

In the Studio with Artist *Renée Owen*



A dialogue with Amena Hajjar

Amena: Renée Owen's art holds the viewer in a delicate embrace. Her work spans a remarkable range of scales, initially drawing the eye from afar with shadows and volume. Upon closer inspection, the depth and complexity of her vision are revealed, demanding a more profound, intimate engagement. The materials, while seemingly familiar, possess subtle strangeness, a quality that challenges our assumptions; narratives extend beyond their immediate function and context. Her pieces introduce mystery, hidden histories, repository secrets, within and beyond. Her insightful perspective and reflections further give an appreciation of her art.

What is your process for creating art?

Renée: My art often starts with being inspired by a material. Sometimes it's a shape, maybe a color, but more often than not, it's something tactile about the material that draws me in. I start working with the material, and as I deepen into the process, the material begins to speak to me about what I am doing, what I am creating. Sometimes a theme might come to me early in the process. Othertimes it's just out of the blue.

For example, when I worked with dyed coffee filters and stitched them with red thread. I start to think about where coffee comes from, its history, and the history of slavery. I begin looking at these shapes I have created out of the coffee filters and the red stitches, and it starts to look to me like whip marks on the back of a slave's skin. This is how my process starts to feel like a haptic process, as I am actually engaging with the materials.

Do all your works have narratives?

Yes, mostly. Typically, the narrative story unfolds. It doesn't just pop into my mind; it evolves. It's usually a feeling. In that feeling, I know something is wanting to emerge; often, it is grief or a feeling that has moved me deeply. A book. A documentary. Something I have seen recently. Articles in the newspaper. Things I cut out and put in my art journal. They pull on me, and then they emerge as I work with materials.

My work is very time-consuming and tactile. There is a haptic, meditative act of stitching or pulling the sheets of handmade paper I am making, or bending the wire, or weaving. Through working with my hands and body, the stories begin to emerge.

I notice that you often incorporate found objects into your work. Have you always been a collector of them?

I have a repurposed chicken coop on our property, in which live lots of pieces of driftwood, reeds, bones, feathers, seeds, and all kinds of other items that I have gathered. I have been gathering natural objects since I was 3 years old, running off into the woods where I grew up.



Today, friends tease me as I gather rusty objects wherever I go. I have a daily practice of taking a walk every day, and for a year, I would find some kind of object, write a haiku about it, and calligraph it into a book with the object. The book was recently sold.

Tell me more about your childhood of exploration.

I was born near the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia; my extended family still lives there. My father's business kept relocating us. We moved around frequently. While we were in Tennessee, living at the edge of the forest, my two younger siblings were born, allowing me to spend all day outside, playing and making things. Every year we went back to visit family in Virginia. As I grew older, my grandmother would come to Florida on the Amtrak train, and I would return to Virginia with her, spending the entire summer outdoors. I've always spent a lot of time in nature. That is what feeds me, and my heart process.

What is your educational background?

I was majoring in biology. I had wanted to be a doctor, which makes sense because I am interested in the natural world, but it was clear that I didn't care for the sight of blood. Eventually, I agreed with my father's ongoing suggestion to major in business. After receiving my MBA, I pursued a business career, but it became painfully clear that this was not my true calling, so I returned to school to earn a degree in transpersonal psychology. That is what I have been doing for over 30 years.

My art training involves attending numerous art workshops led by esteemed teachers and mentors. Often, I already know what I will be working on when I attend, something about being in their presence and the group that, although they may all be working on different projects, really works for me.



When did you start calling yourself an artist?

That evolution started when I was in graduate school. While in the transpersonal psychology program and simultaneously working to become a certified spiritual counselor, I enjoyed the performative aspect of our projects, and I began writing poetry. The first real art piece, separate from the piddling around, was an artist book I created for a major Japanese poetry and music festival we were participating in, in Gualala. I decided to make a book to sell at the event and to give to other performers.

I am an incredible bibliophile. I joined a book art group and continued to make smaller closed books. I quickly realized that I wanted to share these books with others, so I started making open accordion books, allowing viewers to view and walk around them. I then decided to place the books on the wall. From there, I

began to explore more sculptural art and fiber sculpture.

I'm a poet too. My poetry is woven throughout all my work. I will borrow titles from my poetry. I will write a poem about the process of making. Fragments of words appear in some pieces. And of course, found objects are also part of them.

How did you get involved with Gallery Route One?

I discovered Mary Eubanks' Sometimes Books Gallery in Point Reyes and began exhibiting my books in the front gallery of her studio, where I remained for eight years. Simultaneously, I had been fortunate to be accepted into numerous juried GRO shows and began organizing their artists' talks. Mary and Zea Morvitz had been inviting me to join GRO as an artist member for years, but working full-time kept me from committing. Then, when Mary decided to close her studio, I wanted to continue to be involved with everyone, and so I decided to carve out some space in my life to make being a GRO member work.

When I became a GRO artists member, I committed to making space for making more art in my life. It's felt really transformative in my art practice to be able to think about and make art all the time.

