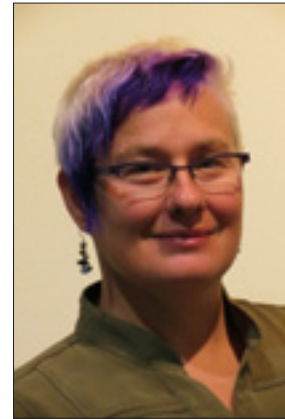


## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Pam Rosenblatt

### Artist Rachel Mello and appreciating the “why” in her artistic process



On Tuesday, September 10, 2013, at a few minutes after 11 a.m., Somerville artist Rachel Mello met with *Wilderness House Literary Review's* arts editor, Pam Rosenblatt, inside the Rotunda at the Hynes Convention Center to discuss Mello's artistic career, especially her recent art exhibits at the Hynes where 23 of her artworks were on display and at the Boston Children's Museum where one piece was shown. Shortly after this interview, she also finished a new public art installation. "This Is a Long Distance Call", located in a disused phone booth near the corners of Highland Avenue and Vinal Avenue in Somerville, is her contribution to the "Phone Art Box" project, a joint venture of Nave Somerville and the Somerville Arts Council. Interviewed by Rosenblatt in June 2007 for *The Somerville News*, Mello was eager to discuss the developments in her artwork since their first meeting in 2007. The article that follows discusses Mello's artistic development from 2007 through 2013.

Sometimes when you go to an art exhibition or an art museum, you look at a painting and think, "This artwork is perfect. This artist can't possibly do any better. She or he has achieved perfection."

Why take Edward Hopper's "Railroad Sunset" (1929) or Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" (1948).

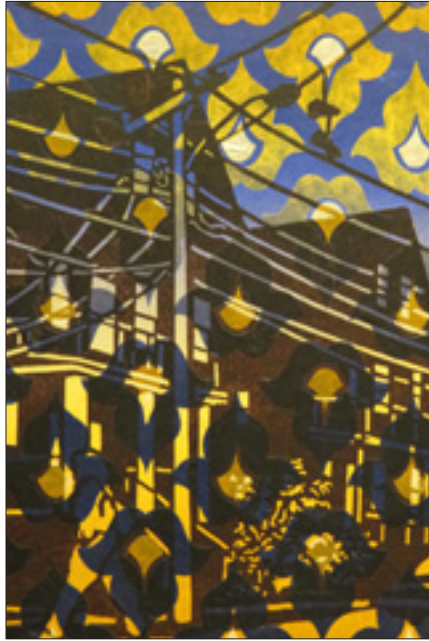
Two remarkable paintings created by two remarkable artists.

Somerville artist Rachel Mello's artwork has that same great quality as Hopper's and Wyeth's pieces. They are intelligent, urbane, and yet simple in their complexities. While her art may not have yet reached the "perfection" of a Hopper or a Wyeth, it's all a wonder to view.

Her artwork had this strong impact on me in 2007 when I interviewed her at the Tufts University Art Gallery's "Fourth Annual Juried Summer Exhibition" for *The Somerville News*, Somerville, MA. And now in 2013, six years later, as the Wilderness House Literary Review's arts editor meeting with Mello inside the Rotunda at the Hynes Convention Center, I observed that Mello's work has advanced and is more brilliant in its development than noted in 2007. What may have appeared as an artist's high-point six years earlier was no longer so in 2013. Mello just keeps on getting better at her craft! Her artwork has progressed from simply oil painted hardboard cut silhouettes to prints on hardboard cut silhouettes.

What type of background does Mello have to develop such an artistic talent? She has an architecture background from Rhode Island School of Design, where she received a Bachelor of Architecture. She studied and worked in set design and theater after architectural college and obtained her M.F.A. from Brandeis University. Mello sometimes serves as an adjunct teacher of freehand, portfolio design, and foundation design study at Boston Architectural College.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4



In 2007, Mello's work consisted of images of houses, power lines, streets, human figures, etc. painted on hardboard cut to silhouette. The paintings were layered with oil paints and areas were cut by Dremel tools, also known as very high speed low torque instruments.

Today, she has other, more sophisticated saws to cut her silhouettes, and she does printmaking in combination with the cut wood silhouettes and works with metal, such as steel, as well. And she used and still uses tempered hardboard, like Duron or Eucatex, more commonly recognized as Masonite. Same concepts, more advanced images, evolved styles.

In the Tufts University's "Fourth Annual Juried Summer Exhibition 2007", Mello's "Girl on a Street Corner", "We live in the City and Dream Of the Sky",

and "Charlie's Dream" were three artworks displayed, created with the concepts of cutting of the hardboards' shape and making a transparency and dimensionality to painting that is traditionally a two dimensional flat surface with allusions. But, as Rachael Arauz, the curator of Tufts University "Fourth Annual Juried Summer Exhibition", said of her younger work in 2007, that that's not all that there is to a Mello artwork. There's an added third dimension that can be understood as an additional visual allusion in her work.

Since the Tufts University exhibition 2007, Mello's artistic vision has developed into an even more complex, refined style. In 2013, she acknowledged how over the past four or five years the politics underneath her artwork has been becoming much clearer to her.

"Sometimes you do something and then afterward you start to understand why you did it," she said. "In the past few years, I've really been understanding my own passion about, again, clear, honest

thinking about the way we are about the world – trying not to think that there are any simple answers. It's not like if we only stopped doing this or that, we would be fine. Or if only everybody else did this or that we would be fine. There's a very complicated web between all the different parts..."

Mello has spent decades thinking about environmental issues and cultural issues around how we use natural resources and how we relate to our natural resources and food justice and how people live together, she said.

"You know, how is it that a million people can live within four square miles and for the most part we are pretty peaceful. And how can we do that? And then how is it that we can have such vitriolic conflict in, say, New England, the northeast of the United States, and the rural areas in the mid-west and have these really strong conflicts, and ideological conflicts.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

But, at the same time, we have some of the same underlying concerns," she said.

Recently, Mello spent one month in Wyoming at the UCross Artist Foundation Residency Program. "And in the process of the drive out there and the time there and the drive back, just the space away from where I am, I was always working on these relationships between urban and rural spaces and all these cut silhouettes that you saw before they had something natural painted on them urban-shaped. But I really began to think a lot about how I grew up in the city, I've lived in cities my whole life, and I go on bicycle trips .... And recently, when I rode my bicycle to Montreal and back with my partner, we went through small towns in Vermont. We went through small areas that were unlike what I ever lived in. Between that and driving to Wyoming, I found myself thinking about different ways that people live and how there's some shared concerns and some very different concerns and relationships between people in different places and connections between different cultural experiences.



"So on the surface of some of the work, it's still looking at a lot of the same questions: the houses and the power lines and the shapes in the city and the landscapes painted on them. But when I make my choices as to what to draw and what to cut, I'm thinking a lot more about how different people are living right now, different places where I have been," said Mello.

Mello's artworks don't scream environmental or cultural issues. She is a subtle, sophisticated artist. You need to look at each piece and understand from where her thoughts are developing to appreciate her detailed, intricate "whys".

"Whither Shall I Wander" is a more recent series of artworks that Mello has designed, painted, and printed (2010). From June 2013 through September 2013, eight pieces of this series were exhibited in a solo exhibition in the Rotunda at the Hynes Convention Center. Mello had a total of 23 artworks on show there.

The "Whither Shall I Wander" series was created by "taking some of the cut silhouettes that I make and rolling ink on them and printing them. I'd continue doing that. Then I took that process to another level where I created another design pattern by looking at architectural details like wallpaper, tin ceilings – all of these ornaments that influence us in our world and in a built environment. I drew some of these patterns on some of the prints, cut them out and then re-layered them so that now what you





are looking at in this piece here .... You'll have more than one print layered in such a way that this pattern appears. It's coming through it.

"It's returning to this underlying current theme in my work of the layers in the city, the layers in the way that we live. There's a surface image that we're seeing. There's something under-

neath. And there's something behind that. Maybe it's memory. Maybe it's history. And so these traces of other places or other ideas come into a current moment," said Mello.

The "Whither Shall I Wander" series resulted from a commission. "This was a fabulous commission because it came from the place from someone who deeply understood my work and connected it to his own life very powerfully," said Mello.

There's a cut silhouette used for all the pieces in this series. There are two main themes that happen in "Whither Shall I Wander" series. That is city life and farm life: the similarities and contrasts between the two. In the cut silhouette, there are houses, power lines, a street, a man on a bicycle, and some plants. The image of the man on the bicycle reflects Mello's client, a gentleman from Alberta, Canada. He would have been a third generation Norwegian Canadian farmer if he had stayed in Canada. But he chose to stay in the Boston Metro area after going to college there and work as a computer scientist.

"So that man on the bicycle in that piece grew up on a farm in Alberta, third generation Norwegian farmers, and then moved to the Boston area, went to MIT. And, on some level, he knows he'll never be the farmer that his family is and go back to the farm. But it is still his home.

"So he has this deep rooted connection to the farm but also to his life here in the Boston Metro area – and to his work in computer science. And these pieces have his house in Medford and the plants from the farm in Alberta. And that's him in the middle on the bicycle. And it's him –not by his request. That was my choice to add him into it. But I thought that person riding the bicycle makes the connection between the place here and the farm," said Mello.

Having a representational figure or figures inhabit her work isn't uncommon for Mello. "Sometimes it's myself. Sometimes it's figures that represent a situation. There will be two people walking and one person

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

walks in the other direction. They represent a situation that I was working through of connections between people. There was a conflict happening or a story that I was telling,”

said Mello.

Mello also has an artwork where a person is represented making a big choice in his life. “And the figures in that piece are not portraits of specific people. But they stand for the choices that person was making and the places where that person was going, and the things that he was going through,” said Mello.

There are common threads of themes throughout Mello’s works that were viewed in 2007 that have been further developed but still maintain the same qualities, though more advanced. For example, there are cut silhouettes about city life but now, in the year 2013, Mello has developed this idea into seeing the differences of lifestyles between city people and farm people. In 2007, Mello basically worked in three dimensional layers, used shadow reflections on the walls behind each artwork as a dimension in a sense. Now, in 2013, Mello has furthered her dimensional layers by adding decorative print layers into her work.

“Whether You Know It or Not” (2008) is a series that spans media. It includes a cut-silhouette painting (now in a private collection), and a series of woodblock prints and woodblock print collages. The series pans from 2008-2011. Some of these pieces were included in the exhibition at the Hynes Convention Center. “This pattern is a pattern I developed looking at some Iranian tiles in the Museum of Fine Arts. I had an Egyptian woman tell me that these tiles reminded her of growing up and looking out through the screen door from her house. They’re very labor intensive, hand-made pieces. Each one of these lines, if you come in close, you can see the pencil lines,” she said.

The hand printed image was then cut out with an Exacto knife and individually glued onto the silhouette. Thousands of little tiny pieces of rice paper which were picked up with a tweezers and glued down with wheat paste were used to create the artworks in this series, said Mello.

And how does Mello achieve these refined, superior metaphorical layers? Currently, she isn’t so eager to talk about her process. “You know, I used to spend a lot of my time talking about the process and the ‘how’ of what I do. And its step-by-step process. First I do this. Then I do that. And then I do that. There’s a lot to it. But I’m more interested in the ‘why’ right now because with each piece, I’ll solve the problem of ‘how’ I’m going to layer it in the moment. It’s a technical question. It’s a thing that needs doing. There is one part of ‘how’ that is not visible in this show. It’s where my new work is going! I’ve been making pieces that hang in space and you see one through another through another.

“If you get a chance, if you can go down to Boston’s Children’s Museum, I have a piece in one of the vitrine windows. That’s where one of my three [layered] cut silhouettes [is displayed]. And there’s a different painted surface on one side versus the other. But you see each piece through it. It’s beginning to move more into special installation.... This piece should be up through next Summer 2014.”

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

This artwork is displayed in an exhibition at Boston Children's Museum that is part of several artists collaborating. "There's an exhibit throughout Boston Children's Museum that is really wonderful whereby each of the display windows represents a letter of the alphabet. Different artists took on each letter. 'L' is for Lunch and [this certain artist] took items from the collection at the Children's Museum that showed lunch boxes and making lunches. 'G' is for Games. Each person got a letter. Then I decided I'd do 'H' for Home, for Houses, and found in their collection shells and birds' nests and places where animals live. And then I did some of my cut silhouettes that are houses and trees. But nestled into it are these things that are the homes of animals. So you get to see that..." suggested Mello.

While her artworks have lots of themes and ideas going on in them, she does not really deal with international politics at this point. When asked if she considered events in Syria, she said, "I don't know that I have any enough understanding of, say, Syria to approach that right now. That's another complicated space."

Mello has travelled to such places as Poland and Iceland. "I have been very fortunate to have had opportunities to travel. It puts things into perspective. I just got back from a trip to Iceland. And again, rural Iceland in some ways is not that different from Wyoming. In other ways, it's very different.

Right? And Reykjavik is in some ways just not that different from Boston. And then in other ways it's very different. But recognizing what some of the common themes are – and when I do think about them, when I try to understand it – I try to say what are the similarities: somebody's going to the coffee shop; somebody's going to work.

And it's so easy to think of quote-foreigners-unquote as "other" and "different". And when you remember that these people are going about their daily lives with some of the same concerns and needs and then some very different ones, you can't over simplify," she said.

And she enjoys learning about the art from these different countries where she has visited. "There are some phenomenal Polish and Icelandic artists. It's one of those things that when I travel, I always bring back art books - again,



## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

because I was just in Iceland. I saw some phenomenal artists there that I wouldn't have heard of in my American art classes. As an art student, I was mostly exposed to French, Dutch, Italian, some German artists."

As for American artists, Mello admires such the works of such accomplished people as Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth.

As for some words of advice to aspiring artists, Mello said, "Every person's path is different. For me, it's been a lot of patience and a lot of work. For somebody else, it's a lot of phrenic energy. I think it's really important to meet other artists and be involved in a community of artists. There's so much [to learn]. It gets easier when you get to know other people, and you can talk to other people about what's going on."

