Is it archival?

Caroline: Yeah, I want them to last. When I was in New Haven I had a mouse problem, at first I was using cereal right out of the box, then I got really grossed out, plus I was afraid that my stuff would be consumed.

Lauren: Can you tell me a little about your process in doing that?

Caroline: I learned how to make the mold from an 8-year old on you-tube who was like “hey boys and girls, want to learn how to make gummy bears?” She was using this craft mold that was a silicon rubber, 2 parts you could mix together. I can show you some of the molds. I ended up getting polymer clay and pushing it in, or resin or whatever.

Lauren: So, you make all your own molds and then you can multiply them as many times as you want?

Caroline: Yes, I usually make one mold then I will cast each piece one at a time and then bake it in my oven.

Lauren: So it imprints the actual object too?

Caroline: Yes, it’s kind of funny because I used to love using it when I was little but I didn’t have the finger strength. It’s even hard now to use, I get blisters from it. I always think it’s weird that this stuff is made for kids to use and it’s hard to use.

Lauren: What was so hard for you with the American eagle on this piece?

Caroline: It’s really loaded and I wanted to come up with a way to shift it. I chopped this blanket up a bunch; it isn’t where it would have been originally. It was a cropping issue, and a formal issue about the text; I didn’t want that on there. I’m not sure if I like text in my work.

Lauren: It seems like text a recurring theme.

Caroline: I always want the image to be more powerful than the text. I don’t want the text to function and the viewer to miss an image, because you read the work rather than look at it. There are a lot of people who use text successfully; I don’t think that’s where I’m at. I used to do performance stuff, and then I did a workshop with Marina Abramovic. Then I thought: “I don’t ever want to do performance anymore” because I’m not serious about it and she’s really serious so I thought: “why I don’t do something I’m serious about”.

Lauren: You’re working with a lot of kitsch language, and a lot of cliché and “trying to kill things”. Where does that interest come from?

Caroline: I’m really using materials that I feel comfortable with, and have been using since I was little. I like the crocheting, because it is portable. That’s a practical reason for crocheting, so you can always be making. I think about some of the trends that are happening and going on but my work doesn’t really fall into that. With painting and things being un-stretched and an intrinsic color relationship. These cats are kind of a response to that. I think it’s hilarious because they’re cats, but people are very serious about it. I think about these things. The pieces are moving towards more shaped things. I wanted to make a beanbag chair, like a hippy having a bad trip, but a good trip maybe. I start with images. I tend to think in images first rather than content.



gathering, 2014

Lauren: The title of your show, it's "Homunculus" how did you come to that?

Caroline: Yea, I didn't even know about it until Jacob suggested it, I thought it was perfect. There is a three-part definition for it. The first one is: a dwarf that's made in an alchemist's flask. The second one is: a deformed creature sort of like Schmeagle from "Lord of the Rings", or like Frankenstein could be an example. There's usually something witchy that changes them from human to beast. The third one is: a part of your brain that's like a map, like a sensory, even related to your motor skills too. So your mouth is really big, and your eyes are big, hands are typically large, genitals are large because those are more sensitive areas for the body.

I thought that was really great, I loved that; perfect. I can't believe I had never heard of it before.



dionysian gonzo, 2013

Caroline: When I was making these I wanted to make 365 but I only made about 70 because I felt exhausted. I knew I needed to formally shift each one up or try to do that. I was using materials that were specifically from reject bins from the holidays. I wanted to do literally an advent calendar that never really stops at Christmas like it just keeps going. Some of them were hybrids, like I would take 2 holidays and mix them together somewhat.

Lauren: So ‘holiday’ was the impetus for the work?

Caroline: Yes, at that time I was feeling a lot of anxiety about the holidays. I think a lot of it was just balancing time and stuff like that. They were springboards for the other pieces, but I still like them. I’m still drawn to them, they tell me things, it’s weird, I’d see things that I do in some of these like you’d name something and not realize. For example, I took pornographic cut-outs and then set them like little moths around some deer and then I named it “I Made it through the Wilderness”, which was an homage to Chris Ofili’s “Holy Virgin Mary.” It is the first line of Madonna’s “Like a Virgin.” It was like four years later that I realized that, I thought that was so great, I was so happy about it.



i made it through the wilderness, 2011

Lauren: You didn't see the humor in that?

Caroline: Yes, it was so wonderful. Its fun when your past-self does favors for your future-self.

Lauren: That's exciting, that's a really exciting place to be. What is your studio practice like, are you working all the time? You mentioned that the portability of these was important.

Caroline: I'm always pushing. I stopped making these panels for a little bit but I want to make another one. The mystery is all in the cookies. I feel like those are a return to 'painting, painting' for me.



selfie as trip tip cookie, 2014

Lauren: That makes sense because it's a lot less decorative and a lot more about the material.

Caroline: Yes, the surface is everything. I was thinking that these are more in collage territory. That's how I think about them. I love collage. I was trying to do collage in order to reorder language, but deep down I think that even though I use non-painting materials, everything I think of is painting. Some people hate that, but I love that. Even when I crochet I think of it as painting, I like to think of paintings sometimes, like if you stabbed it, it might bleed those colors. Cookies do that for me, pizza does that for me.

Lauren: Is that a measure of success for you? If it feels like it would bleed like that?

Caroline: Yes, like if I could bite into it or something.



untitled cave painting, 2013

Lauren: They do have a cave painting logic to them in how they're composed; the layering and the flatness of them. I'm curious about process, do you do drawings of them before you begin them?

Caroline: I wanted to do something like a modern-day cave painting. At the time I was thinking about Bodegas, they are really interesting to me because sometimes they display ads that aren't for things in the store. And then they decorate, around the holidays like at Christmas they put up a Santa face. I wonder if an Alien came to Earth if they'd wonder, "where can I buy this Santa" would they look for it in the store? Commercials function similarly. Lots of cats and lots of pizza. That would make the most sense of why I am using cats and pizza for a modern-day cave painting. I like a lot of outsider art just because they develop their own material language, it's really specific and I find that exciting.

Lauren: Can we talk a little bit more about the titling of some of the works? The titling of this body of work was "Tranny Chaser"? What are you thinking about? Is that a reference to queer culture?

Caroline: To a certain extent; I named these works specifically for pieces that I made; one of them was *p(ie/ee)r into my buttsoul*, the other one was *i singing to nelson, i made it through the wilderness* and then *tell me something good* and I made all those around a time I came out as Trans' and my friend sent me that [song](#). All of these (referencing l'ours and roots rock) are referential to the butt, this one is an abstract asshole. Shelia Pepe had a really great article. I thought that it was awesome in terms of craft culture and queer culture.

Lauren: What do you think about the term 'queering' as it relates to craft culture?

Caroline: I always think of it as taking something that's familiar and everyday and using it in an unfamiliar way, but I also look at it in terms of rearranging like twisting something... whether if you're augmenting its function or original use. I think it's really

good if you're an artist and you're already creating your visual language. There's nothing wrong with grouping up with other people, I'm always trying to figure out a way to have your own way. Even though I don't mind if other people use that, I identify as queer, but I'm always trying to figure out how to write about my work and the way I want it to be written about because I feel like visually I've figured it out it's just translating that into a written language.

Lauren: That makes sense. Do you have other artists that you feel like are in your family?

Caroline: Yes, my favorite artist now is Bjarne Melgaard; I love his work so much. Did you see his giant dick room at the Whitney Biennial?

Lauren: Yes. I did. I thought those were amazing. Did you sit down with the models and listen to all the sound pieces?

Caroline: Yes, it was so good. I loved his show at Gavin Brown. He's so cool. I kind of wish that him and Robert Gober would get married and adopt me; I want them to be my art dads. And I love Forrest Bess too; I think he's amazing. I think his paintings hold up so effectively. He had his own symbol-based language.

Lauren: Do you feel like any of the symbols in your work have specific meanings to you outside their cultural context? Do you look at them as symbols?

Caroline: When I'm putting the materials together. I like to think of them as my spirit animals: a bear, for me and my partner is a frog/turtle. I wanted to make an animal that was connected at the asshole so I put our pair of animals going around it. I included hair in this work; there is something kind of witchy in that.

Lauren: Like Voodoo or something.

Caroline: It's also like a joke on 'bad paintings', they're made with crappy brushes, and they have hairs in them. I wanted to do that. Plus my hair is in all my work, even if I don't want it to be. If I'm crocheting, it's in there. I think I'm more Irish out of the mix, so there's Lucky Charms all over this too. I put some Leprechauns in there, so there's some of that stuff going on. This one is really two visionary states: I put these morning glory flowers and amanita muscaria which is used by Siberian shamans; supposedly when you take that you see a giant mushroom. I was thinking about that in relation to looking at images. Even the food stuff, it's stupid, but I wanted to use the food because it's like a mini-image, you take it in, somehow like how images function. In taking in images then you identify with some of them, some you don't.



L'ours, 2012

Lauren: That's also like the notion of dispersal of things within oneself. I think of the partialization of a lot of these is interesting to me; thinking about how they digest from the layers in the work.

Caroline: Right, how they mix together. This piece was more formal, color based, I like this image because it's another found image and it looks like a family of dinosaurs that look like they're having a 3-way. In these works, I think about something in the frame of the work as affecting something inside of the frame and I'm interested in that. This one also glows in the dark, both of these glows in the dark.

Lauren: Are you paying attention to how things will be composed in terms of their glowing when you're putting it together?



roots rock, 2012

Caroline: Yes, I just make a bunch of stuff first and then I use the rule of odds when I'm placing things down so lots of triangles to navigate your eye. When I'm composing things I think about how one piece of the work could be hallucinating and creating something else. Some of these objects remind me of other things, sometimes it's just visually rhyming stuff, I probably wouldn't put apples but I used Apple Jacks and then honey comb kind of reflects the shapes that like a fractal, almost or even these Smacks, I like the feel that they look like little vaginas; so I love that.

Lauren: Are you trying to pin down the associations of these icons?

Caroline: No, no, no. That's why I like to think of them as symbols because they're like three-fold in terms of being cultural, personal and universal. That way allows for, many voices coming together and that's important to me.

Lauren: What is your relationship with humor? Are you trying to make things that are funny?

Caroline: My work is kind of funny, warm and terrifying at the same time. I never try to make it terrifying, but it happens sometimes. When I'm making stuff, I think it is kind of funny but I'm not trying to make it funny. My partner and I went on a road trip for her birthday, they had pizzas like that were like smiley faces, I thought it was so funny. I've worked a lot with pumpkin faces for a while, so I am now working on a jack-o-lantern pizza face.

Lauren: So the impetus for the work is sometimes personal; yet it also seems so culturally filtered as well.

Caroline: I have a personal relationship with the materials. These are all materials that I liked using when I was little. When I was younger I felt like I knew more about who I was, and then I feel like culture sunk its teeth in. And then you have to figure out, as a young adult, where you stand with all that. My work is also fiercely feminist at the same time. Unapologetically fiercely feminist, it's important that is in there.

Lauren: Is it important that you shop mostly from JoAnn's or Michael's?

Caroline: Yeah, both of them. It's conceptually interesting to me; a friend said that she thought they were the birthplace of heteronormativity. I really like using those materials because I am using them in a bizarre way. I think about those things. Plus I loved going to Michael's when I was little, that's more for little kids, but it was fun. Now I don't have to ask for permission to get stuff, I can just get it myself, so it's more enjoyable. I don't have to pine for things as much