

EMILY ROZ, ARTIST

by Richard Toth

I meet the artist Emily Roz outside her studio in Long Island City. She tells me that she recently had to get this place, a sublet, because she was shut out of her former studio when the city closed it down. She shares this new one, which is half the space and more rent. She's completely pleasant, polite, has an easy laugh, and even meets me near the subway to help me find my way, yet I get a glimpse of what might be behind the rage in her work, a rage I can relate to, of trying to do art in a town that can often feel indifferent or hostile to its inhabitants.

RT: So you recently had a solo show at The Front Room in Williamsburg. Was that your first solo show?

ER: It was. I was in a two person show there a couple of years ago but with a completely different body of work. And I was involved in a couple of their group shows.

RT: You studied art history at first? Did that lead you to wanting to become an artist?

ER: It was a very serpentine path. I wanted to be an artist or run an art gallery when I was younger, but I was also really interested in art history. I grew up in Chapel Hill, NC, and so I would go to the university and sit in on classes which were really cultivating. My parents wanted me to go to a Liberal Arts school. I went to Hampshire College and ended up studying art history, literature, and women's studies. I was really interested in how art and literature related, but at a certain point I felt like I had to make stuff – everything was so theoretical. I was on a bit of a feminist kick, so I went into it by knitting and weaving and spinning. I took some time off and went to The Penland School of Crafts in NC. I ended up doing my thesis project in weaving.

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BABOON FIGHT, 2008 colored pencil on paper, 50"x40"



CHIMP WITH DOGWOOD BLOSSOMS, 2009 acrylia goauche on paper, 12"x16"



GAZELLE WITH WILD HONEYSUCKLE, 2008 colored pencil on paper, 22"x30"



GAZELLE WITH POPPIES, 2008 colored pencil on paper, 22"x30"



HYENA WITH CROCUS, 2008 colored pencil on paper, 30"x40"

RT: What kind of materials did you use?

ER: Natural fibers. I would hand spin and hand dye everything. It was all done on hand looms. It was very labor intensive, which is probably why I do what I do now. My thesis was 12 pattern woven scarves that took forever. I moved to Arizona for a little while and worked for a woman who had a custom design textile studio. She went nuts, and I was also living with her. She kicked me out; it got bad. I didn't know anyone, so I got this job ironing in a party rental company. My grandparents were immigrants who were constantly telling me to educate myself, not to work with my back, and there I was ironing.

RT: Like in a sweat shop.

ER: In a sweat shop, yes. My boss had a sweat shop in her garage! But I wanted to go to grad school, so I took a couple of classes at ASU and then went to Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan to study in the fiber department. It was a pretty loose program, and I eventually gravitated to photography. After I got my degree, I came to New York. I started doing these pieces that involved Polaroid images from films. That was the stuff that got me involved with The Front Room.

RT: The Polaroid pieces are all centered around violent film images.

ER: Violence and sex in the media and how we're really drawn to it. My thought behind it was to show how unrealistic it was and that it never happens to us. Of course then 9/11 happened and blew my theory.

RT: Whoa. So that made you think in a different direction?

ER: Yeah. I started doing more political work with images of the Capitol building. The last piece I did in that series was the *Death by Mel* piece, which was made of Polaroids of all the people he killed in all his movies in chronological order. It was a great coincidence that when I showed that, he came out with all his anti-Semitic ravings. It was around that time I started drawing again.

RT: And when was that?

ER: Maybe about four years ago.

RT: Just four years ago?

ER: I hadn't picked up a pencil in I don't know how long. I didn't know how to draw.

RT: But you drew when you were a kid?

ER: Yeah, a little bit. I took art classes in high school, but other than that, no.

RT: Did you feel like you were good at it?

ER: No, I thought I was terrible.

RT: Really?

ER: Oh yeah. I had a whole confidence issue. I sat next to the boys in class that had that natural ability, as if they were born drawing. When I was studying art history, there was a certain concept of the artist as having natural, god-given instinct to do all these things, and I felt like OK, I just don't have that. It's not going to happen. It's not going to be me.

RT: Did people discourage you from drawing?

ER: Not really, but I think I had enough interest in the more intellectual side of things - the art history, the literature, the theory - that was seen as just as legitimate. I think people were just as excited to see me doing that, and I was content to go on that path. But I always felt like I was never going to know how to draw.

RT: That's shocking, obviously. Your work is so precise.

ER: It wasn't until about four years ago. My son was 2 or 3 at the time, and we had some of those DK books. You know, the ones with the sharp photographs on the white backgrounds, and he would ask me to draw something, and I would say I can't do that. There I was, an artist, and I didn't know how to draw. It seemed absurd. And I said to myself, OK, enough with this worrying about being good at it, I'm going to learn how to draw.

RT: And how did you do that?

ER: I just forced myself to do it. I think I started using crayons.

RT: They just happened to be lying around.

ER: And I would draw kids' toys and images from those DK books. And just by being around a child a lot, I started thinking about why I'm interested in all this violence and where the hell does it all come from. I watched him and saw that everything goes in the mouth, and every toy needs to be eating the other toy. And then there's the biting. My son was in day care, and there's always a biter. My son was a bitee. It was fascinating to me to watch these kids. They hit and bite. It seemed to be a natural, non-verbal way of communicating, and, of course, we have to teach them to stop.

RT: But that's what they instinctively want to do.

ER: Right. And so I started with these drawings of toys eating each other, and from there, it started becoming more than that. It

was more about the violence and the anger and the aggression and the teeth. The stuff that gets pushed down. We're not supposed to be that way. But...I think we are.

RT: So when you started drawing from your kid's books, did you feel you had a knack for it right away? Did it come easy to you?

ER: Not at all. I read some article after I had my son that said it's important not to tell children that they're smart or doing something good, but to recognize the job they are doing, the work they're doing. At the same time (I work at The Cooper Union at the Herb Lubalin Study Center) I noticed that those students work their asses off. It dawned on me that this isn't about talent, this is about working hard. It's about putting your mind to it and telling yourself to keep trying. I realized it was going to be a long time that I was going to be failing at it. I just decided I'm going to make shitty art work for a year. I'm not going to sell it, I'm not even going to show it to anyone. I just have to make the bad stuff, and the good stuff will come eventually.

RT: And it did. The detail is incredible. They're ultra-super-hyper realistic.

ER: The first piece I made that I was willing to show was about early 2006. I still see it as just a lot of hard work. The patterning of the fur goes back to the textile background.

RT: When you want to start something, does it come from a particular feeling of anger? Do you have to be pissed off at something?

ER: No. I look at pictures. I go to the Strand, and I look at nature books. My in-laws went on a safari recently and brought me back a book on predators that has been very useful as a resource. It's a very intuitive process. I never say, I'm going to make a piece about such and such. Now I'm still working on the monkeys. I have a thing about the teeth. I'm not done with them.

RT: Where do the flowers come from?

ER: There was a lot of negative space I wanted to do something with, and the intensity of the animals needed something to balance off of. The flowers were an interesting juxtaposition. A lot of them are from where I grew up in Chapel Hill. The dogwood is actually the state flower of North Carolina. I grew up in the woods, and we would eat honeysuckle. I started thinking along the lines of the contrast between the harshness of the animal images and ones of gentleness, fragility and beauty. All these things co-exist, and one is not necessarily more dominant than the other.

RT: When I was looking at your work, I was



BABOON SCREAMING, 2008 colored pencil on paper, 16"x20"

thinking, chimps don't get *that* angry. Their mouths don't open that big, or their teeth aren't that sharp. When we focus in on them, in the way you present them to us, they seem over the top in a way. But looking at the photographs you use for inspiration, they really don't seem to be embellished.

ER: I usually make them more angry in the eyes, a crazier expression. I don't know if its aggression or fear or rage. We tend to anthropomorphize animal behavior. I don't know what it is exactly. Is it emotion? It's just the way they operate. But, obviously they're stand-ins.

RT: What are you working on now?

ER: I'm working on a piece that may become two pieces. One is a chimp eating cake, and the other is a group of chimps eating another one.

RT: Does that happen?

ER: It does.

RT: Because they're hungry?

ER: I think it's a dominance issue. The chimps will line up like soldiers and surround another chimp.

RT: So everyone knows what's going on.

ER: Right, and they'll beat the chimp and then eat it. It's bullying.

RT: It's not enough to beat him to death; they have to eat him too.

ER: This is what's fascinating, the dynamics and power struggles. And not just animals, but children, the art world, New York, and any field in life. Who's in control?

RT: And how do you get it?

ER: Power, dominance, establishing control.

RT: You seem like a very nice person? Do you feel like you have a lot of rage inside you?

ER: Oh, of course.

RT: Yet the painting is so detailed and precise. You have a craftsman attitude toward your work. You're not splashing paint on the canvas. Do you feel your painting is an outlet for any anger you feel?

ER: It's an interesting point because you see a lot of angry art work that's physical. You can see the material was handled in a certain way. This is very controlled, but I think that speaks more to my personality. I have a lot of rage and a terrible temper that no one sees except my poor family.

RT: The people we're closest to always see the worst of us.

ER: Yes, I've always had a real intensity of emotion.

RT: You've used the word stand-in to describe the animals. Do you see a lot of anger in the world currently.

ER: Well, I started this series before the whole economic crisis, when everyone was still feeling whoo-hoo. What was frustrating was I had a lot of anger, a lot of stuff I was pissed off about in my life. With raising a kid, I just became more aware of how it's not OK to express that in our culture. What I think happened when I was working on this series was that the bottom fell out, and now people are identifying with it cause they're all pissed off too. The show that happened at the Front Room was perfect timing. I felt like now, finally, everyone can see what I live with on a daily basis. Now more people are in tune to a lot of unfairness, a lot of anger at things we can't control. Some people are failing and getting eaten alive, and some people are doing the eating.

RT: So you did all the Polaroid explosions, and 9/11 happened. When you did your Mel Gibson piece, he started going cuckoo. Now you're doing this, and a lot more people are feeling rage. You'll have to be careful about what you do next.

ER: Well, let's hope everyone will be eating cake.

Richard Toth is a writer and performer living in Brooklyn with his wife and son.