

How to Have Courage

A Conversation with

Michelle Lopez

BY ANDREW CORNELL ROBINSON



Southern Trees/Black September, 2009. Tree, resin, rope, and sandbags, installation view.



Southern Trees/Black September, 2009. Tree, resin, rope, and sandbags, installation view.

“The Violent Bear It Away,” Michelle Lopez’s 2009 exhibition at Simon Preston Gallery in New York, featured three new sculptures, each masking a subtext of terrorist warfare and exploring an abject form of violence and entropy. While a departure from Lopez’s earlier work, these pieces continued her investigations into the human condition and how the physical body is transformed through tragedy and experience. These themes are also present in her best-known work—eloquent appropriations from the mythographic universe of *Star Wars*. In Lopez’s blending of sci-fi vernacular, material decay, and cultural critique, the projected future is present and the present functions as a ruin. Her mutated relics of the Death Star, C-3PO, and other familiar icons, exquisitely crafted in materials ranging from resin and prosthetic foam to bronze, become part of a larger project that investigates the boundaries between the grandiose and the pathetic by devolving discrete, identifiable form into haunting anthropomorphic abstraction.

Andrew Cornell Robinson: *I’ve seen your work evolve over the past 10 years; a shift seemed to occur when you went to California. In fact, there have been several moments when your work has changed significantly—the first after you left grad school at the School of Visual Arts and started to work with leather, which became your signature material. Much of your work has had this intense exploration of material. What’s that about?*

Michelle Lopez: Back in grad school, I was working with chocolate and apple skins. I was trying to find a way to re-contextualize a material, something incredibly familiar to us. A lot of the work is about how to invert something masculine and make it feminine, create an ambiguity. The thing that I am most interested in exploring is androgyny. I’m not sure if it translates. In terms of my education, I was interested in a feminist perspective but not a feminist aesthetic.

ACR: *Do you mean like Judy Chicago, what a friend of mine calls “my tortured vagina” art?*

ML: Exactly. I was interested in feminist theory but not entirely convinced by the art. I wanted to create work that was specifically non-gendered. I don’t want to be specific about the language. I feel like I can so easily get pinned down, and I don’t want to, so it’s better for me to keep the ideas open.

ACR: *You mentioned androgyny. When I saw Southern Trees/Black September, the sycamore tree sticking through the wall, I was struck not by the violence or the surprise of the white prosthetic branch on the other side, but by the small, meticulous details like wrapped and repaired broken twigs. That attention to queer imperfections reminded me of how drag queens pay attention to applying makeup and costume in the process of becoming their personas, the illusion not yet achieved. There is something in your work that plays with this transgression of material and repair, disguise and revelation. It’s awkward and melancholy, but sublime in its own way.*

ML: Jeffrey Uslip uses the word “rehabilitation” in his catalogue essay for my recent exhibition. In a way, it’s trying to rehabilitate something that doesn’t exist. The smashed leather car piece, *Woadsonner (edit)*, is a redux of a failed piece, and in crushing and crashing it, the work gets rehabilitated through trauma. With the sycamore, I was trying to make the tree do something that it’s not supposed to do. It’s very much about a sense of not being seen.

ACR: *As a woman? As a woman of color?*

ML: Yeah, as a woman of color. And that relates to the wig piece, *Self-portrait as Special Mission Project/Akira Revisited*, which responds to the Takashi Murakami “Superflat” culture, in which there is always the objectified Asian woman. This wig works as a counterpoint, a rejection of the micro-aggressions, the false promises, the polish of Murakami’s neo-Pop position.

This show was really scary for me because it was the first time that I took a position on any of these things. I’ve been thinking about materiality a lot in my work. “Adventures of the Skin Trade,” an exhibition that I did at Deitch Projects (2001), explored the notion of how this skin [leather] can create a mask, protect objects, and protect identity.

ACR: *In this new work, you are not hiding your identity. You break through the wall, smash your old work, and throw your wig on the floor. In a way, this is a much more successful installation than the show you did at Deitch.*

ML: The Deitch exhibition opened during 9/11, and the sand felt like war trenches. The leather sculptures, including the sportscar, *Woadsonner*, which was part



Above: Installation view of "Adventures in the Skin Trade," 2001. Below: *Self-portrait as Special Mission Project/Akira Revisited*, 2009. Resin and soot, 19 x 19 x 17 in.



of an installation with Public Art Fund, were conceptual appropriations of objects layered into each other to make a kind of pop abstraction. The work was in some way a moment of crisis for me. I was responding to the leather-covered car *Boy*, the easiness of it—the cleverness of the cultural appropriation—by examining what it would mean for me to investigate formalism. And 9/11 made that work irrelevant. I really had to question what I was all about. I moved to the West Coast to teach and work at Berkeley. It was a moment of assessing what it really meant to be making art. 9/11 tore me down, and so all the work after that was tearing things apart, crashing, breaking down.

ACR: *What happened at Berkeley?*

ML: I abandoned working in leather. It was so easy. In grad school, it was about how the material would serve the concept. Berkeley was great because I got to play with other materials and other industries. I worked with Porsche, toy people, and prosthetists. I was hired on a digital media initiative at Berkeley, and I got entrenched in the digital world. I was doing three-dimensional scanning, making wire-frame objects on computers and printing them out as three-dimensional prototypes.

ACR: *That makes sense in terms of your earlier work, like the drawings that you made at Yaddo—layered linear abstractions, like incomprehensible wire frames. They reminded me of Arturo Herrera's work.*

ML: That body of work came from taking familiar iconography and trying to abstract it to find the uncanny. I still work this way—try and reverse something so that it will expose its cultural meaning.

ACR: *I can see this in your references to familiar icons like C-3PO, but there seems to be a real departure in this show.*

ML: I hope I'm not perceived as "that leather artist" or "that *Star Wars* artist," but I am interested in these cultural phenomena. I research them extensively, getting inside them and trying to figure out, through material, scale, and combinations of things like the C-3PO with a condom, how meaning can shift. In the "Adventures" pieces, I made cellular things, one thing directly on top of another, but they were too hermetic.

ACR: *They seem much more self-referential, more about the material than a larger idea. What interests me is how you do all this research without getting stuck in a neurotic life of the mind. You don't hesitate in the studio—you make the transition from research and work intuitively with the materials.*

ML: That was the great gift of leaving New York, being in Berkeley, and not having the voices of the art world in my head. I began to think differently about my process. That's why I feel very strongly about making the work and learning how to do all of these different techniques. In those moments, something happens that I like to be a part of, so it doesn't matter if it doesn't quite work for the piece.

ACR: *I think it helps you keep it fresh. It reminds me of a story that I heard from a potter or maybe from one of my teachers. One year, he had two pottery 101 classes, and he did a test. In the first class, he said, "You will get an A based on your ability to make a perfect pot." And to the second class, he said, "You will be judged on the quantity of pots that you make this year." He was fucking with those poor kids. The first class got hung up on trying to make the one perfect pot and produced shit, while the other class made some of*



Above and detail: *Death Star*, 2005–08. Resin, vacuum-formed polyurethane, stainless steel, wood, and prosthetic foam, dimensions variable.

ACR: *It's fascinating how as artists, we are often compelled to go beyond what we get acclaim for, even if it results in criticism. Most people hesitate in the face of change. You continually move out of your comfort zone and push yourself into a new place. It's a real power of example.*

ML: With the tree installation, we had two weeks. We got a dead tree that the NYC Parks Department was cutting down. They craned it in, we installed the tree and cut the branches. Then we had to do the configuration and cast a branch; once we got the cast back into the gallery, all of a sudden everything changed. It was a performance moment: What is this piece doing? What does it mean? When we brought the cast branch in, the tree was very majestic, even baroque.

The night before the opening, I told my assistant Crisman that we had to destroy this piece, that if it was really going to be about "The Violent Bear It Away," if we were really going to make it mean something, we had to do something more important than just bringing a tree into the gallery. So we started chain-sawing everything off that was majestic. It was just at this moment that I thought, "Screw it." I had to think like that in order for anything

the most beautiful student pots that he had ever seen. Stop trying to fixate on hitting an ideal that doesn't exist, and just make it. I bring this up because I've often seen artists struggle over the execution. I don't see that happening in your work. You are working through ideas of identity and invisibility, but you work through the materials as well. And it becomes poetic, rather than polemical.

ML: I'm sure that in grad school, I was reacting against identity politics, at least as it was being translated at the time. That's why part of me is concerned about what it means to identify myself in the work and have it be about minority experience. But to get back to perfection: it is a great moment in the process to let go of that idea. A lot of times, I feel that I am only a servant to the work, I have to ask the piece what it wants. I had my students read the Sol LeWitt sentences on conceptual art: stay on the concept, don't veer from it, and if you veer from it it's going to compromise the project.

ACR: *What did they think?*

ML: They thought it was dated, and a little too rigid. And then I had them read a Philip Guston lecture, which is totally opposite. But both texts are about how to have courage in the work, how to get out of the way. And both of them do it in radically different ways.



Above: *C3PO*, 2008. Bronze, 5 x 23 x 17 in.
Below: *Woodsonner (edit)*, 2009. Steel car chassis and leather, 89 x 60 x 40 in.

meaningful to happen. In a lot of ways, I have to get out of the way, because if I try to hold on, then potential meaning is not going to happen.

ACR: *That's interesting to hear, because my first impression was that you came in, rammed the tree through the wall, and walked out. We've been in a period within our culture, in the United States in particular, where everything is polished, everyone has their halos on, and everything looks shiny and finished. I am happy to see that Simon Preston is willing to take risks—that isn't easy, or comfortable. I think this move into the unknown, the uncomfortable, will continue to be important.*

ML: Simon was really incredible, in terms of finding ways to make this exhibition happen. I've been feeling very optimistic about this time we are in. I have nothing to lose. It's a great opportunity right now for, well, what "The Violent Bear It Away" is about—letting the house burn down and having there be fertile ground. The exhibition title came from a Flannery O'Connor book about destroying a legacy of dogma and belief systems, and the notion of burning in order to "clean." The premise is the baptism of a child, what it means to have a sacred entryway turn in on itself tragically. That's how I see it in terms of artistic process—how one can sabotage the child for the sake of an idea. In the book, the child is drowned while being baptized. He's also a slow child, and there is guilt that there is something not quite right about him, a lack of acceptance. In relation to the current climate, it feels that everything is being burned away, taken away. It's the same as the way that I've approached the work: "Destroy that fucking leather car, and fuck all of you."

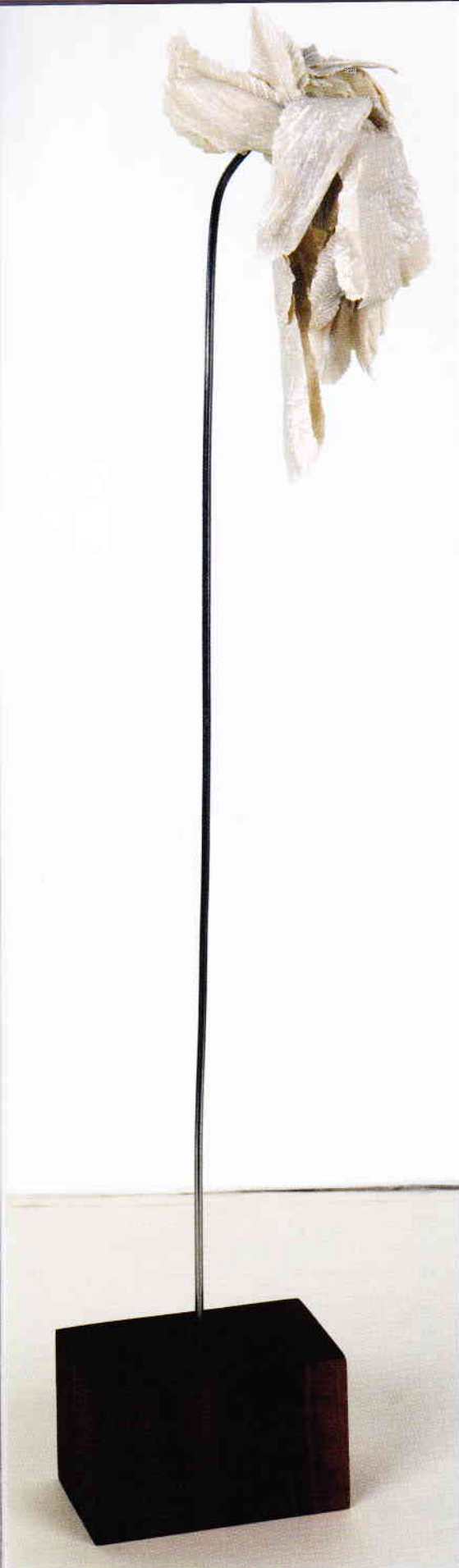
ACR: *That's something that not a lot of people feel comfortable doing.*

ML: I know. But I also took the gruesome paradigm of 9/11 without the theatricality and tried to create more of the austere aftermath. Remember when Jackie Winsor would ask, "Is the engine in the car?"

ACR: *What did she mean by that?*

ML: Well, I teach with her now, and supposedly her critiques are so intense that students cry. I think that the engine in the car metaphor explores the notion of self-conception: OK, you call yourself an artist, and you have the shell of the car, but the engine is what is going to run it. Is it going to move it forward? We always used to laugh about that, but it's accurate. She would always attack me for this, asking, "Where are you in this?" I feel like it's a really easy thing to do: I can be culturally clever and determine what is





what and tell you as a viewer what is what, but in the end I have to own up to what is under the hood.

ACR: *Your work has gone from “Adventures in the Skin Trade,” a show whose title comes from an unfinished Dylan Thomas novel, to something more emotional, spontaneous, and fresh.*

ML: *Boy was great and resolved as a piece for me, but everyone said, “Your brand is leather.” There was a contrived sense of trying to push something, but in the wrong direction. But as a result of all that work, I figured things out three-dimensionally. I almost could have made those awkward balls without leather, which I ended up doing when I first got to Berkeley.*

ACR: *This transition in your work has enabled you to cultivate a sense of awkwardness in an interesting way. That’s hard to do; it’s the other, it’s the three-legged dog, and you’ve made it poetic.*

ML: *Awkwardness in the sense of something not right?*

ACR: *Yeah, for example, working with prosthetics, the absence feels wrong, but it makes perfect sense. I feel like our culture has a self-conscious awkwardness to it, and I feel like your best work captures a bit of that.*

ML: *I think that part of it is wanting to cultivate how we function as human beings. I was really interested in how prosthetic technology gets misinterpreted as an animatronic, cyborg thing. The sycamore pieces are really more about an idea of longing, of rehabilitating a tree. But, in terms of the culture of prosthetics, I’m interested in that moment when you try and replicate something natural and also in the intersection where artificial replication meets the natural. I’m interested in those intersections and how wrong they are, that sense of vulnerability, the co-dependence of those two.*

ACR: *So there are all these cultural references, and a sense of identity, but your work is not preachy, not polemical, it feels highly personal and a little coded. Is that accurate?*

ML: *Yes, it’s very personal. It’s the thing that keeps me going. I hope the fact that it is personal is a lens into the human condition, about trying to exist in the world. In some ways, the pieces are portraits. For every artist, on some level, the work is self-portraiture. For me, it is really about a certain kind of vulnerability and decay and trying to prop it up, move it forward. It’s also about a sense of rehabilitation after something destructive. People scoff when I talk about this notion of the “anti-metaphor.”*

ACR: *What do you mean?*

ML: *Like that crux, the piece that was in LA><Art with Lauri Firstenberg in Los Angeles.*

ACR: *You mean the funky, multi-legged thing?*

ML: *Yes, the funky, awkward thing. I really wanted to make this figure/crucified tree do something that it wasn’t supposed to do, and also fail at it miserably. There was a sense that if I had taken it away from the C-stands, it would have been triumphant just like a figure should be. But I wanted to create an abject, failing figure—it felt more real. A metaphor can become tired, and, again, I wanted to try and invert it. I am anti-clichés, I guess.*

ACR: *What’s been going through your head in the aftermath of this show?*

ML: *Well, it’s the first time that I’m really feeling detached from my work. I’m really excited about it, I don’t have doubts. I am just accepting the process of it being out there in the world. It’s out of my hands, and I hope that it means something to the people who see it.*

ACR: *What are you up to now?*

ML: *In retrospect, I felt that the attitude from this work was overly dramatic, at least in the writing—I had shrouded things for so long that an extreme “coming out” inevitably surfaced. Now I’m gravitating toward things being very sedate and simple, but with the same attitude, which I think has always been quiet subversion. I recently made a wilted plywood skateboard that was part-feather, part-petal, called *Your Board*. It continues*

Death in Venice, 2008. Porcelain, bone ash, wood, and metal, 25 x 3 x 5 in.



Above: *Crux*, 2008. Sycamore branches and resin prosthetic joints, dimensions variable. Right: *Your Board*, 2008. Maple plywood, grip tape, and steel, 132 x 38 x 25 cm.

the idea of deflating cultural vehicles of speed, in this case, the boyhood ride. I wanted to question “speed, flight, triumph” by forcing the “rigid” board to become impossibly flaccid. It is another “crash,” but one with contradictions: what is soft is hard, straight is sagging, ephemeral (feather) is wood. I also wanted to expand on the wilted petal/wings theme from *Death in Venice* (2008), a piece I made out of porcelain. The thing that I really enjoyed about *Your Board* was doing it all on my own—bending the plywood and determining the form without the help of assistants. I found it to be very meditative and much more rewarding. It felt a lot clearer in my head.

ACR: Tell me about the title. Does it have meaning for you, like your other titles?

ML: *Your Board* implies that I am yours. I wanted this to be a commentary on ownership, on magnifying reality, the sense that the audience could have ownership of my identity—take me as woman, artist, whatever you need me to be, but also a real self-portrait about the desire to disappear or be a shadow. The board at times looks like a silhouette or a shadow. But by making it and putting one intervention in, I wanted to redeem or repair something—much like “The Violent Bear It Away.”

I am also working on a wallpaper explosion using flocking material, an anime wig cast in cement that blends with the floor, a video called *Meditation on Legs*, and a large wilted petal/feather that hangs on the wall, another stick piece called *Golden Crown*. A lot of the new work is about disappearance. If the work in “The Violent Bear It Away” was about exploding or destroying the objects/sculptures, the recent work is about having them disappear.

ACR: Has your work changed in relation to having a child?

ML: I may have said this already, but it makes you care less about what the world thinks while simultaneously connecting you to a bigger subconscious. My life gets infinitely more complicated, but my thinking gets simpler. And maybe the work gets simpler, but with more of an impetus. I’m not sure, it’s still all mysterious to me. My will gets broken



each day by my son, and maybe the work does that too. I can accept more about where the work needs to go. I can also show more of myself without it being diaristic or belly-gazing. It’s humbling.

Andrew Cornell Robinson is an artist living and working in Brooklyn, New York, and teaching at Parsons School of Design. He is a 2010 recipient of the Edward Albee Foundation’s residency fellowship. <www.acrstudio.com>.