



## CLAUDIA HART *Welcome to Alice's Gift Shop!*

by Tom McGlynn

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Claudia Hart is an artist for whom the ludic is essential to understanding the complicated concept of human individuation. Her tactical play with words, contexts, and mediums serves to poke fun at the logical machine we call "self." In *Welcome to Alice's Gift Shop!*, Hart's playthings include digitally tagged quilts, ceramic plates embedded with randomized patterns with digital tags, and a video montage of a recent performance piece. The show is an allegory of multiple layers of experience unified by its reference to *Alice in Wonderland*. Like Lewis Carroll, Hart uses the figure of Alice to heighten the viewer's awareness of his or her own unsettled identity in a contemporary world.

In the case of this exhibition, the context for a devolution from politeness and reason toward nonsense making sense is a gallery space in Chelsea, rather than a fantasy world discovered from falling down a rabbit hole. The installation resembles an upscale boutique on Madison Avenue, emphasizing a parallel between a rarified art marketplace and a Victorian garden party. Hart sets the viewer up to critically question the presentation of the artifacts generated by her research and performance. This forthright addressing of art marketing strategy deals directly with the mystifying social construct of the gallery as inert architecture, and charges it with an ambiguity of intention that throws one off balance, like a virtual Alice in Chelsealand.



Alices Walking, and opera by Claudia Hart and Edmund Campion; from left to right: Alice #3: Adrian Saich; Alice #5: Nayland Blake Alice #4: Julie Robinson; photo by Abigail Simon.

Each of the artist's peculiar artworks contribute to a questioning of what the task of art should be, thereby throwing into question our objective relations to the work and our appropriate subjective response. Hart has worked to find ways in which technological means, specifically digital imaging and modeling, can interact with material construction. The disembodied and the embodied dance a

complex *pas de deux* in her work, an intricate exchange inspired by the artist's involvement with feminist theory and practice. Examples here include the quilted images both hanging and folded in the installation, such as "Little Crazy" (2014). With the use of a computer pad deployed as a camera eye/lens, and pointed at the quilt patterns, the viewer is able to uncover flashing fragments taken from the original text. Phrases such as "I'm going down...below" and "Eat Me" call forth the sexual ambiguities latent in Carroll's narrative and important to Hart's project of upsetting the boundaries of propriety. The fact that such phrases are buried deep in randomly scrambled and coded patterns in these luridly colored "crazy quilts" connects the socially engendered with mechanic compulsion, all wrapped in cozy materiality. There is a lurid aspect to these flashing phrases, like a flickering neon sign in a film noir, that mimics a nagging subconscious.

In a video piece, "Double Narcissus" (2012), Hart extends a similar insistent surrealism that conflates the male gaze with art historical quotations from Dalí and Buñuel's film "Un Chien Andalou" (1929), Duchamp's construction "étant donnés" (1946 – 66), and various painted depictions of the myth of the self-obsessed. In Hart's version a reclining male nude gazes at his computer screen on which a coded ceramic plate reveals a nude female torso overrun by digital cockroaches, milling around in a randomized pattern. The plate shown in the video, fabricated by the artist as a discrete object and displayed in another section of the overall installation, is entitled "Nue Mort" (2013). This work is a prime example of the complex interweaving of associative logic that permeates Hart's esthetic. The fluid interplay between connotative and denotative logic is what emerges as the subversive subtext of the show. The process of naming and/or tagging experience has been historically generated from a position of a fixed identity. Most often associated with patriarchal privilege, the "naming right" gets undermined here; the condescending authority that operates within the fixed bounds of proprietary logic no longer applies. That particular key doesn't fit anymore and breaks the room wide open for a reassessment of the social status quo. Hart accomplishes all of this with an almost giddy joy. Bold, graphic typefaces and highly saturated colors dominate both her digital and hand fabricated works here. It is this wit and care in her visual presentation that makes her particular "drink me" potion a bit easier to swallow.

"The Alices (Walking)" (2014) performance documented here took place within the theatrical black box/rabbit hole of Eyebeam Art and Technology Center this past March. The lush production, scored by Hart's collaborator Edmund Campion, entailed a meta-fashion show of the artist's friends and associates, including performance artist Nayland Blake, dressed in clothing designed by Hart to generate the same augmented reality, flashing signals as in her quilt pieces. In its adoption of the fashion runway context, however, the work presents itself as more aggressively narcissistic. Other participants on stage (conscripted audience members, including myself) operated tablet devices to reveal the flashing texts derived from the clothing designs which were so patterned as to digitally prompt these phrases. These outfits looked like a cross between samurai armor and Hopi Kachina ritual costume. The performance was a highly choreographed and orchestrated event, which also felt a bit anarchic and cacophonous at times, and could not be wholly taken in from a single perspective, but this fit within the artist's strategy of upsetting the fourth wall of the theater of social propriety.

By assimilating and then deploying the ill logic of an everywoman Alice, one lost to buffeting reminders of the breakdown of normality, Hart re-describes the presiding assumptions of what that normality pretends to be in the first place. Her work delves deep into identity politics and self-construction, serving as a curiouser portal to the myth of the self.

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