

INTERVIEWS

EMILY ROYSDON

July 02, 2017 • Emily Roysdon speaks about her show at Kunsthalle Lissabon



*View of “scenic, say,” 2017.

*Emily Roysdon’s exhibition “scenic, say” at Kunsthalle Lissabon marks a transitional moment in the artist’s work as she shifts from her site-specific performance and text project *Uncounted*, 2014–17.*

Here, the Stockholm-based artist discusses moving forward and creating spaces for both “alive time” and loss. The show is on view through September 2, 2017.

WHEN KUNSTHALLE LISSABON contacted me about doing an exhibition a year and a half ago, I imagined I’d soon be stepping out of my project *Uncounted*. *Uncounted* began as a collection of textual fragments, phrases, and questions that influence each other in various ways as the text develops over the course of writing. One of the phrases, “alive time,” has been at the heart of the project for years. I’ve written about it, but only by asking other questions—for instance, about marginality, what is unseen in time, and the project’s phrase “how to build a structure to be alive inside.” I think one of the reasons I’m so connected to “alive time” is that there’s inherently a sense of loss in this phrase that’s important to me.

I needed a sense of loss to be constitutional to what I’m creating right now. I was leaving *Uncounted* and experiencing the loss of my grandmother. I’ve always said that I have three moms, and she was one. I had been photographing her, and them, for about twenty years. And so, in grief, after losing her, I was going through my image archive over and over again—every old negative, analog, medium-format, 35-mm, and digital image. So in a way the exhibition comes from this personal image archive. But I’m not that kind of artist; I’m not going to just

use my image archive—at least not at this point in my life—to tell the story of my three moms and the unconventional matriarchy that we have. Maybe when I’m eighty I’ll do a straightforward show like that. Instead, to make this show, I wanted to honor these questions around grief and see how they intersect with “alive time.”

I play with an idea of theater in “scenic, say.” In many ways I have always used it as a specter—this thing that I imagine, but that I’m not that rigorous about. I build it as a shadow structure to my thinking. In this exhibition it’s a bit more formalized though; the relation to theater is announced in that first word scenic, but then also in the series of five wall murals titled “Vanishing Point” and the collages titled “prosceniums.”

Of the wall murals, one features my grandmother Enid in the bathroom. There’s a toilet bowl in the bottom left corner, and she’s grabbing for a bar on the wall for some support. I consider her the protagonist. I thought her leaning was important somehow—this elegant lean, this need for help. I think that grounds the show in a lot of ways. It’s the first figure you really have access to. Of the other murals, one is a choreographic moment, two are architectural/spatial, and another, the largest, is from my “piers” series and depicts a horizon that embodies a particular cultural history and city space.

As I've been making exhibitions with *Uncounted* the last few years, I have focused on different questions in the text to stage my exhibitions and make works out of the various proposals. But in "scenic, say" I really boiled them down and isolated a few phrases so that they have different performative relationships to the "prosceniums" I constructed in the collages. I tried to give the following phrases from *Uncounted* a different materiality, by using them in my collages: "aliveness trespasses," "what is a transition that is not a solution," "What instruments have we?," "a length of inaction," and "genders and governments, the shifting of weight, the changing of direction."

That the collages are independent, each on their separate stands, means the works themselves create a space; they are something you navigate. They compose a landscape. I like to tether the text and questions to that performative space, and for that performative space to be the back side of a photo that you're not seeing. Both series use photography to think about "alive time," and in both the integrity of the space is obstructed, calling up the questions of trespass and marginality that *Uncounted* writes around.

— As told to Samara Davis