**EXPOSURE 15: RE-DOMESTIC** is the latest in a series of group exhibitions designed to feature artists who live and work in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The Exposure series originated with the St. Louis Art Gallery Association in the late-1990s and was housed at Hunt Gallery on the campus of Webster University. Gallery 210 took ownership of the series in 2005 with Exposure 8. Since then it has become one of the gallery’s most anticipated programs. This year Gallery 210 is proud to present an exhibition of work by Gina Alvarez, Heather Corley and Deb Douglas.

The title “Re-Domestic” is from a dinner discussion with Gina Alvarez, Heather Corley and Deb Douglas from May 2012. Over the course of the evening common themes of gender roles, methods of working, conceptual foundations, inspiration and aspiration for their work began to emerge.

“Re-domestic” was a response by Deb Douglas, after the conversation turned to the problems of balancing professional and family responsibilities, to the question of defining domesticity. This off-hand remark resonated with me. “Re-domestic” seemed to me a concise description of the shared commonalities and ambitions of these three artists.

Outside of political or economic contexts domestic is defined as: of or pertaining to the home, the household, household affairs, or the family: domestic pleasures, devoted to home life or household affairs. As subject matter the idea of the ‘domestic’ emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, growing from theories associated with the mid-20th century Feminist Movement and conceptual art practices. Much of this work addressed issues of gender roles, relationships and beauty that were for most part the topics at the center of our dinner discussions.

“Re-domestic” within the context of this exhibition is the subversion of traditional gender roles by employing art-making activities that filter domestic craft, associated with femininity, and high art, associated with masculinity, through contemporary feminist theories and conceptual art practices. The pieces in the exhibition exploit to greater or lesser degrees the paradoxical experience of attraction and repulsion and reveal the transcendent experience that can result from repetitive activity. They are all concerned with beauty. The works by Gina, Heather and Deb connect us to a history of skilled production and feeling, touching on the nostalgia of loss or absence, of filling a need for something to which there is no longer a lived connection.

The following is a transcript of the dinner conversation. It has been edited to fit the space available in this publication, to allow for a coherence of expression to facilitate, as much as possible, the flow and naturalness of the conversation.

Terry Suhre, Director, Gallery 210, UMSL
July, 2012

**INTERVIEW:** May 29, 2012, Schlafly Taproom, St. Louis

**ARTISTS:** Gina Alvarez, Heather Corley and Deb Douglas

**INTERVIEWER:** Terry Suhre, Director of Gallery 210, UMSL

**TERRY SUHRE:** When I started putting together this project I considered you Gina, Heather and Deb because I felt your work shared attributes in common. There is a non-traditional approach to your studio practice. Much of your work is material based often, making use of found objects. I also believe there is an underlying narrative in all the work. Some of the narrative themes I see connecting your work are domesticity, love, loss and nostalgia.
HEATHER CORLEY: Those [themes] actually are in almost all my various artist statements.

DEB DOUGLAS: Mine too! I thought did I write that because love, loss and disappointment were a big part of a lot of things in my work for a long time.

TS: Gina, your work stands apart from Heather and Deb’s a little bit.

GINA ALVAREZ was born in Racine, Wisconsin. She received her B.A. from the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina where she focused her attention on printmaking and costume design. Gina moved to St. Louis in 2000 to pursue her Masters in printmaking and drawing at Washington University. She completed her degree in 2002. Since graduation, Gina has pursued her interests in the arts both as an artist and an arts administrator. She has exhibited her work extensively in St. Louis, as well as Chicago, New York, Washington D.C., South Carolina, and Washington State.

GINA ALVAREZ: Well, it definitely engages the same issues but for me there is some sexuality [in my work]. I think domesticity is tricky because it’s kind of loaded negatively, although I think that’s a part of our discussion. But I feel domesticity is defined in a certain way -art historically- and that is where I have trouble with it. I think sexuality is where my work comes in. So my work is like sexuality bucking domesticity.

HC: It depends on the context. If you are talking culturally or art historically, through materials or through the intention of the material itself. There are certain books I think about in the context of my work like On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, by Susan Stewart, and Domesticity and Dirt, by Phyllis Palmer. Palmer’s book is the history of women and domestic servants in the United States from 1920 to 1945. It puts them in the context of TV, film, and art, the home itself, as domestic servants as “materials.” I think that’s part of loss, that’s part of nostalgia. It’s part of taking something that is seen as almost dirty because it’s gender-based. Instead, why not embrace it?

TS: How does this relate to your work?

HC: The materials I use are the things you encounter everyday. I just change the context in which you encounter them. They are all things that are used and then often discarded. With the piece I am making for this show, I am creating hanging tags like you would find on a present or a price tag or on any number of things, with screenprinted patterns from security envelopes. I’m not exactly sure of the title, but right now it is certainly uncertain. I’m utilizing the three answers to everything, one answer hanging from each form, “yes,” “no” and “maybe.” When the viewer encounters the piece, I want them to respond personally to the environment. The questions are up to the viewer.

TS: I want to Ask Gina when we talk about issues of domesticity and sexuality and how does one turn back on the other?

GA: So, how does my work address the bucking of domesticity and sexuality? Actually it embraces sexuality more so than domesticity but I think the way it does that, especially with the bell jars, with works on paper and not framing them and using materials, you know, having that image come off the paper. It creates this desire within the viewer to touch it. So, in that way there is this thing you desire but you can’t really have. I think there’s a dichotomy of like caging a wild animal or not having the freedom to be the beautiful thing that’s inside the jar. I think women feel that stronger. I think through process, I think through printmaking, I think through sewing, and by having this intimate moment that is purely my own I can imbue all of that stuff in those central objects that actually have multiple purposes. If you think about what they could be, they could be a child’s toys, they could be pleasure objects, they could be objects found in nature or they could be simply the materials they are.

They cross all of those aspects. Also humor is important.

DD: I like what Heather says about how she embraces the idea of domesticity because it’s a word I have always skirted very consciously. I use images from a very domestic time in the history of women in this country. I use them but I don’t ever talk about them. I think it’s kind of a reclaiming, I guess, and I also like what Gina said about the beautiful thing you can’t touch. I use images of women who represent what I can’t even begin to attain. I mean to me they represent so many things that I can’t get my head around myself.

GA: I think we all struggle with the idea of the ideal. I think that what you are presenting is the idea of the ideal. And whether we adopt that individually or we adopt it as a culture, it’s force-fed. I think playing with that concept and putting it in front of viewers is powerful.

HC: One thing I just wrote down that relates to both of you, and myself as well, is the “expectation of free will.” The idea that people have free will and the expectation to control it and believe what it is supposed to be. That expectation of free will; it’s like love or nostalgia or anything. It encompasses things like the pushing and pulling of “I want it. I’m repulsed by it. So I am going to embrace it.”
I know what you’re saying but it might be simpler than that actually. Many years ago, and you’ve maybe seen my work from this time period, I would use animal imagery because animals were a way to explore my own emotions from a distance. So I could put a picture of the dog up. The dog looks sad or lonely or whatever and the dog was me but nobody else knows the dog was me. So now I’ve been using images of women in a kind of similar way because they represent different things for me. One woman looks scornful. And I like that because she’s vindictive and angry or powerful and [another] one looks very seductive. I like that because that’s kind of power or control, too. So they stand in for me in a really personal way about experiences I can be distant from. I don’t always feel like I connect to those women because they’re too pretty, they’re models, they’re beautiful, they’re from the 60s, etc.

My interpretation being female would be different than that of a male viewer. Seeing a wolf with a woman looking sly is going to look very different.

It seems predatory

Maybe it’s context. Most of my friends are male and that may inform the point from which I was looking at that. Because of the amount of time I spend with them, I’m more able to see things through their eyes. I wouldn’t be as aware of their male perspective.

I agree completely. With female friends I often feel I am on the outside looking in at a group. I feel more comfortable around the company of men. It’s just easier to talk to them. Sometimes I sense competitiveness with other women that make me uneasy. So the women in my images automatically set up this duality. To me they’re really compelling but also they’re a little bit scary.

When you start your work is there a specific problem you’re addressing or trying to solve? And then is there a particular set of responses you are trying elicit from people?

My agenda is there. I want to make something beautiful. I want to engage in that conversation about beauty.

Because [the word] beauty is so loaded?

Totally. Beauty is loaded. I actually don’t think it has to be loaded and I think that people can appreciate beautiful things. I think it’s loaded from the art context because of [art historical and critical ideological] fascism. (I feel) You can’t tell me what beauty is! What my beauty is! (laughs) But I’m going to tell you what beauty is from my point of view and I’m going to beg you to want to experience it. I think my agenda is a bit that.

Is there a pleasure principle at work?

Yeah, there’s a pleasure principle but I think for me the pleasure principle is more on my end as a maker than it is for the viewer. I want to create a beautiful surface. Like I’m actually using wood in these pieces. I’m using walnut. I don’t have a lathe but I’m essentially turning the wood, just differently. So I’ve created my own way of doing it and I’ve blown the minds of the men in my family and in my life. So within that it’s really important for me to make something that transcends the original function and the original process. I think that is where some of the original materials come in. It’s books, paper, its printed material, and it’s fiber that’s been printed on a way you wouldn’t necessarily expect.

Heather Corley was born in Houston, Texas and was raised in St. Louis, Missouri. During her pursuit of a Bachelor of Fine Arts she attended Hartford Art School in Connecticut, Parsons School of Design in New York, and received her degree in Printmaking at the University of Missouri St. Louis in 2004. After receiving her MFA at University of Tennessee Knoxville in 2007 she returned to the St. Louis area. She exhibits extensively in the St. Louis region, nationally and internationally.
Using stitching as drawing, there is all those ways to push the perception of how something should be used.

**TS:** Another commonality is each of you makes use of found objects.

**HC:** Sometimes they are found or accumulated, and sometimes I recreate them. There is beauty in the process of collecting and creating. I think beauty is very empowering because it’s something every person reacts to, no matter if it is a positive or negative response. I think all three of us do so through materials... especially through materials. Something can be so grotesque that when I look at it, it’s beautiful and I want to touch it or even lick it. Beauty can be all encompassing and not just defined as something that is aesthetically pleasing. Beauty is, I think, a big part of what is appealing in everything we make. It draws you in, and then may be disarming, beautifully seductive and tactile, through material and concept and craft. It draws you in and then you may feel awkward with it.

**DD:** What I like about working with found objects is that it’s already there. If it’s a scrap of paper or a postage stamp or whatever it is I am looking at, what’s so great about it is that it already has a history built into it. It comes already loaded for me. And I really like that because it is a springboard to jump off as opposed to creating something completely from a blank piece of paper, where you are starting from your own conception. I feel like I need that. It will, kind of, set the mood for the direction I want to take the piece based on what it is.

**GA:** For me it is. It’s born out of being a printmaker though. There is the concept of the multiple. If you approach printmaking in a traditional sense it is the ability to reproduce that singular item. So for me the multiple is linked conceptually to producing an edition of variance. Regardless whether they’re flatworks or three-dimensional objects. In my world they all exist as prints.

**HC:** Yeah

**GA:** For me it’s just a material choice. It’s not necessarily a conversation about using the ready-made or found object. It goes back to the idea of nostalgia. It goes back to the idea of there being some sort of presence that’s not my own. But ultimately it’s cut up. For instance I was in Kansas City this week and found some purple lame fabric in the dumpster. But nobody will know that I found that.

**HC:** But does it matter?

**GA:** No. What I’m saying, although for me it’s not a conversation about the found object or the ready-made. It’s a conversation about materials regardless of what those materials are. They could be cherry pits. For example, I’ve collected all the shaving from cutting PVC pipe that actually looks like snow. It’s an opportunity to redefine what the cast-offs are. That’s my agenda in picking materials and also those are the materials that transcend what people thing they are.

**TS:** What are your influences? You all seem to have some affinity for conceptual art, in particular through the use of repetition and process.

**GA:** For me it is. It’s born out of being a printmaker though. There is the concept of the multiple. If you approach printmaking in a traditional sense it is the ability to reproduce that singular item. So for me the multiple is linked conceptually to producing an edition of variance. Regardless whether they’re flatworks or three-dimensional objects. In my world they all exist as prints.

**HC:** I agree with that totally. I think I found printmaking because I’m obsessed with the multiple. I like things in mass. I like an enormous amount of multiples in one thing. Like at the hardware store, the bucket with thousands of bolts, the same exact bolt, I find really appealing. But it is the idea of multiplicity and repetition, I think, is why I found printmaking. Even though my work is informed by printmaking it isn’t necessarily or predominantly print-centric. The idea of the multiple is a very sensual thing. I’m so drawn to that. If something is good as one it is just fantastic as a hundred.

Not necessarily only as a print but as an object or as an image.

**DD:** It’s interesting that you guys are both coming from printmaking because my minor was in printmaking. The one thing I actually enjoyed about printmaking was not necessarily the multiple, I never thought about the multiple. I thought about the obsessive mark making on the plate. That’s where I really had a good time. By the time I made multiples I was like, “I don’t care anymore.” What I think is interesting about myself is

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**EXPOSURE 15: RE-DOMESTIC**
I want. I find the process in itself satisfying. That obsessiveness... its satisfying my own desires and obsessions and it makes me happy because I can obsess about this and I can get to what I desire, but still keeping the work open and engaging. That's what I want.

GA: For me the repetition is more controlled. It's a little more meditative. It is also the chance for me to talk about time. Repetition is not necessarily in mass like the way you think of hundreds of items accumulating but they are kind of marks accumulating. So it's a time reference. Those are the things I think about when I use repetition and multiple.

TS: Gina, does your being a mother change your relationship to time?

GA: Totally. That's how these soft sculptures started. I've always had a sewing interest. My grandma was a sewer. I was a double major in costume design and printmaking. Although I didn’t complete costume design, I worked in the theatre. I worked behind the scenes stitching costumes, and so there was a lot of that training in me so when I graduated from graduate school, I didn’t have access to that equipment. I had a show a Forest Park Community College and I'd just had Oscar and so I had to make this work but I had to make it during [Oscar's] naptime. We have a one thousand square foot house. It's super small and my studio is in the basement. You can hear everything in the house so I would put him to sleep and then I would go down there and I started making these small, intimate, (and) quiet (pieces). I wasn’t running a press. I wasn’t drilling anything. I wasn’t hammering anything. I wasn’t sifting. I was quietly sitting and producing. Using the tools I that I knew I had in me to produce the marks akin to the kind of marks you would make in a print studio. Using all that conceptual process knowledge. Knowing full well that concept comes out of process.

HC: I completely agree about concept coming out of process. That's how I approach (my work). The way to concept is through process, and process is driven by concept. It [concept] can be hidden from you until you pull it out. I would agree that a lot of my work from the last few years comes out the same kind of thing, enormous changes in living and studio situations affects the work and the process.

DD: The same thing happened when my son was born a long time ago. My work got really small because I worked at the kitchen table. I also learned how to work in half-hour increments on something small as opposed to grad school's eight hour days of working on and on.

HC: My studio schedule is driven by my teaching, my family, my creative partnerships, and the opportunity for space to work. That's partially why I started making parts that create a whole because they’re smallish, I can do them where I am.

GA: So to redefine domesticity.

HC: By what it means now.

DD: So we’re re-domestics.

TS: How does this new idea of domesticity relate to earlier ideas of “women's work?” What I am referring to here is historically women with servants and leisure who chose to pursue the visual arts were relegated to the crafts.

HC: I guess it depends. I tend to only look at it from a mostly historical standpoint. I think [of these activities] as an extension of drawing and it's something I'm drawn to. I think, that because I am female it's more acceptable for me to embrace it because I am female. When I use embroidery, it's mark making. Cutting with an Ex-Acto knife, it's drawing.

TS: So conceptually you are not connected to the issues and conversation on “women's work.”

HC: I am connected to it in practice. I understand and think about it, but from a personal standpoint of what I’m doing. However it’s not what drives me to create work. But it’s important to know and appreciate.

DD: When I was a graduate student I wanted very...
consciously to make big, heavy, what I kind of thought of as masculine kinds of painting. I really like raw, de-constructed construction. It was something I very consciously wanted to do... to be a big painter like that. It was only after I got married and my son was born that I started wanting to do more intimate kinds of works. And I guess

Deb Douglas received M.F.A. Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Illinois and her B.A. Truman State University, Kirksville, MO. Since 2000 her exhibitions include: The Perlow-Stevens Gallery Early Spring Exhibit, Columbia, Missouri, SCC Painting Invitational, Curated by Christine A. Holtz, St. Charles Community College, Six, Mad Art Gallery, St. Louis, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, Open Studio Tour and Exhibition, Hanley Building Art Show, St. Louis, and Duane Reed Gallery, Home Grown, St. Louis. She is also active as a curator and juror.

I’d say in hindsight, more sort of traditionally feminine [kind of works], and I think that’s interesting. It’s just how my trajectory went. But in terms of materials and craft and how I relate to that I’m grateful for being able to have the choice to work anyway I want and with any materials I want.

GA: I actually love the idea of engaging in both the fine art world and the craft world. Backing up to the original question of craft duties delegated to women, my experiences as a child really formed my interest. My dad and both my grandfathers were woodworkers so there was a wood shop in every house I frequented. My grandmother was a seamstress so she would make my clothes for me. I think there was a certain empowerment in that. We would go shopping and I’d pine after something and she’s say “Ah, we don’t need to spend your money on that. We can make that. And she and I would go to the fabric store and we’d pick out the pattern that closely resembled the item that I wanted and we would pick out the fabric and then we would make it together. So early on I understood the power in being a maker and having the opportunity and the ownership in making that thing yourself and being prideful and wearing it.

HC: It’s almost the exact opposite reason why I make things. The basic reasons end up being the same. But how you got there is different [from me]. My mom did paint and draw some when we were very young, but my mom and grandmother don’t sew. I probably have a kind of false nostalgia for “women’s work” as a childhood influence. I think the reason I started making things as a child was because I had a strong desire to create things, and not an activity I was taught as being female.

GA: Just in terms of craft, because I think craft is important. For me it’s important to have the conversation that fine art can be craft and craft can be fine art. I think for me beauty and the lack of functionality of the object plays a really strong role in that conversation. It doesn’t necessarily have a functional purpose that is crafts based but is employing craft-based processes.

DD: That is what is so great about today. After the 60s and when the crossover [between craft and fine arts practices] occurred. Like Peter Voulkos and other artists who were making things specifically non-functional [began] to break those boundaries. I mean that was amazing. We used to have the argument when I was in school, “Well, we’re painters!” But at the time it is “Well, we’re painters!” But now that has totally evolved and the best painters I know are illustrators. The point I’m making it is that there isn’t that boundary anymore.

HC: I would argue that craft [in the broadest terms] has always been at the center of everything throughout art history.

GA: It depends on the context of craft, the context of action if you’re talking about in the context of art itself. I think we can talk about it in all those contexts, anthropologically, tool making. Craft is important. There is power in knowing how to make something. In terms of craft, it’s labor intensive. I guess that’s where I see it. Craftsmanship and labor are inexorably linked.

TS: What do you want them to know about an artist's responsibility to communicate with people?

HC: I only know about my experience.

TS: What you want them to know about that experience?

HC: It’s not that I want the viewer to know anything. I want people to bring something to the party and look at themselves
I’m not judging them or giving them the answer. I’m asking them to experience the work and reflect on their own experiences, as I have. When I make work like the insecurity series, I used the interior of security envelopes. It’s exposing those truths that we all hide, securely tucked away from prying eyes. I think it’s a larger question. I’m fully aware you come to the work from a different place than I do; I count on that.

**DD:** I have personal relationship experiences I make art about. I’ve had a lot of ups- and-downs relationship wise in the last few years. It’s a way for me to translate what I’m experiencing into something concrete. Because I don’t always trust my head in terms of what I’m feeling and I often don’t really know how I’m feeling. I can’t really get in touch with that. So making work about some of these experiences through other figures and other juxtapositions of imagery is a way for me to say this is about that experience. That’s how I make something I have no relationship to personal in my own meaning.

**HC:** Are you saying “Look at me, but don’t look at me?”

**DD:** Yeah. I hadn’t though of it that way but that’s possible. I hope people like my work but I don’t make my work for other people. I just make it because it’s a way for me to say what’s in my head.

**GA:** There are poetics. For me my work exists in a space that has words and is [also] void of words. It’s that liminal, in-between, space. What happens in a space that is definable and indefinable is that it’s ultimately experiential, because that’s your visceral response to most things. The head is not there, the heart is not necessarily there but the opportunity to respond to feeling is there, because it’s in its purest form. In terms of defining what it means to create meaning and relationships that work on a personal level, that’s hard because I think those moments are ultimately indefinable. There are not words to put to that. I think our art is an opportunity to give those moments space. So the ability to verbalize to those unspoken things is probably where some of the work exists. I guess that’s why it’s hard. And maybe it’s because we’re women. I think [women’s] brains are different [from men’s]. So for me the response that I elicit from the viewer hopefully exists in that verbal/non-verbal space. That ability to create poetics and something quiet, something beautiful, something that is ultimately intimate. I can share an intimate experience with a stranger.

**DD:** That reminds me of Terry’s question of “What do you intend for your work to do?” That’s what you’re asking, right? I want the viewer to come to my work and say, “Oh, that is such an interesting and appealing way of putting all those things together in one space. A lot of times they don’t really get the answer. They don’t get what’s going on in my head about a specific work. To me it means something very specific and to most viewers, they don’t see that. So for me I rely on the formal qualities of the work to carry that. The content is for me. I’m not trying to be cryptic. People aren’t in my head so they don’t get that. I try to work in tandem with having a very conceptual base but also having a really strong formal element that hopefully carries that. That question, “What do you intend for your work to do?” I don’t know how to answer that.

**GA:** To take over the world!!

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