

INTERVIEW WITH MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST AND OCAD U ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR SIMONE JONES

Interview By Maggie Broda • Vice President of OCAD University Alumni Association • Visual Artist

Bio: Simone Jones is a multi-disciplinary artist, embracing video, film, sculpture, electronics, performance and more. Her creativity investigates our perception of the everyday experience. She is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) where she currently holds the position of Associate Professor and teaches in the Integrated Media program. Ms. Jones is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York. Her work is collected internationally.

Maggie Broda: It is a pleasure to have you share your time with me Simone, thank you so much. I have long been a fan of your work as you may know; I pop up at most of your openings. While at OCA you were enrolled in the Experimental Arts program and you currently work with sculpture and electronics, as well as with film/video. At what point in life did you recognize creativity would be your path?

Simone Jones: I have always been interested in art and was exposed to it at an early age. My parents took me to the AGO and to the McMichael to look at paintings. I remember studying a book about Ken Danby in our local public library. In the introduction it mentioned that he had attended the Ontario College of Art. I decided that that is where I wanted to study. I think I was around fourteen years old at the time. Later, Joyce Wieland's 1987 solo show at the AGO made a big impression on me because of her experimental use of mixed media and her choice of Canada as subject matter.

M.B. Terms like: perception, spatial context, time, interaction, all seem to be relevant in describing your work. Tell me about your inspiration for *Within Distance*, your installation that was at the Christopher Cutts Gallery in 2014.

S.J. *Within Distance* is a two-part video projection that is installed in two rooms of a gallery. The work is concerned with simultaneity. Because the synchronized projections unfold in two different

spaces, the projections can only be experienced separately. In this regard, the narrative in the work is pieced together by the participation of the viewer who must move between the two rooms to make sense of the story.

M.B. What was it like when The Art Gallery of Ontario commissioned you to create a piece for the Alex Colville exhibition? Can you comment on the process?

S.J. I was thrilled when curator Andrew Hunter invited me to take part in the Colville exhibition. When Andrew asked me if I would be interested in making a work for the show, I immediately began thinking of ideas for a film. To me, Colville's work is very cinematic. His paintings resemble film stills where something is about to happen or has just happened. There is a lot of underlying tension in his work that is combined with a precise eye for storytelling. His subject matter is largely taken from his own experience and I was very struck by his commitment to document the banality of the "everyday" within an environment that was distinctly identifiable as eastern Canada. Because of this, I knew I wanted to try to capture the banality of my everyday experience growing up in Scarborough, where the presence of hydro fields dominates the vernacular landscape.



Warden and McNicoll, 2014 • Still from Synchronized, Three-Screen Video Installation

M.B. Warden and McNicoll was a perfect fit for the Colville show. What was the moment like, when you knew you had it?

S.J. I am not sure if I ever knew I had it! However, I did watch people go through the exhibition when it was at the AGO and when it traveled to the National Gallery. I was pleased to see that people spent time with the work and sat down to watch it. This was very satisfying considering that people primarily came to the exhibition to see Colville. I must congratulate Andrew Hunter for his commitment to exhibiting contemporary artists within the context of the Colville exhibition; I believe his vision for the show honoured Colville by placing his work in relation to contemporary artists' responses.



Warden and McNicoll, 2014 • Still from Synchronized, Three-Screen Video Installation

M. B. Warden and McNicoll has been acquired by the Doris McCarthy Gallery at U of T Scarborough. It is a profound piece with the elements powerfully working together to tell a universal truth yet it is indisputably Canadian. How much collaboration was required for this project?

S.J. Warden and McNicoll was the biggest video production that I have completed to date; I had to rent a helicopter to complete the aerial shots! I worked with a crew of nine people (four of whom are OCAD graduates: Ryan Randall, Layne Hinton, Keith Cole, Tom Third). I also had to work with two young boys who had never acted in front of a camera before. Everyone who contributed to the project was very generous with their talent and their time because they were excited to be involved in a production that was a response to the artwork of Alex Colville.

M.B. I enjoy the openness of your work. It includes the viewer's perception and encourages their personal narrative. Who has most influenced you as an artist?

S.J. That's a tough question because I admire quite a few artists for different reasons. However, here is a short list (in no particular order): Richard Serra for his tenacity; Joyce Wieland for her exuberance; Murray Favro for his inventiveness.

M.B. Your work in robotics began well in advance of the recent developments. What technologies did you develop that aided you in creating your early pieces?

S.J. I didn't develop any technologies per se, but I developed a keen sense of investigation. Before the creation of microcontrollers and the advent of the Internet, I worked mainly with surplus items sourced from Active Surplus on Queen Street West within a context of like-minded Toronto artists (members of InterAccess as well as graduates and instructors of OCAD's Experimental and Photoelectric Arts programs). How do things work? How do they function? How can these behaviours be applied to an artwork? These were the most exciting questions that I could think of; they propelled my early production and contributed to the growth of my personal language as an artist.

M. B. As a pioneer of technology in art, your work maintains a distinctly primitive voice. How do you achieve this balance of technical and emotional?

S.J. Because almost all of my work is kinetic, I try to pay attention to how it behaves – the performance within the work has the potential to elicit a response in the viewer. I care about the technical aspects in my works because it is important to me that they function; however, the functionality of a work should always be in service of the larger issue that it is attempting to address.

M.B. Thank you again for your time. What's next for you, Simone?

S.J. I will be traveling to Venice, Italy, in late 2017 to begin a new body of work that focuses on a study of light. I will also be embarking on two new film projects that begin production in the summer of 2017.



Within Distance, 2013 • Still from Synchronized, Dual-Screen Video Installation