Essay about Sharon Louden by Brilynn Janckila/May 2015

Sharon Louden is a fast-paced, accomplished artist. In fact, if you don’t listen closely and attentively, you’ll most likely miss something important. Louden currently teaches at both New York Academy of Art and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where she is a mentor to graduate students. When I first spoke to her, I was intimidated. It wasn’t in an ‘I’m-scared-of-her’ way, it was more an awestruck, ‘Can I be you when I grow up?’ kind of thing.

We were both eating lunch and spent a half hour chatting over Skype about her work and her show that is coming to the University of Minnesota Duluth. Louden was at the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach, Florida, and I was in the Underground at the UMD.

Louden will be visiting UMD during the Fall 2015 semester. During her time here, she will be creating an installation piece for the Tweed Museum of Art—meaning it will not only be displayed in the Tweed, it will be created there.

Louden’s installation piece will be heavily influenced by the form of the rectangle, a shape she is currently inspired by. It is a sight-specific piece, which means it will be assembled improvisationally, in the moment.

Creating a piece on site is not something that Louden is worried about. She is comfortable creating art on the spot. “I’ve known my work since I was five years old,” she said. “I know it, I feel it. It’s like another person in the room with me. A lot of it is intuition and following what I see, even when I don’t understand it yet. It’s risk taking all the time and just having the confidence to follow it. We’ll do little mock-ups of it in the studio, but for the most part I’ll be making it on site. The students who will be working with me will be part of the creative process.”

Louden’s installation will be accompanied by a response from the musician Andrew Simpson and theatrical lighting design by Arden Weaver, the Associate Dean of the School of Fine Arts and Professor of Theater at UMD. The music and lighting are both based on the installation. UMD students in the Department of Music will also be working to create music to respond to the piece.

According to Louden, the idea of having music and theatrical lighting came from Ken Bloom, Director of the Tweed Museum. He wanted the Department of Music to be involved and as a leader on campus, he was able to pull all these people together to create this collaborative experience.

Louden is looking forward to being at UMD and working with the students. According to Louden, the students who work with her will not be asked to run any personal errands—they will only be there for the installation of the art.

The students who work with Louden will not only be a part of the creative process, they will learn that she wants everyone to strive to do their best work. When she gives a critique of someone’s work, it is only because she wants others to learn, improve, and use this knowledge to be better in the future.
One of her influences, Richard Tuttle, reflects in Louden’s work. His installations are all shapes and sizes—each one different than the next. His pieces are made of wire, rope, wood, etc.—all things you might find and reuse.

Louden also uses found things in her “Glowtown” project—a workshop she does for children and adults. It involves found materials, in combination with luminous paint—which is made of acrylic, phosphorescent, and non-toxic matters. “Glowtown” began in 1998 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Louden’s inspiration for “Glowtown” came from one of her installations. She shared with me, “I did an installation called ‘Tips’. That piece got me thinking about how to do a workshop for kids. ‘Tips’ is made of cotton dental rolls that came from my sister-in-law, who’s a dentist. So the idea of ‘Glowtown’ is to use found materials, which came from my work. Everything from me comes from the content of what I do in my studio.”

After learning about her artwork and the presence it creates in a room, it was shocking to learn that Louden never had a point in her life where she knew she wanted to be an artist. Louden told me, “It was always in me. It was never a decision. I’ve just always been an artist, since before I can remember.”

This kind of insight into yourself—being able to pinpoint what your passion is—is something that I wish I had. I am graduating from college and I am still not sure what I want to be, unless you count still wanting to be a princess.

It didn’t surprise me that Louden earned both a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a Master of Fine Arts degree. Her parents didn’t approve of her career choice because they thought it would be harder to find success. This is something I can relate to, however, because my writing degree has gotten me countless remarks along the lines of, “So I’ll be seeing you at McDonald’s after graduation then?” Louden has found success, but as the days of paying off my student loans are closer than ever, I am more impressed to find out that she paid hers off in only 10 years.

“Financially, it was a really big struggle,” Louden said. “At times, it can still be that way. And living with uncertainty can be difficult for some people. But you need to think about what is good for you. The next thing to think about is: ‘What can you stomach?’”

Louden’s determination shows through in the way she lives, and it comes out in her artwork. Her installation pieces are created on site, with limited time and materials. To me, this would feel like showing up to class or work before I finished everything and I’m scrambling to get it done on time, but that isn’t the case at all. It’s Louden’s job to be show up with previous experience and knowledge, materials, and the confidence to create on the spot.

Louden said that part of being a really good artist is being a critic—being able to stand back and say “Is this working? Is it not?” and knowing to change it when it’s not working.

“The older I get, the less fearful I am of anything,” Louden said. “I am afraid of bugs and heights, but I am not afraid of doing anything professionally anymore. I feel the freedom to take these risks because I am doing it every day in my studio.”
Louden’s favorite part of being an artist comes through in the risks she takes every day. She is expressing herself and learning more about what works and what doesn’t.

“Freedom to express my truth is the most important part of me being an artist,” Louden said. “The second part is being able to put my work out there in the world and start a dialogue, start a conversation.”

What’s most important to Louden, however, is context. “Context is King. When context is perfect for the work, that’s when harmony exists for me,” Louden shared. “There was one time in my life, in the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in 2011, when I had a premiere of one of my animations. My expectations were very high and it was the first time in my life as a professional artist that those expectations were met.

“To see the premiere of my animation in the most exact context, to see everything breathe and sing where it should be was fantastic. Creating art and exhibiting it—that’s the experience. It’s in the here and now. That’s when it all comes together.”

That moment where everything comes together, no matter how it differs for each person, is what blossoming artists have to look forward to. “Persevere,” Louden said. “I always say that there is no such thing as a rejection. It’s just a difference of opinion. If you don’t receive an opportunity that you feel you should get, then that means you’re going to receive something else, something the universe has in mind for you. Sometimes, it’s not what you think.”

Louden’s advice and philosophy on life can be a comfort to both new and experienced artists. It’s easy to get down on yourself when you don’t get an opportunity that you really wanted, but it’s important to remember that there will be something else, you just have to wait for it. And while we aren’t all destined to be artists—or princesses, much to my dismay—Louden’s advice is something that everyone should remember.