Introductio

For I am like a blind man who has found
A precious gem within a mound of silt.
Exactly so, as if by some strange chance,
The enlightened mind has come to birth in me—
—Shantideva

I am always wandering around looking for things in this gallery: a one-inch screw, my ring of gold and silver keys, and right now a jewel. It was one of the first things that Astrid Bowlby drew after pulling in the gallery drive in late December with her truck full of boxes. Within an hour or so, she had used her big paper cylinders like smokestacks along a wall, unfurled a roll across the gallery floor, got on her knees with black ink jar and brush and was making her first batch of images. Astrid in “drawing” from her own inspiration and some will be reaching in a fishbowl where gallery visitors are invited to drop their written requests. To get started, Astrid asked the Art gallery interns to create lists. She immediately executed my “wish-fulfilling jewel” request, but that specific image is now lost among a bold pattern of objects on wide paper strips that overlap,umble, and zig around in a madcap race.

When Astrid first described this project it reminded me of the Buddhist concept of a “wish-fulfilling jewel.” Wealth and wish-fulfillment are often symbolized by jewels. Yet even if we were to find such a mythical gem which could grant our every wish, we should not be as fortunate as we would by gaining enlightenment. Our minds have an underlying compassion and loving nature, which once recognized leads to a “wishless state,” in Everything, the artist turns the notion of genre around, summoning the requester’s own visualizing process to formulate the request as well as imagine the artist’s eventual rendering. This interaction highlights the essence of the artist’s social role—the tangible creation of what a society envisions.

This particular residency has a precious quality. The fresh presence of an Artist-in-Residence on campus engaging in experimental educational and art-making roles always invigorates faculty, staff, and students. That Astrid is a USM art alumna whose talent, generosity, and good humor has made her a beloved figure among former professors as well as the larger art community makes her presence especially valuable. Finally, this residency was originally scheduled to take place two years ago and had to be cancelled when Astrid was diagnosed with cancer. It is now transpiring thanks to her recovery, a generosity, and good humor has made her a beloved figure among former professors as well as the larger art community makes her presence especially valuable. Finally, this residency was originally scheduled to take place two years ago and had to be cancelled when Astrid was diagnosed with cancer. It is now transpiring thanks to her recovery, a

For Everything, Astrid wanted to make clear that the artist is not dealing with the artist as a subject, or a particular entity, but rather that the artist is appropriating the consciousness of the artist as subject, an idea that can be extended to all of the artist’s surroundings and environment. The project incorporates four new approaches: it is the first time Astrid has incorporated her physical presence in an environment, as well as the first time she has designed a continuously evolving installation. Also, it is the first time she has made the suggestions of others integral to her drawing.

I asked Astrid, since the word “everything” encompasses more than just objects, how would she handle conceptual requests? She replied that the requests are prompts, subject to interpretation; she would choose when and how she would execute them, and was prepared for a varying degree of success of the individual drawings on a formal level. That sounded good, and I could see that Astrid also reserved the right to have fun. Deliberately ambiguous shapes pop up here and there underscoring our fluidity of perception. Astrid then added, “And while my focus is objects, I like how ‘every’ ‘thing’ composes ‘everything’ And besides, everything is ‘everything.’” Hmmmm.

The installation clearly suggests the vastness of things. When first walking in the room, we encounter energetic bold patterning and quickly fill in the black outlines with content. These shapes are affected and conditioned by each other and the white of the paper. No single perspective in the gallery reveals what the paper “stuff of life” begins or ends. But is this stuff of life everything? The paper, conditioned by space, is a thing or phenomena we experience through our senses. The Buddha categorized inner phenomena, such as thoughts and feelings, and outer phenomena, such as objects and colors as interdependent “things.” Space, a phenomena not affected or conditioned by other

A participatory installation by
Astrid Bowlby
University of Southern Maine Art Gallery
Jan. 24-March 6, 2013

Everything things, is a “non-thing.” Things and non-things are empty of inherent existence and represent two of four categories summarizing that which is inherently empty and beyond concept, or everything. Everything suggests things in a dance of radiant emptiness.

Carolyn Eyler
Director of Exhibitions and Programs
USM Art Galleries

“Exhibition Checklist”

A list of objects made by gallery intern Earlith Hunter at the artist’s request.

About the Artist

For over a decade, Rosalyn has steadily gained recognition for her size-sized fantasy landscapes composed of thousands of hand-cut simplified ink drawings on paper.

Bowlby received her M.F.A. from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where she is currently a visiting critic and represented by gallery Joe. Bowlby has shown widely in Maine, the United States, and abroad.

Recent exhibitions include VOLTA, Basel, Switzerland; Vacationland, Baggot Salon, Brooklyn, NY; and Gains, Cool, Collected, Danese, New York, NY. Bowlby has received a Pew Fellowship in the Arts and numerous other awards. Her work is included in the collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the New York Public Library, among others.

Visiting Artist Program

Each year, six visiting artists and scholars greatly enhance the USM Art Department by engaging in student art critiques, demonstrations, art exhibitions and lectures. The Artist-in-Residence stays for a short time, but their influence is felt throughout the year as the artist maintains open studio hours, creates an artwork, and greatly contributes to the fabric of the USM community.

USM Art Gallery, Gorham

Exhibit dates: January 24-March 6, 2013
Hours: Tuesday-Sunday noon-4 pm.
All events are free and open to the public.
For packing and directions call 207-780-5508 or visit www.usm.maine.edu/gallery

Brochures design and photos of the artist: Carolyn Eyler
Photos of Everything Installation: Lens Donners
Everything condenses several aspects of Astrid Bowlby’s practice; it feels like a contraction, true to its accumulating potential; like a spring crunching down tight before the showering into the air. This work that will greedily expand week by week and is designed to extend, grow, seethe, and multiply its dimensions and component parts—whether there is wall (or floor) space or not —concisely integrates everything I know of her work. The first pictures of Everything in-progress reveal this tremulous tension. Its immediate sense of elasticity is the cathartic exhalation before gathering in all. But what will be in that eventual release?

Of course she has called it Everything. It has to be. Her memory, her ears, her mouth, the paper, the gallery vessels for temporarily holding ideograms; as many as she can recall or visualize. Unwinding like an infinite spool or scroll beading declaratives to name aspects of a lived world. Whatever materiality exists in Bowlby’s art I have long understood that it is all drawing. Not the matter, the temperature, substance. Everything keenly bears the presence, the marks of the innumerable gestures that led to it. No critical hyperbole here; Bowlby is mindful of how each project uses seeds of the next, cross-pollinates the species. Here are deceptively straightforward, clean, readable, practically schematic renderings of things. They are nearly round. Laid down in one shot with black ink on white paper, concealing nothing, without inflection, without gravity, shadowless, scale-free, uncomplicated by narrative; themselves.

As mark-making this reswells far from the 20/12 vision that seems necessary to apprehend (let alone produce) the compacted facts that defines her autonomous single-sheet drawings. Tight curls, stitches, taut parallel threads, crystalline flora and fauna, unsewing gauze, cell beds, shimmering soil, and unseen counting to infinity. On the quality and variety, ambition of the materiality, of the volume, temporality, substance. Everything radiates outward from a center, this swerves far from the 20/12 vision that seems necessary to apprehend (let alone produce). Whatever materiality exists in Bowlby’s art I have long understood that it is all drawing. Not the matter, the temperature, substance. Everything keenly bears the presence, the marks of the innumerable gestures that led to it. No critical hyperbole here; Bowlby is mindful of how each project uses seeds of the next, cross-pollinates the species.

The open accretion and additive intention in motion grows from Bowlby’s past room and wall installations in which disparate component parts — individual, shaped drawings — of distinctive forms suggest a growing organism. In 2002 she made Leaves of Grass, consisting of hundreds of shaped drawings of things pulsating across walls and onto a floor, closing in on viewers as they walked through a garden of forms. It has seemed that far beyond a tannosomic impulsion, an impulsion to get into and beneath, down to the cellular level has permeated her work. Not simply naming and tapping but seeking the clusters and strands and symbolic relationships that propel the macro world. Everything in-progress reveals this tremulous tension. Its immediate sense of elasticity is the cathartic exhalation before gathering in all. But what will be in that eventual release?

In Down Back (two versions, 2008) Bowlby envisioned and established a room in which the raw materials (rolls of paper, for instance) of her previous work intermingled with objects that seemed transformed physically by their uncanny companionship. Branches, misshapen bottles, cut colored paper in confetti bits, white rope, and ladders of various sizes seemed drained of their function or even identity amidst painted planks, blankets of colored paper, vinyl, felt and other fabric. In Snag (2010), which Bowlby made for the James A. Michener Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, her hand-selected, hand-fabricated environment generated a dialogue with the Bucks County Impressionist landscapes which surrounded it. Shing hard and soft materials, close and distant spatial arrangements, muted color and several emphatic textures to suggest a forest floor and the teeming life therein, but depicting nothing directly, she made visual proxies that achieved meaning and representation despite themselves.

Everything has all of these accumulated lessons and methods behind it; but it is also more open ended, not finite since it demonstrates ongoing growth. Bowlby says of the process, “It is a process I have set in motion. There were certain goals, for more; draw more, get better, engage public and myself in a new way. One of the goals (which as I get older and busier seems to come more and more to the forefront) make toward the answers. Meaning: I do not know the outcome and if I did why would I bother. To not know and to experience and to open and soften and observe what is going on, for me, and to help the viewer do this, it is a goal. To decide not to decide. To operate from the position of Let’s see.”

This is new. And that is important —not for the novelty– because it fundamentally challenges her practice and opens up new possibilities which will undoubtedly come through making. Bowlby is quick to dispel any precariousness of process, fertilization of the concept or emphasis on the result. “It is just a drawing. This is important. It can be made again and will be made again. This touches upon the fleeting nature of things and the contingency of return. The drawing is a placeholder. Something and nothing. Special and ordinary. Repeatable, yet different every time.”

Where Everything will lead and how it will get there is as yet undefined; it may never be.

Robert Cozzolino
Senior Curator and Curators of Modern Art
The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia