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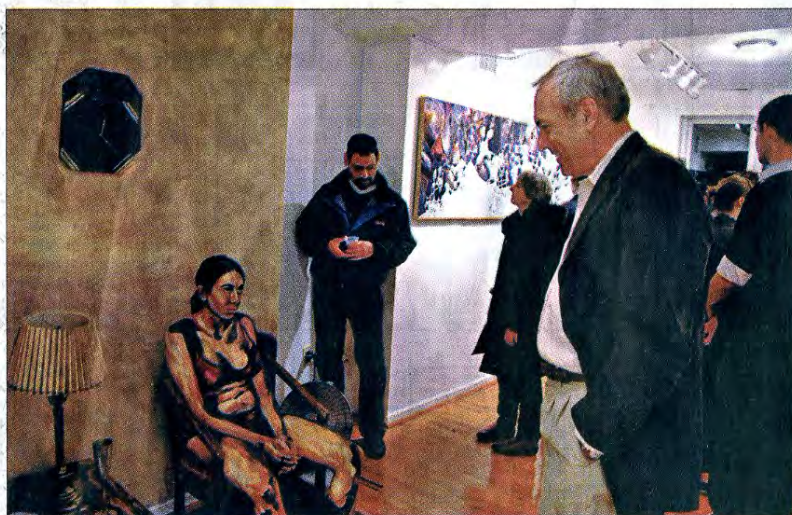
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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2010



THE HUMAN TOUCH: Gallery visitors respond to the piece "Natura Morta."



STILL LIFE ON THE MOVE: Meade posed the subject of "Timmy as Timmy" on Metro.

flesh PERSPECTIVE

BY DAN ZAK

Slender, freckled, auburn-haired Alexa Meade is in her parents' basement in Chevy Chase. It's 7:30 a.m. Tuesday. She resists the temptation to Google herself. Instead, she sets an empty Grand Marnier jug between a mirror and an inclined plate of glass, traces the bottle and its reflection on the glass with black paint, then traces the reflection of the paint itself. Next, she sprinkles her expired thyroid medication into a can of Betty Crocker frosting, stirs it and scoops the mix into the pill bottle.

She doesn't quite call it art. It's an experiment, she says, to limber her brain, which has been consumed recently by her shotgun art career. The media inquiries, the hundreds of sales requests, the invitations from random galleries — it's a bit much for a 23-year-old who only six months ago decided to be a full-time professional artist. This moment is playtime.



BRUSHING UP: Meade is making a "very interesting contribution" to portraiture, says one gallerist.

on.washingtonpost.com

 View more of Alexa Meade's work in an audio slideshow narrated by Meade at washingtonpost.com/style.

"I'm not out to make a masterpiece right now," she says as her iPod shuffles through indie rock. "I feel like anything you do gets you moving, inspires you in some way. It's also kind of satisfying playing with frosting."

Footsteps on the stairs. Her father, Phil, pokes his head in. "Off to work," he says.

"Bye, Pops," she says.

Two weeks ago she was a political science grad living at home, painting her way through her first year after college. She is still that. Except now she has a deal to exhibit at the Saatchi Gallery in London, an offer to collaborate on a music video for a major record label, and hundreds of curious e-mails from people who want the story on Alexa Meade and how she turns people into paintings.

Her current medium is acrylic on flesh. She paints on people's skin and clothes until they look like they belong in a frame. And *voilà*: The masses are captivated, opportunity comes

MEADE CONTINUED ON C10

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MEADE FROM C1

knocking. Even as she putters in the basement, Alexa Meade may be standing on the brink of an inventive career, or the brink of oblivion.

Internet memes are most virulent when they blow people's minds, and Meade's "Living Paintings" seem to have done that. For two weeks she has been linked, blogged, page-viewed, tweeted, Digged, thumbs-upped, CNN'd, OMG'd and lavished with parades of exclamation points by anonymous commenters — the plebeian, virtual equivalent of a good opening at MoMA, minus the bona fides.

"A portrait is something that's been with us for 3,000 years — that's not an easy genre to move forward," says Magdalena Sawon, owner of Postmasters Gallery in New York, who has invited Meade to be part of an upcoming exhibit. "I'm more interested in the end result than just the strategy, and she has the ability to convey a powerful image. [Her work] exploded virally on the Internet, and my wish, to some degree, is to bring it back into the focus of the fine arts world. This is a valid and very interesting contribution to the portrait genre."

Meade uses a brush. She paints skin on skin, lips on lips and eyebrows on eyebrows, and the insides of nostrils, using her own mixture of nontoxic paints and unspecified ingredients. Her subjects must sit still for multiple hours as she follows the natural contours of their faces, varying brushstroke and color to exhume their inner essence. When she's done, they appear banished to two-dimensionality,

Alexa Meade's body-painting is increasing her exposure

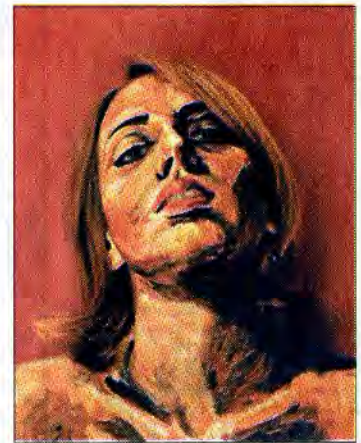
yet they also seem fuller, more dynamic. She then sets her subjects in an installation, or photographs them. There are no touch-ups or special effects beyond acrylic on flesh and the initial complacency of the observer.

Look at the eyes, though. Bam. Real person. This effect jars people, confuses them, briefly rattles their grasp of art, space and reality. Meade, who has worked on Capitol Hill and on campaigns, says her experience in politics taught her to look beyond facades.

Dunn Loring resident Will Claybaugh spent 11 hours last month modeling for Meade at G40: The Summit in Crystal City.

"No one was categorically trying to decipher me as a person," says Claybaugh, 24. "They were trying to figure out Alexa's vision. It felt dehumanizing in an incredibly liberating way. . . . I was a piece of art looking at them as opposed to a person who had some understanding of them. It made me realize that objects, as far as I experience them, are just surface."

The human body has always been a canvas for artists — makeup, tattoos, Joanne Gair's magazine-friendly body-painting — but there's something different about Meade's project that strikes some galleries and artists as novel and new.



IMAGES COURTESY OF ALEXA MEADE

SELF-PORTRAIT: Meade's aim is to "feed my curiosity."

"She sent me a photo of her work and I thought it was really amazing," says Elise Siegel, owner and curator of Positron Gallery in Baltimore, where Meade debuted the concept in October by painting her younger sister Julie into a lonely, earth-toned tableau. "It's something I've never seen before. It plays with your mind. During the opening, people were really im-



Alexa Meade's body-painting is increasing her exposure

pressed by her installation."

Based solely on a forwarded link, English painter Christian Furr booked Meade as a selected exhibitor at an October charity event at the Saatchi.

"She's going to create quite a stir in this country," Furr says. "People are fascinated by playing with viewpoints, and she's taking it one step further than *trompe l'oeil*. I was blown away by it. She's quite an established artist, by the look of things."

Except she's not. She's been working full-time only since the fall.



Growing up in Chevy Chase, Meade was steeped in fine arts and design, and at 16 she began to focus on sculpture and politics. She went to Vassar College and studied political science while taking sculpture courses on the side. For three summers she interned on Capitol Hill.

In the summer of 2008 she worked at Barack Obama's Denver headquarters as a press assistant. She wrote her 100-page senior thesis on community organizing and the Obama campaign, then graduated last spring and moved back home into the open, loving, mildly concerned arms of her parents, who wanted her to have a secure job with benefits. Her father lassoed

her an offer for a high-paying job as a director of communications. She turned it down. Art was her choice. She was done spinning for other people. Now she'd spin herself.

She spent last year learning how to be a professional artist. She interned at a local gallery last summer, networked with artists and gallerists via e-mail, and crashed art events several times a week to pick the brains of the cognoscenti. By October she showed her first Living Painting at Positron. Her work has appeared in five minor regional shows in six months. Earlier this month, District artist Chris Bishop, whom Meade met in September, sent a link to Kottke.org, a high-traffic liberal-arts blog in Manhattan. The linkage unfurled from there.

Bold, focused and media-savvy, Meade has welded her political and artistic sides to fashion a campaign for a long-term art career, careful to weed through bogus solicitations in her in-box, bothering to respond to comment threads on social media sites like Reddit.com, declining to work on the music video to remain free of the commercial world.

"I'd rather feed my curiosity than push a product," she says. "I have so many ideas and so many things I want to explore, and I don't want to have all this hype and then have nothing."

She says the rest of this week is booked for media interviews. Then she's driving to New York to drop off prints at Postmasters. She's anxious and exhilarated and yet cool as a cucumber, pulling 20-hour days to maintain control of her not-quite career and still have time to nurture future projects, and play around with frosting.

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