

GEARY



DECEMBER 2022

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Meddling in the Middle: Breakfast with Vadis Turner.

By JAMES SALOMON August, 2022



Vadis Turner, Chelsea Square Diner, NYC.

Photo: James Salomon

So, we're at the Chelsea Square Diner on 23rd and 9th. Why here?

This is my old haunt from when I had a crazy large, crazy free and crazy cold studio on 11th & 22nd. It was a dreamy place from a lost time. The interior was built out with street finds and repurposed supplies. Ceiling tin gutted from uptown brownstones lined our kitchen walls (thanks Tom Beale). There was a 50ft long paper plate chandelier that hung above our dining table (thanks Christopher Trujillo). Great parties.

I came here for the split pea soup, and thank god the scene is exactly the same. This place isn't cool in all the best ways. I love the rotating cake display, the landslide of baked goods that were all made somewhere else and the bowl of mints at the register. It's a gloriously gritty place.

A couple of years ago I photographed you on the Williamsburg Bridge. You chose that spot.

I moved to Williamsburg in 2000 and would walk over the bridge every morning to my first job in Manhattan. My own "Let the River Run" moment. I walked that bridge almost daily for 12 years. Lots of curious encounters. There was another walker, with the opposite commute, who would give me a piece of gum whenever we crossed paths. I hate gum, but loved the friendly exchange. A former boyfriend once spray painted a birthday note to me in the left lane. I often tried to make phone calls, but the searing screech of the train makes that impossible. A bonus to the noise is that you can talk outloud or cry if you need to. Thats a weird thing I miss about NYC... people crying on the street. Strangers emoting within intimate distance from each other. Elsewhere, people just do it alone in their cars.



Vadis Turner, Williamsburg Bridge, NYC. , Photo: James Salomon

I heard you say you're "meddling in the middle" these days. What does that mean?

Yes... well, I'm a middle-aged mid-career artist living in middle America. These super lame terms are kind of potent? fabulous? when you put them all together right? My work fuses the female-identifying experience with materials from the domestic landscape. It feels like an important time to be making this work ... and Tennessee is an important place to do it. I'm excited for some exhibition opportunities in the region. My solo show opened at the Huntsville Museum of Art last week. I'm thankful for upcoming group shows in Louisville, Nashville and Miami. Next year I'm back in Alabama with projects in Birmingham and Dothan. I wanna give these Red states a little tickle..... and meddle and muddle it all up as I go.



Vadis Turner at the Huntsville Art Museum, Huntsville, Tennessee. August 2022.

Well I feel there's a lot to be mined in all of the states, it's not always NY/LA. Is there anyone in Nashville or elsewhere that you have your eye on? Someone we may not know about?

Here are a few brilliant women artists working in different parts of Tennessee:

Nashville - Jana Harper

<https://janaharper.com/home.html>

Johnson City - Vanessa Mayoraz

<https://vanessamayoraz.com/home.html>

Memphis - Johana Moscoso

<https://johanamoscoso.com/home.html>

Knoxville - Althea Murphy Price

<https://www.altheamurphyprice.com/>

Chattanooga- Christina Vogel

<https://www.christinarenfervogel.com/>

Can you elaborate a little bit on your personal take on "the female-identifying experience", and how it manifests itself in your work? A lot of people look at artwork, kind of nod their heads and say "very interesting" without really knowing what's going on in the maker's mind. Then they'll read a press release or explanation that says virtually nothing, still keep nodding.

So... what's up?

I find myself nodding through press releases sometimes too. Glazed over by social media, our interest in absorbing actual content is numb. But there's work out there that jolts me out of nodding. The works that are the most difficult for me to appreciate are the ones that are the most important for me to spend time with. I love things that I don't know what to do with, that don't fit into a category.

Similarly, checking the boxes and following the cultural prescription or behavioral expectations of womanhood feels overrated and vapid. After growing up in the South, I struggle with "supposed to's". My content often draws from tragic heroines from Greek mythology, literature and shared experiences from different generations of women. I partner these stories with domestic materials that have the potential to speak in some way. Sometimes I use functional materials from inside the home, like used bedsheets and curtains. Sometimes I mine into the foundation or exterior landscape and employ mineral wool and driveway gravel. I manipulate the materials, allowing them to transcend their intended functions, contradict their structural natures and betray traditional gender associations. How can wax paper become lace? How can quilts be naughty? How can breastmilk be sculptural? How can cement become a fertile vessel? How can a ruffled bedspread become a glowing hissing window? How can bedroom curtains become a free-standing sorceress? Ideally, the materials will be perceived in new ways and engage in the force, the friction and the fantastically feisty current I associate with the female identity.



Thank You Note from Eris, 2021 from The Future is Female at 21c Nashville.

You recently met up with one of my old pals and collaborators, Alice Gray Stites, at 21c. How did that go?

I think Alice is incredible. We burrowed into the heart of the matter..... we talked about creating, exhibiting and discussing art in the American South. And what a gift it is to be in this weird world of work. She has the awesome job of producing/designing/presenting powerful contemporary art programming for 8 states "in the middle". She always knocks it out of the park.

We met at the 21C in Louisville, the mothership location, where Still, Life! Mourning, Meaning, Mending is on view. Magnificent pieces by Valerie Hegarty and Heidi Lau, to name a few. Weight and optimism swirling together. I'm currently in a show called The Future is Female, curated by Alice with Stefanie Gerber, at their Nashville location.

Since you're a local I can't resist asking: Who are you listening to now?

Something I really love about Nashville is that you can still move here with a dream. Although the country scene is pretty saturated, there are still niches to be filled. I live near the bus station, and I often see people getting off a Greyhound with a guitar slung on their shoulder.

I went to a party last week and heard Peter One perform. His first solo album comes out later this year. You should also look out for the very fabulous Katie Schecter. Her latest album, Bad for Business, came out last October. She was last seen opening for Beck, while 8 months pregnant, at The Basement East in Nashville.

What is your Why?

The female narrative in American folklore needs to be rewired.

I'm drawn to domestic materials because they are artifacts. They carry expectations, histories, tensions and the potential to evolve. Transforming them into storied forms, editing them into raw elements, aspiring to say as much as I can with as little as possible. To have the confidence to say that this is enough.

I'm not interested in combing out the tangles. There is more content within the loose ends. I do this work so my sons can see that digging deep is worth being vulnerable, and likely a little messy.