

ONCE UPON A TIME

A Conversation with

Andrea Loeffke



Three views of *The squirrels, hedgehogs and rabbits are indeed harmless*, 2007. Wood, foam, fabric, drawings, and mixed media, 18 x 8 x 17 ft.

German-born Andrea Loeffke lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, constructing complex conglomerates of material and form, working from innumerable materials, both decorative and everyday. These supplies overflow from the categorized shelves and bins of her studio. In fabricating her often vivid multi-form assemblages, Loeffke employs a myriad of techniques expressing ambiguous thoughts and sensations. Her fairy-tale worlds incorporate multiple objects, colors, and textures, resulting in what could be described as playful and mysterious landscapes that entice viewers into visual as well as narrative journeys.



Two views of *Let us celebrate! With brittle, rock candy, pastry and confection!*, 2006. Wood, plastic flags, wallpaper, and mixed media, 98 x 138 x 208 in.

BY PAUL ANTHONY BLACK

Paul Anthony Black: *Process seems to be an integral part of your work. Is it more important than any initial concept or intention?*

Andrea Loeffke: My work evolved from playful, intuitive little drawings and objects into a more conscious process that creates scenes or whole environments. The tone is seriously playful; or you could say that the tone is serious—it is serious play, and at the same time, it is humorous, sweet, and innocent. The making becomes a journey and an exploration for me. The work evolves step by step, developing while making. I start with a material, a feeling, a color, or a vague image. Obscure, intangible thoughts and sensations collect within my head and my body. There are no words for what I am going to do. Things come together—it feels like building. One stone goes on top of the other. It is a playful process that goes through different stages of evaluation and development before finding the finished form. It is a back and forth between letting go, allowing parts to just stay where they fall, and controlling, refining, pushing further, and putting into order. Improvisation and structure are combined in my working practice, provoking the unforeseen, the unexpected.

PB: *“Innocence” suggests a lack of intent or less conscious motivation to manipulate the viewer’s responses. Do the new works, which combine structure and improvisation, now express a logical narrative process?*

AL: It perhaps appears more innocent than it really is. Play and conscious decision-making are interwoven in my process. But I like to surprise myself. Things happen while playing, often very unexpected things, and they open new doors that give me new directions and add layers to the work, which I think can only form when the process is partly improvisational. When things are too thought out

and controlled, they usually lack the wonderful mystery and ambiguity that I strive for. The remarkable thing about art is that things can be created and made visible that are very complex, new, unexplainable, not logical, and full of vague emotions and moments. I create elements that even I can’t properly explain or understand. I guess this is the “innocent” part in my work. Yet certain accidents and play lead to ideas and layers, which I then recognize and push forward. This creates fanciful environments that become systems—overlapping worlds, groups, and subgroups juxtaposed and united through scale, color, sound, form, space, and material. With the continuous pushing and pulling among the elements of this vocabulary, I am building hierarchies of events and narratives that compete and communicate. The groupings of objects and their placement within a particular space become a journey of discovery. Narratives can be discovered and woven.

PB: *Are these works intended to be “magical” journeys for viewers?*

AL: I develop pathways for the viewer to travel. I link the vocabularies of micro and macro worlds, encourage notions of irritation and implied movement of the objects, and ask viewers to relate themselves to the objects and the situations they present. I am interested in creating a place with the capacity to crack open a well of associations, allowing the viewer to feel, to dream, to fantasize, to be irrational, subjective, and intuitive. Specific or vague personal memories are awakened. The viewer is asked to weave his or her own story and sensations, to believe and to wonder.

PB: *Francis Bacon said that he sought “to open the valves of feeling.” Is there, after all, a desire within you to lead viewers toward experiencing and feeling their way through these spaces?*

AL: To wonder, to believe, to let go and dip into a different world

full of associations, that’s what I like viewers to experience. In the end, I want to create a place that interweaves the magical, the child-like, and the naive with lurid, mysterious, and abstruse elements. People bring their own stories, experiences, and personalities when viewing my work. I like to trigger sensations based on shared experiences with certain objects, materials, colors, textures, and ways of building and making. The viewer is free to knit his or her own narrative around the work and dip into a world full of ambiguity. Very often the combination of objects and the alteration of familiar elements add a bewildering and challenging aspect, making viewers pause, arousing their curiosity, and inciting them to create the unexpected and new. I am interested in cultivating our ability to fantasize, to freely associate, to put together and create. Imagination is a very powerful human ability—it cannot be controlled, and it is free of censorship, manipulation, logical and ethical prohibition. Imagination is the power of subjectivity that surpasses reality. To imagine is a liberating sensation because it is the ability to select freely from the real world.

PB: *Your Das muss gefeiert werden! Mit Krokant, Kandiszucker, Krehnuetchen und Konfekt (Let us celebrate! With brittle, rock candy, pastry and confection!)—seems to be a slight departure. It reminded me of Damien Hirst’s Let’s Eat Outdoors Today, in which the remains of a barbecue are set within a vitrine. The veneer of a happy and innocent gathering is subverted by the insinuation of something sinister. Your work balances a similar tension: your desire to create a liberating sensation also expresses the ability to imagine the disturbing. This work also makes a kind of social comment on a hidden danger lying beneath the façade. Is this a clearer narrative than in your earlier works?*

AL: The title’s listing of old-fashioned German goodies alludes to the idea of a party, a cheerful get-together. The white poles with colorful flags and the crowd of playful artifacts spread out across the room give the impression of witnessing a lively and joyous event. It feels like walking into a room and finding all the traces of a party but no people. The scenario is very colorful and playful, maybe a little chaotic, with a clear sense of movement, process, and life—an animated scenario. The installation fills the space: the confined room is painted all in white (walls, ceiling, floor), and entering it directly through a door from the street immediately invites the viewer to become part of this world. Inside, one is asked to participate and examine. When one looks closer, the jollity is broken at once: popsicles with sharp red tips and medical implements lie next to pieces of cake and candy. Little marshmallows can be mistaken for pills, spills of water and red fluids accumulate, and the moving, motley flags are enchained with tight strings of yarn, meeting the hard surface with an aggressive splash of red liquid.

The narrative here might be more linear than in some earlier works, even though the individual elements are still ambiguous. I am very much interested in the melting and confrontation of contraries, looking behind the façade, discussing the many facets of life—the two sides of a story. But my last installation at PH Gallery in New York, *Oh do let me help to undo it!*, might have been less self-explanatory. This work raised the question, “To what extent does the artist rely on the audience to do the work of mentally



When the green frog changed into a happy prince the nearby well—splish, splash—turned into sweetened lemonade, 2005. Cardboard, paint, glitter, light fixture, Styrofoam, and mixed media, 129 x 203 x 225 in.

joining the disparate components?” [See the review by Jonathan Goodman in *Sculpture*, vol. 25 no. 10.] It is important to leave space for the viewer, but enough has to be given to start the experience and process. This is, of course, always a fine line, but when it is well managed, it will heighten the viewer’s sensation.

PB: *Oh do let me help to undo it! also has a sense of foreboding. At first you are met with a colorful and child-like playground of objects. But this gives way to a feeling of unease. Like any fairy tale, the primary narrative here holds a secondary narrative, giving a sense of reality being slightly off-kilter.*

AL: Yes, it is like walking into a child’s drawing—a fantastical environment, playful and discomforting at the same time: baby-blue, cartoony clouds that “gasp,” raining red string; tipped-over cups and spills everywhere; ladders and platforms composed in an ascending gesture, with a production line of red, dripping clouds; a blackboard with sketches and scribbles; little foam peanuts with wet red tips, which seem to explode over the blackboard canvas; and comfortable carpets and scattered drawing implements. Puffy white clouds on the floor and floating rain-clouds give the place a heavenly suggestion, yet bold construction materials, the familiar red and white check tablecloth, and the backboard bring us back to our world. I was trying to create a place between realities, between comfort and disaster, between familiar and outlandish, keeping the viewer a bit off balance. The first impression is light and friendly, but soon after, one gets the distinct feeling of having walked in on something that has gone badly wrong. A child-like, imaginative dream of disastrous dimensions? I believe that with the blood cloud I found a poetic metaphor for the times and conditions in which we live today.

PB: *Your works have a thematic continuity—intended or not. Can you tell me about the direction in which you’re moving?*

AL: One of my main artistic goals is to create interactive and

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Oh do let me help to undo it!, 2006. Wood, vinyl tablecloth, Styrofoam, yarn, plastic cups, and mixed media, 130 x 203 x 455 in.

engaging work. I invite viewers to relate themselves to objects and the situations they present, to pause and experience these environments. I am interested in an even more direct interactive approach, to have the audience interact literally with the piece—be able to climb it, feel it, play with it, become part of it.

PB: *inandoutthroughandabout—and don't forget to put your feet in the blue bucket, for the Islip Art Museum in New York, seems to represent your idea of viewer participation.*

AL: I feel that if I invite viewers to become part of the work not only intellectually and emotionally, but also in a physical way, they will have a richer, more vivid and memorable experience. The dipping into a world of wonder and discovery becomes real, becomes true experience, true sensation. The art affects the viewer as a human being in this world. But the most wonderful aspect is that there is a chance for the viewer to keep the piece moving and evolving. With every new personality, there is a possibility for a new ending. The artwork depends on the person and reinvents itself every time. The artist provides the platform where the participant ties all the elements together.

PB: *Sculpture places the viewer outside of the object's "universe" in an objective position. Installation places the viewer as a participant in that universe in a subjective position. Your work adds a temporal component—the process of the journey, physical, internal, and marked by time and process.*

AL: The piece is incomplete without a temporary participant. The moment one enters, the work becomes. The moment one exits, the work ceases. In that moment, the work is quiet; it awaits the next inhabitant and exists as a framework, full of potential. In *inandoutthroughandabout—and this is new to my work—the*

viewer becomes a performer and takes the narrative to another level. He or she is in the center of the play and at its end. A time component is added. The work is ephemeral.

PB: *Viewers once projected themselves into the micro pathways of your work, which only insinuated macro worlds. The issue now seems to be one of scale, to incorporate the viewer, allowing physical interplay like an explorer in a fairy tale. Is this interplay a conscious motivation to instruct or guide?*

AL: Scale has always played an important role in my work. In earlier pieces, it was about an emotional response to scale—putting oneself in relation in an imaginative way. In my recent installations, scale can create an actual physical experience. There is great potential for me here, as the artist: my interest in the shift of scale lies in the ability to have an effect on the viewer's body and understanding of his or her position within the work, as a part of the work, and in relation to the real world. To challenge through scale gives the possibility to talk directly to individuals and invite them to participate. Sometimes it might allow entry and a relationship, and other times it might deny entry, leaving us left out and off-balance—a wonderful conflict from my point of view. The point is that I can play with this new physical experience and manipulate it in different ways. What would happen if the actual physical experience was an experience of denial?

PB: *Your "deer-stand" project, The squirrels, hedgehogs and rabbits are indeed harmless..., appears to create a dialectic, again incorporating viewers as participants within the work while playing with scale and perception in a landscape of miniature creatures—asking viewers to traverse a minuscule safari through binoculars. Is your primary intention to form a dialogue between the micro and macro elements and to highlight the ongoing nature of playful discovery?*

AL: This new piece is a modification of my "scaffolding platform/treehouse" idea (so far, no space has lent itself to this project).

DOUGLAS ROMINES, COURTESY THE ARTIST

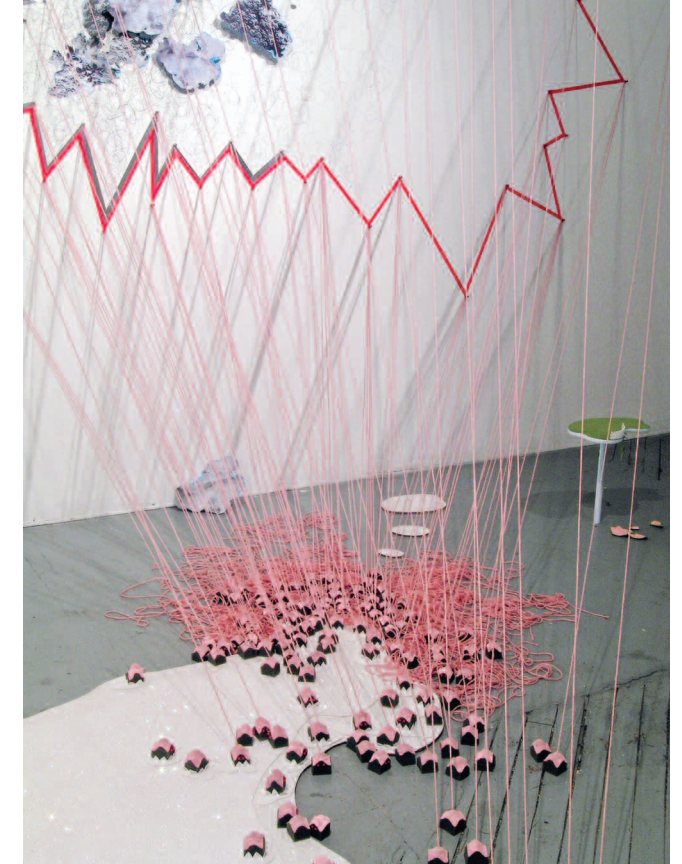


Left: *inandoutthroughandabout—and don't forget to put your feet in the blue bucket*, 2007. Fluorescent paint, safety mesh, wooden poles, pulleys, and mixed media, 18 x 13 x 20 ft. Right: *Tik tik tik tik*, 2005. Cardboard, glitter fabric, pom poms, vinyl, miniature foam fence, pins, and mixed media, 101 x 130 x 96 in.

At Michael Steinberg Gallery, I decided to replace the large-scale structure with a high platform, a deer stand, raised eight feet above the floor. This wooden structure can be climbed, and after one has successfully overcome personal challenge—in some cases, even fear—to ascend, the world above is comfortably welcoming, with soft cushions in dazzling green, fanciful, and whimsical. A pair of binoculars invites you to explore the detailed and pictorial world around. The visitor is allowed to dip into a different world of magic and exploration—an interactive experience outside of everyday events and normal adulthood. Participants are invited to imagine themselves back in childhood when they still built forts and treehouses. A sense of mission, the feeling of being in control, and the sensation of peeping mark the ongoing nature of playful discovery. The use of binoculars also enhances the "dipping into a different world." One not only discovers details that might not otherwise be visible, but also zooms in, detached from the surrounding environment. The participant is suddenly in the middle of it all, at the core of events.

In this piece, visitors have a double role: they are participants and performers with subjective experiences within the piece; but, at the same time, they are placed outside of this creation in an objective position, like witnessing a performance in a theater. Micro and macro elements enhance this double role. Visitors can relate to the size of the deer stand, which comes out of our world, like the binoculars. The surrounding environment, however, plays with scale: one finds miniature parts next to small, familiar or regular-sized, and enlarged elements. A magazine cutout of a deer, greatly reduced in size, hides behind a regular-sized picture frame with a drawing. Egg cartons and spray-foam develop into

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enormous chestnuts, and a miniature ladder leads to a normal-sized hook with small drawings of forest animals dangling from it. Parts of the installation invite participation because one can relate in terms of size and feel comfortable among the familiar. Other elements preclude participation, and one becomes more of a beholder, standing outside. The visitor brings his or her own body and size to this universe.

PB: *In the disparate elements of this installation, have you employed a collection of narrative components to make a free-form puzzle for the viewer to construct?*

AL: All of these bits and pieces arranged on fields of green continue as a composed collection of narrative components, rather like a puzzle. At this point, my work in the studio was mainly collecting, archiving, and doodling. I went through magazines and scavenged through stores and my own bins and shelves. I was reading stories, collecting words and sentences, and making small objects inspired by materials and found commodities. There was a general theme underlying this work, and the more time I spent with it, the further an idea developed: generally speaking, a "blithe" and enchanted version of a serious topic—nature. The idea was to create a canvas with a loose narrative meant to be found and collected. The participant can follow the traces, the marks I have laid out, and weave his or her own story. After all, the idea of the deer stand ties in with the surrounding environment—it is all about discovery—unfolding and inventing.

Paul Anthony Black is an artist, curator, and arts journalist currently living in the U.K.