



Alake Shilling

interview by Claire Milbrath

A sad cowboy teddy bear rides his way home from the local watering hole, where a frog naps atop a lily pad and swirly butterflies hide among glittering daisies. We've arrived in the psychedelic fable world of Alake Shilling. Alake's heavily textured works borrow elements of nature to produce endearingly familiar characters out of animals and insects. A departure from the disturbing perfection of Lisa Frank's rainbow unicorns, Alake embraces the aesthetic of after-school craft, making the viewer become what she calls "an accessory of comfort."

Has your childhood had a big influence in your work?

My memories of growing up in Los Angeles and exploring popular artistic comucopias such as Boys Town and Venice Beach have influenced my work to some extent. However, I feel like my days of going to summer

camp influenced me even more. I spent a lot of time in summer camps when I was growing up, with frequent field trips to amusement parks. In conjunction with everyday craft-making, this greatly impacted my work. That part of my life particularly fueled my love for a kitschy, crafty aesthetic.

What do your subjects express?

I'm still dabbling with each character and formulating various ideas about them. They stem from my childhood obsession with Lisa Frank. Everyone remembers that wildly popular line of school supplies decorated with garish colors and stylized cartoon characters. I wanted to create my own language using the same formula. I chose to depict cute animals not just because I like them, but because I find them relatable. Everyone has memories tied to the idea that things like puppies have the potential to ease life's tribulations. I've always found that a plush

creature can soothe and comfort. I thought it would be interesting to have these characters embody the human condition so that the tables turn, making the viewer become an accessory of comfort.

Is your art intended to be political at all?

Not at all. I make art to escape political commentary. I identify as a woman of color, and that label has subjected me to enough political commentary in my everyday life. To be honest, I find it draining. However, I do feel that being a black female artist who doesn't explicitly comment on race, class, or gender is a political commentary in itself.

When did you start making art?

I started making art as a young child. My mother would take me with her to class when she was in college. She didn't want me to get restless or be disruptive, so she

would give me crayons and paper, so I could draw. During instruction, she quickly discovered that I would sit quietly drawing throughout the entire class. She said that by the time the class was over I would have these interesting drawings of the landscape outside the window. I've been making art ever since.

Does it relax you?

Surprisingly, no. I always get anxious before starting a new project. The aspect of problem solving, in addition to the unpredictable nature of art, is very stressful. I do it because it's one of the only things I really feel confident doing. I love the feeling of believing in myself, so I suppose that aspect does relax me. I get excited about all the possibilities in my work. I love the rush I get when I finish a piece. It's so exhilarating. The struggle and agony of trying to bring something intangible, like a vision or a genuine emotion,

pales in comparison to the victory I feel from solving an equation that essentially has no answer! No, it's nowhere near relaxing. But it is invigorating.

What do you want people to think about when they see your art?

I want people to be reminded of something that they like, that they're familiar with. I'm always thinking about the future, but when people look at my art I want them to think about their past.

What inspires you? Any specific artists or subjects?

Other artists inspire me, of course. Some of my greatest influences are artists like Jim Nutt, Peter Saul, Ida Ekblad, Austin Lee, Rebecca Morris, and Jamian Juliano-Villani, to name a few. I am also fascinated and heavily inspired by nature. I was obsessed with frogs for a long time. I would keep several different file folders filled with images of frogs with all of the research I was collecting about them. Wildlife and nature is something that has always motivated me, and I think that nature will always be a significant topic of conversation relating to my work.

Anything else you may want our readers to know about you?

I love my mother dearly. She has greatly supported me throughout my journey thus far.



Image Credits:
Fig.1.1 Swirly Girl
Fig.1.2 Buggy Bear