

## Curating A Sense of Place at Southampton Arts Center



Worlds within Worlds by Edwina von Gal.

By Emily J. Weitz

Bastienne Schmidt doesn't consider herself a curator - she never went to curatorial school and her great passion is creating her own art. But after decades of regularly going to exhibitions and immersing herself in art, she has an eye for what she likes. When she set out to create a show at the Southampton Arts Center, she had a deep well of talent from which to draw.

"There's a newfound vibrancy out here [on the East End] as to who we are as artists," said Ms. Schmidt. "The people I chose, there was an ongoing dialogue of what they could add to this theme."

The theme is "A Sense of Place," and it's one that has threaded its way through Ms. Schmidt's career as well as her life. Growing up in four different countries, she would have been hard pressed to pick just one place as her home. But each place had its own contribution, and its own unique identity. The work she'll be showing at the exhibition consists of large scrolls that will hang side by side on a wall. One of the scrolls has large seeds attached to the fabric, and the words "We the People" interspersed.

"I've never been a political artist," said Ms. Schmidt, "but after the Women's March I was inspired. Seeds grow out of nothing. It's a tiny thing and you plant it and something comes out of it. It's the same as 'We the people'. Singularly we may not have any power but collectively, we are the source."

Another scroll is dotted with maps of countries, but they're out of scale so that the United States appears to be the same size as Israel.

"I've been forever fascinated with the shape of things," said Ms. Schmidt. "The shape of countries. I was interested in the fact that people don't have a deep knowledge of geography and history. And then you take out the scale, so they all look the same size, and it underlines the complexities of us finding our sense of place. It's a misnomer to think that through the creation of additional borders we will find our sense of place. It's the other way around."

It's clear why the theme "A Sense of Place" made sense to tie together Ms. Schmidt's body of work. But she is only one of eleven artists that bring their interpretations to this theme. Phillipe Cheng, whose photography book, *Still*, came out in 2016, will show a series of 48x48 images from that book.

"The structure of the book is that as you travel through this landscape, you find yourself in unexpected places," said Mr. Cheng. "On one turn you'll be in a waterscape and in the next you'll be in a landscape."

The images are all local East End scenes, blurred and muted in a way that evokes a more subtle sense of place. "The body of work is based on searching for emotional place," said Mr. Cheng.



Typology of Nations by Bastienne Schmidt.

He sought to unveil the many layers of East End vistas, so that the seemingly monochrome winter landscape reveals the many levels of browns, whites, and blues.

“For me it comes back to the emotional arc,” said Mr. Cheng. “On the one hand you think brown could be a subdued color, but once you begin to look, it creates contrasts between the sky and the earth and becomes transformative in a way that is unexpected.”

Other artists utilize space in different ways: Almond Zigmund will use the space itself by creating sculpture and actually painting the floor to occupy the exhibition space in an interactive way. Christopher French riffs on his connection to the area through his paintings which at first appear abstract. But as Ms. Schmidt explains, his inspiration was observing the way the light came through the trees on his wooded property on Majors Path. Michele Stuart, a land artist from the 70s, plays with environmental concerns by cataloguing extinct species.

“What interested me about her work is [it explored] the texture of place, with these drawings where she rubbed earth into the paper,” said Ms. Schmidt. “How does nature leave a mark and how do we leave a mark?”

Other artists in the exhibition include Louise Eastman with Janis Stemmermann, Saskia Friedrich, Mary Heilmann, Toni Ross, and Edwina von Gal and the Perfect Earth Project. Perfect Earth Project, which works to bring beautiful landscaping back into harmony with the surrounding environment, will have an exhibition that most literally ties to A Sense of Place. Their interactive exhibit will feature five different habitats: the beach, the salt marsh, the meadow, the woodlands, and a managed landscape.

“It’s presented in a designed and artful fashion,” said Ms. von Gal, “but hopefully it invites people to put their hands in it and pull something out. We’ll have magnifying glasses so you can look more closely. It’s about the beauty of the found object in nature.”

While all the other pieces will be the artistic response to this place, Perfect Earth’s contribution will be the actual source.

“These are the components of the place we think is so beautiful here,” said Ms. von Gal. “It’s the totally representational component of what all the art in the room will be representing.”

Mr. Cheng hopes “A Sense of Place” will offer people a much needed opportunity to slow down.

“We are all so connected, that to take the moment and the time to be in the silence of why we’re all here is a challenge. I hope this helps slow someone down enough to help them feel where we live. Beyond thought and reason, to feel it instinctively.”

*A Sense of Place will open Friday, February 24 and will host an opening reception for the public on Saturday, February 25 from 5 to 7 pm at the Southampton Arts Center, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton. It will be up through April.*