



SAYA WOOLFALK

The Empathics

Saya Woolfalk's The Empathics

Brooklyn-based artist Saya Woolfalk makes vibrant, exuberant work that blends fantasy, humor, and play to address fundamental questions about how people define themselves and each other in today's increasingly global culture. Working a wide range of media including installation, sculpture, textiles, painting, drawing, printmaking, video, performance, and digital technologies, Woolfalk creates immersive environments that reflect our own, yet encourage us to consider our most pressing societal issues, including those of race, ethnicity, and gender, in a revealing new light.

Woolfalk's current project presents a science fiction narrative about The Empathics, an imaginary race of women who physically metamorphose as they merge cultural identities and cross species, taking on characteristics of both animals and plants. Complete with its own distinctive imagery, symbolism, and folklore, the story of the Empathics is a parable. Drawing on anthropology, biology, psychology, and science fiction, it examines how myriad cultures mix, clash, and transform, and expresses the hope that, in future societies, cultures will develop better understanding, or empathy, for one another. Made with materials from around the globe, the installation synthesizes references to diverse sources such as Native American basketry, Japanese kimono fabrics, West African regalia, Brazilian Carnival costumes, Buddhist tanka paintings, and European illuminated manuscripts.



Empathic Morphology: Herniated Consciousness, 2012
Handmade linen and abaca paper, wool, tree branches, cotton, linen, synthetic fabric, felt, plastic bones, mannequin, tree branches, acrylic paint, feathers, epoxy, and polystyrene foam heads (above)

An Empathic Preparing to Paint Images from the Book Empathetic Plant Alchemy (Jillian), 2011, Archival ink jet print on watercolor paper
Photographer John Groo (cover)



Empathic Morphology: Herniated Consciousness (2013) is an installation comprising textile-based sculptures (which double as costumes and props in the artist's videos and performances), paper-covered baskets, and other handcrafted objects "lent" by the Institute of Empathy, a fictional museum and research center run by, and dedicated to the study of, the Empathics. Woolfalk presents these objects in the manner of an ethnographic display; usually found in anthropological and natural history museums, such exhibits use dioramas, images, and texts to document and examine a given culture. By presenting her art as ersatz ethnographic artifacts, Woolfalk critiques exhibition conventions, questioning how methods of museum display affect the meaning of the objects exhibited. While her inclusion of materials from Japan, West Africa, and the United States references her personal heritage—she is of Asian, African, and European descent—her mixture of artistic media (artisanal paper, hand-woven textiles) and everyday, found objects (plastic beads, tree branches) represents her interest in combining "high" and "low" elements. Together, the disparate influences shaping the world of the Empathics reflect the ever-shifting blend of cultures characterizing contemporary society.

Essay by:
Alexandra Schwartz, Ph.D.
Curator of Contemporary Art
Montclair Art Museum

Guided Dream Incubation (Debbie and Jessica)
2011, Archival ink jet print on watercolor paper
Photographer John Groo (above)

Utopia Conjuring Chamber, Institute of Empathy, Greene County, NY, circa 2012, 2012, Handmade linen and abaca paper, cotton fabric, mannequins, felt, fabric paint, wood, latex paint, polystyrene foam, plastic bones, synthetic felt, plastic sequins, converse sneakers (left)



Empathic Morphology: Herniated Consciousness, 2012

Handmade linen and abaca paper, wool, tree branches, cotton, linen, synthetic fabric, felt, plastic bones, mannequin, tree branches, acrylic paint, polystyrene foam heads, plastic beads, wooden hands, feathers, epoxy, plastic bowls, wicker trivets

Page from the book
*Empathetic Plant Alchemy:
Pollinators and Plants Used
in the Merger of Plant and
Human DNA, 2011,*
Gouache on paper, 30" x 40"





Utopia Conjuring Chamber, Institute of Empathy, Greene County, NY, circa 2012

2012, Handmade linen and abaca paper, cotton fabric, mannequins, felt, fabric paint, wood, latex paint, polystyrene foam, plastic bones, synthetic felt, plastic sequins, converse sneakers

Video: 2 min. 52 sec.

Film maker: Rachel Lears

Empathic Morphology:

Eyebody

2012

Mannequin, glass beads, snake skin, converse sneakers, synthetic fabric, linen

Empathic Morphology:

Petal Formation

2011

Archival ink jet print on watercolor paper
Photographer John Groo

Guided Dream Incubation

(Debbie and Jessica)

2011

Archival ink jet print on watercolor paper
Photographer John Groo
Courtesy of the artist



Aerial Display (Blossoming)

2012

Fleece, wool, felt, plastic beads, plastic bones, feathers, abaca paper, glitter shoes, spandex

Pages from the book Empathetic Plant Alchemy:

Pollinators and Plants Used in the Merger of Plant and Human DNA

2011

Gouache on paper





Chimera
2013
Single-channel video
2 min. 52 sec.
Film maker: Rachel Lears
Music: Kevin McFadden



The Institute of Empathy
2013
Single-channel video
5 min. 14 sec.
Film maker: Rachel Lears
Music: Sean Mitchell





*An Empathic Preparing to Paint
Images from the Book
Empathetic Plant Alchemy
(Jessica)
2011
Archival ink jet print on water-
color paper, 30" x 40"
Photographer John Groo*



*Page from the book
Empathetic Plant Alchemy:
Neurological Balance of
Floral and Human Energy
2011
Gouache on paper
30" x 40"*



Page from the book
*Empathetic Plant Alchemy: Five
Morphologies of Future
Ancestors*
2010
Gouache on paper
30" x 40"



*An Empathic Preparing to
Paint Images from the Book
Empathetic Plant Alchemy
(Anna)*
2011
Archival ink jet print on water-
color paper, 30" x 40"
Photographer John Groo

Saya Woolfalk

The Empathics

March 12 - April 18, 2013

Flecker Gallery
Suffolk County Community College
Ammerman Campus
533 College Road
Selden, NY 11784

sunysuffolk.edu
fleckergallery.org

Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring
Essay: Alexandra Schwartz, Ph.D., Curator of Contemporary Art, Montclair Art Museum

All installation photos are from *Saya Woolfalk: The Empathics* at the Montclair Art Museum,
September 28, 2012 - January 6, 2013

Opposite: *Star Compulsion*, 2010, Fabric, felt, papier-mâché, plastic beads, mannequins, latex paint

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Flecker Gallery