



Lily Cox-Richard
Interviewed by Molly Springfield

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<http://thestudiovisit.com/lily-cox-richard/>

Not everyone can say they grew up with a giant volcano slide in their backyard. Sculptor and installation artist Lily Cox-Richard can. Her family runs Cox Farms in Centreville, Virginia, an unpretentious “agritainment” complex—where you can get pumpkins in the fall or watermelons in the summer, enjoy a hayride, feed the goats, or slide down the volcano during the annual fall festival.

I recently visited Lily at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she is part of a multidisciplinary [fellowship program](#) that provides her with a stipend, a teaching position, and a spacious industrial studio overlooking a park. Over hot tea in the studio, we spoke about the nature of artistic research, Neoclassical sculpture, mushroom fairy circles, and the farm’s influence on her work.

Watching her parents adapt creatively to the challenges of sustaining their unusual farm seems to have instilled in Lily an optimistic pragmatism that pervades her practice. “I remember being a kid and one day at the dinner table my dad saying, ‘I think the farm is too flat. Let’s build some hills.’ . . . The idea that if you figure out what you want to do then you can figure out how to do it really opened up a lot of possibilities.” So, when Lily left the farm for the California College of the Arts for an undergraduate degree in jewelry and metalsmithing, she didn’t feel limited by medium or circumstance. By the time she graduated in 2001 she was making work in a variety of mediums, including sculpture.

Lily eventually moved back to Virginia to live and make work in one of her family’s barns for a few years before attending Virginia Commonwealth University’s renowned graduate [sculpture program](#). At VCU, she began to refine her longstanding interest in Americana. Lily sees a conflict “between the fantasy of what America could be and the reality of what you see happening around you.” She felt “drawn to early American World’s Fairs, where ideas of ‘Americanness’ were first defined and promoted.” It’s no exaggeration, she says, to see all of the work she has done over the last four years as “somehow relating back to researching the history of World’s Fairs, especially the Columbian Exhibition of 1893.”

Although we work in different mediums, Lily and I share an affinity for studio practice rooted in research. We also agree that defining artistic research is a slippery thing. She eloquently summarized the quandary: “I know when I’m trying to make sculpture, but I don’t always know when something is research. Sometimes research begins as just an exploration or rumination, or even just a daily walk. Then I realize I’ve amassed notes, books, images and questions. I stumble into research in a way that I don’t stumble into sculpture, but both seem led by a similar curiosity.” A good example is Lily’s investigation of Spencerian script, the first uniquely American form of handwriting. She’s teaching herself the script, but isn’t sure if the experiment will develop into a formalized project. “It’s certainly not a project yet. I think it can stay separate and still remain valid even if it doesn’t end up being a finished project.”

And what starts as research for one idea often leads to something else. In 2009, Lily spent six weeks learning to carve stone in a quarry near Salzburg, Austria. “It ended up not being about learning to carve marble, but more about trying to figure out what a stone carver is thinking about. There are concerns about stabilizing a figure, but there’s also the difference between additive and subtractive sculpture. With subtractive sculpture, you’re on a kind of one-way road—just taking away material. That’s so different from how so much sculpture is made today where you’re just adding, adding, adding. I knew going in that it was research, but I didn’t know what it was research for. That made it all the more interesting.”

When she returned from Salzburg to Houston, where she was in residence at the Museum of Fine Arts’ [Core Program](#), Lily saw Hiram Powers’ Neoclassical sculpture [The Last of the Tribes](#). Her ideas concerning subtractive sculpture, marinating after her time in the quarry, had found a vehicle. She began with the idea of recreating Powers’ sculpture sans figure. Only the base and the tree stump, which serves as the structural support for the figure, would be present. It didn’t seem enough, though, until Lily introduced the bit of the woman’s skirt that touches the tree stump. The fragment of skirt and its connection to the support became the essence of the sculpture and opened up the project’s potential. “That’s when it got really exciting,” Lily explains. “It became about this one specific contact point and seeing if that could stand on its own instead of pulling apart a sculpture that already existed.”

Before I left, Lily gave me a preview of her next project: an outdoor site-specific installation later this summer in Wisconsin at [The Great Poor Farm Experiment](#), an art center housed in a nineteenth-century Poor Farm—the rural equivalent of the American Poor House System. She plans to create a [mushroom fairy circle](#) in the Poor Farm’s cemetery by casting various mushrooms and inserting them into the ground, encompassing all of the graves. The project will be a meditation on various forms of commemoration and draws on a wide background of research from earlier projects. Ultimately, Lily doesn’t want her work to exist solely as evidence of her research. “I’m really interested in trying to make something that you can’t take apart to tease out each thread of the research. The sculptures that ask a question I don’t know the answer to—those are the ones that work best for me.”



**Featured Review: Marks of Absence:
Caleb Cole, Lily Cox-Richard and Lori Larusso**

May 26 2010, *RiverFront Times*

Jessica Baran



Featured Review: Marks of Absence Curated by Marie Heilich, this three-person, two-venue exhibition presents another group of recent [Santo Foundation](#) grant recipients. At Good Citizen, [Caleb Cole's](#) photographic series *Other People's Clothes* depicts the artist in outfits and environments borrowed from friends, acquaintances and strangers. Cole appears in ill-fitting suits, in an empty parking garage, cross-legged and wearing duct-taped high heels in a cramped automobile, staring blankly from behind the desk of a veterinarian's office. His "drag" performance is of the most nuanced variety — no makeup or wigs; he embodies his adopted personas through the slightest of gestures, a mutably gendered [Buster Keaton](#) armed with sidelong glances, parted lips, subtly betraying props. At Fort Gondo Lily Cox-Richard's plaster sculptures resembling small, draped obelisks stagger the gallery amid [Lori Larusso's](#) shaped acrylic paintings of stark suburban interiors. In both exhibits the viewer apprehends the notion of absence as a motif in the form of unrequited empathy: Larusso's lobster boiling, menacingly unattended, in an empty kitchen, her sculptures reticent under their shrouds. The same, in a way, goes for the owners of Cole's costumes and reconstituted personas, casually leading their lives out of the picture — if they even exist. Through June 6. Fort Gondo Compound for the Arts, 3151 Cherokee Street; 314-772-3628 or www.fortgondo.com; hours by appointment. Good Citizen Gallery, 2247 Gravois Avenue; 314-348-4587 or www.goodcitizenstl.com; hours: noon-5 p.m. Fri.-Sat. and by appointment.



Lily Cox-Richard wins \$10,000 Meredith J. Long Award

May 8, 2010, *The Houston Chronicle*
Douglas Britt

Glassell School of Art Core Fellow Lily Cox-Richard was awarded the \$10,000 Meredith J. Long Core Program Award during the school's annual benefit and auction Friday night.

Named for the owner of Meredith Long & Co., a gallery specializing in 19th- and 20th-century American art, the prize is given annually to an outstanding second-year fellow of the Core Program, which offers one- and two-year residencies to emerging artists and art scholars. A sculptor, Cox-Richard moved to Houston in 2008 to enter the Core Program after earning a master's degree from Virginia Commonwealth University. She was given studio space, a stipend and access to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and its teaching wing, the Glassell School.

Cox-Richard said researching the museum's collection enabled her to develop the body of work on view in her solo exhibition *The Stand*, which is on view through June 12 at the Lawndale Art Center. The exhibit grew out of her response to allegorical elements in Hiram Powers' neo-classical 1872 marble sculpture *The Last of the Tribes*, in which a Native American woman flees western civilization. "I don't know if this project would have happened if I didn't have that access," she said. "I was able to go in on Mondays (when the museum is closed) and spend quality time with the (Powers) sculpture that I was doing this work on, which was really great."

During her time in the program, Cox-Richard also exhibited in the annual Core Exhibition in 2009 and 2010 and in the 2009 group show *One Must Be Absolutely Modern* at Rudolph Projects ArtScan Gallery. She also taught at Rice University and Houston Community College. Cox-Richard is the third recipient of the Long Award, which the gallerist and philanthropist established in 2008. Past winners have included Mequitta Ahuja (2008) and Kara Hearn (2009).