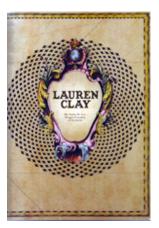
# Beautiful/Decay Book 5: Psychonauts, 2011 Interview and Introduction by Sasha M. Lee





Lauren Clay's enigmatic works, composed entirely of millions upon millions of minute pieces of obsessively hand-cut paper, weave a poetic web of countless contradictions. Finding the macrocosm in the microcosmic, Clay takes the humblest and most ephemeral of sculptural materials to create shimmering, towering monuments that embody ideals of the infinite. And yet her beautifully constructed formalist works seek not earthly beauty, but cast their faceless gaze to the intangible, metaphysical realm. Like lovingly repeated mantras, Clay's devoted, highly personal approach to each work's fabrication calls to mind thousands of tiny prayer beads, each imbued with affirmation and strange blessings. She lampoons the canon of Western art history (albeit gently, and with an air of simultaneous reverence), in particular macho Modernism's nihilistic approach to the self, in order to dialectically address timeless questions of Eastern religion and cosmic ideals. Her highly conceived conceptual framework is used to oppose other highly conceived conceptual frameworks. Throughout all her works is a quietly wild rock 'n' roll: from the acid palette of a Dead Head swirling in a strawberry, psychedelic jam, or the rainbow troupe of Merry Pranksters forging ever Further on their painted bus. It's The Beatles traveling to India and transcendentally meditating on Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. In this sense, Clay's works are almost anti-monuments of sorts, documenting not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes, but the unwavering transience of time and the mysteries of the human soul.

### How you get involved in art?

I come from a family of artists, obsessive craftspeople, and do-it-yourself-ers. Just in my immediate family alone you will find a photographer, a musician, a potter, a flint knapper, a seamstress, a conceptual artist, a soap maker, a couple of carpenters, a stained glass artist, and a spoon carver--we like to make stuff. Growing up our house was full of projects and I've always felt very comfortable making things.

In high school I began to lean towards drawing and painting. Then I went to school and got both my BFA and MFA in painting.

Many of your works' titles have references to Eastern philosophy/mystical-metaphysical/neo-hippy/bohemian ideals. Titles like "Cosmic Charlie," "One Way Ticket into the Nirvana Thickets," and "The Golden Road to Unlimited Devotion," evoke a kind of idiosyncratic, self-invented spiritualism. The titles are also rife with alliterations and poetic word play. How do you choose your titles, and how do you think they affect the works themselves or interact with the pieces?

The titles are a really important part of the work. In some Christian circles there is a belief that the spoken word has power to cause change in the physical realm *and* the spiritual realm. I think of my sculptures sort of like talisman or cosmic debris: the point where the theoretical metaphysical realm becomes tangible. In the same way, the titles have the power to evoke the metaphysical plane and suggest a reading that might not otherwise be evident

Sometimes the titles are little mantras that evolve in my head over the course of months while I'm working on the piece. Other times the titles come from texts or song lyrics.

### What's your outlook on spirituality within your works?

I was raised Southern Baptist and my exposure to that culture growing up enables me to have a better understanding of many different ecstatic expressions of spirituality.

At a young age I became really interested in the hippie movement and began reading about the counter-culture and back-to-the-earth movements, including Ram Daas, Ken Kesey, psychedelics, and meditation. At the same time I also became totally enmeshed in the Rainbow Family/Dead-head subculture. I went to so many concerts; music has always had a really important place in my life. I can definitely see similarities between experiences I've had at concerts and experiences I've witnessed in religious circles. I really think that rock 'n roll is the average American teenagers most sincere attempt to grasp for some kind of meaning or spirituality.

As I go through life now, I find myself more open to the potential for the ecstatic visionary mystical experience to exist in many, many, cultures and faiths throughout time and throughout the world and I'm really intrigued by the similarities found in all of them.

That being said, I still get the sense that these ideas are always approached with a slight tongue-in-cheek postmodern irony in some sense of the word, or with a slight distance. They seem removed from whole heartedly embracing a kind of Modernist manifesto with regards to the spiritualism of art. Modernism these days seems like a dirty word amongst young artists. Many of your abstract works explore Formalism in a certain sense. How do you think your works react to Modernism, or function within that history? I've always thought of Modernism as being totally anti-spiritual. If you subscribe to [Clement] Greenberg's definition of Modernism, it was totally nihilistic in the way that, over time, it systematically rejected everything except itself. Modernism was all about progress, and rationality over superstition. I think of Minimalism and conceptual art to be the pinnacle of Modernism. You will find a lot of references to Minimalism in my work.

I think the way I address Modernism is two fold-- my work embraces the aspects of Modernism that are open to spirituality, and pokes fun at the aspects of modernism that are nihilistic and short-sighted.

At the core of Modernist art, I see a reverence for mystery and esoteric truths. Still there were very few Modernists who embraced a spiritual nature in their work. For example I think of Yves Klein, Agnes Martin, Anne Truitt, and Eva Hesse. Each of them made art that was very minimal formally, but they were also very open to the potential for their works to address something deeper than formal or critical issues. Maybe there's something to be said for the making of serial works, which almost always involves a repetitive motion or task, and the contemplative space that goes along with that task. The thinking *and* the doing. Not just the thinking, and not just the doing... I also think of the Shakers, who really valued a strong work ethic. To them, working was a way of really embracing living in God's kingdom. Sweeping the floor was just as important as praying. I think the Shaker phrase about this is "Hands to work, hearts to God."

I don't consider myself to be a scholar, but a hoarder of ideas. I collect ideas that I think have weight and seem to have cross-cultural value or truth. I think the hoarding of ideas is a postmodern tendency but I don't consider myself postmodern because my work is sincere. It is really rooted in everyday working peoples' self-made, D-I-Y mentality. It's not a critical mind-set. It's an excitement at the potential for the complexity of all these things.

Your works also reference iconic images within contemporary art, usually with a clever sense of play. Take, for example your piece *Lonely Rainbow Picket Found Hoarding the Ten Thousand Things*, which references Judy Chicago's *Rainbow Pickett*, and dramatically transforms the original expression. What's your sentiment towards the "contemporary canon"?

Lonely rainbow picket found hoarding The Ten Thousand Things is all about this minimalist form that is completely barren and stripped down almost to the point of non-existence. The phrase "the ten thousand things" is a phrase used in the Tao Te Ching to refer to every thing in creation. So in this sculpture, this minimalist form tries to compensate for it's own inadequacies by hoarding everything under the sun.

I think this piece is a jab at Modernism and also a lament for the contemporary psyche. In artschool we have all of this conceptual and art historical baggage that is heaped on us. There are times when I regret that I can never undo my schooling; I have fantasies of what it would be like to have the freedom of unknowing all that I've been taught. Whether I like it or not I am knee-deep in my artistic inheritance, and even if I chose to ignore it or tried to forget all of my art history, it is impossible for my work to be viewed outside of that context. Talking about Modernism and Postmodernism, is an attempt to poke fun at my artistic forefathers. And it's also kind of a lament for Modernism and Postmodernism; a lament for nihilism, a lament for arrogance, a lament for anger and the sadness that goes along with all of those mindsets.

### What other artists do you find inspiration in, and why?

I'm not sure if it's good to admit this, but I don't look at a lot of contemporary art. I think my work has been more

influenced by books and music than visual art. Some of the music that has really informed my current work is 60s acid rock, Shaker hymns, Sacred Harp singing, and my brother, Daniel Clay's music. I also love Joanna Newsom. Other things I like to look at or think about: decorative arts from every era-- from Italian Renaissance to Verner Panton. For a while I was also really influenced by retro sci-fi movies like Barbarella and Logan's Run. And I sometimes think about The Peter Pan ride at Disney World. Some of the writers and books that have had a huge impact on me are Walker Percy; Flannery O'Connor; C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*; *Be Here Now* by Ram Daas; *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe; all of J.D. Salinger's works, especially *Franny & Zooey*, and *Raise High The Roofbeams Carpenters*, and all of Douglas Copelands books especially *Life After God*.

There's a definite visual language within your works, through recurring shapes like minimal strips of paper that almost look like rain or strands of hair, geodesic tunnel forms that fade to black, circular wreaths and garlands, totems. There's also a kind of retro-futurism within the works, adopting the cube and other geometric structures. Why are you attracted to these kinds of forms?

The geometric shapes have many different sources. They are sometimes references to formal devices and tropes of eastern cultures, sacred geometry, holy rocks, and totems, the patterns and colors of psychedelia, rock music and American youth culture, as well as iconic forms of Modernism such as monochrome painting, the plinth, and the grid.

It's important to me that the sculptures be somewhat autonomous and open-ended. Essentially I think the sculptures are an attempt to make the intangible tangible. I want them to feel like they push the limits of our current material world. I want them to feel like they dropped in from some other plane.

# Your palette is undeniably beautiful, saturated, candy-colored hues that are so pleasing to the eye. What's your approach towards color within the works?

I like to think of color as its own entity— not really intending for it to reference anything in our day-to-day life. I like to be very generous in my use of color. Sometimes I'll choose colors that create a sense of illusion of depth, or color that will help me "bend space" within the sculpture.

Both your gouache paintings and sculptures (while the former is two-dimensional and the latter three-dimensional) seem to be rooted in the same interest in exploration of space, or at least proposed spaces as architecture. Your sculptures look like paintings and vice versa, almost as if there's an attempt to challenge depth and standard spatial relationships. How do you view the construction of space in regards to your works?

Because my work evolved out of a background in painting I think I have a painters tendency to push an illusion of space. Also, since the works address a metaphysical plane I think it's natural for them to develop their own spatial logic—one that wouldn't necessarily make sense in our everyday world. I like to play with the illusion depth and foreshortening of space. The pieces may have a certain internal logic but never one that would make sense or have any necessity outside the scope of the individual piece.

### How did you develop your particular way of working?

The work I'm making now has evolved directly from a body of work I began about seven years ago. I had been making really large drawings on paper of these imagined architectural spaces. They were really large—about 90" x 40" but very minimal. I was using a type of heavyweight printmaking paper that comes on a roll, so the drawings naturally curled and drooped off the wall when they were hung. I became really interested in the way the drawings functioned as objects simply because of the dimensional qualities of the paper. I began very minimally cutting the edges of the paper and was really interested in the way the minimal forms of the paper mimicked the minimal architectural forms in the drawings.

I continued cutting the drawings and began attaching small sculptural elements to the work and slowly they became more and more sculptural. I began painting the paper in flat sheets and constructing small objects by cutting and scoring and folding the paper.

The work has always been about space and blurring the lines between imagined and physical space. There was something really great happening with the illusionistic space of the drawing and the physical presence of the sculptural form of the support. The drawings became more and more sculptural until eventually they came off the wall completely and were free standing objects.

Your sculptures are often constructed from papier-mâché and painted paper- pretty delicate construction materials. How did you get started using these materials, what do you like about them? Or, alternatively, what do you dislike about them?

All of my formal education is based in painting, so everything I know about making sculpture is completely self-taught. I'm extremely impatient and compulsive. The paper is something very immediate and accessible. Also it is completely autonomous. It can look like anything I want it to, but also it references nothing in particular. I think it's important that the viewer has no preconceived baggage or history with the material- the experience with it can be completely new and foreign.

## Can you walk us through fabricating an actual work, and through your technical process?

It's a little different every time I make something. When I start a piece I usually have no idea what I'm making. I'll have a seed of an idea but it usually changes a lot and grows more complex as I'm working on it. I usually don't even make any sketches.

I'll begin by making a really simple armature out of wood and papier-mâché, then I'll begin to construct around it with paper constructions. There are also several stages of painting. Every sculpture I make goes through at least a couple of rounds of additions and subtractions. Sometimes I'll put a piece on the shelf for months before I come back to it. It's a totally intuitive process.

The process is also part of the search-- the attempt to make sense of all of these ideas I'm trying to sort out.

It seems that cutting and painting each piece of paper must be incredibly painstaking. Do you ever feel like you can't go on, like its some sort of torturous Sisyphean task, like filling a bathtub with sand through a sieve, or do you find pleasure in the method? Like a zen-like comfort in the ritual of it?

I kind of have an obsessive personality. I love repetitive tasks so this is actually my favorite part of the process! There's something very satisfying about covering one big thing with lots of tiny things. Also, I love the idea of a seemingly impossible task. I think the energy that goes into a handmade object is really valuable. Every part of my sculptures is cut and constructed by hand. I always admire visionary artists who have similar obsessive compulsions to make really time intensive objects.

Because the works are primarily paper, it also seems they have a sort of fleeting beauty, they seem as if they could blow away if placed out in the cold, or be completely ruined if exposed to the elements. Why this material? Why not, say, marble, brass, plastic, that is more robust with regards to the ravages of time? I keep thinking of your works as almost anti-monuments. Rather than attesting to the permanence of an ideal, there's sort of a Buddhist acceptance of all things transience. Akin to sand paintings that are so precious because you know how easily they can be destroyed. How do you see your works relating to notions of temporality?

Using paper is a way for me to talk about the ephemeral nature of spiritual ideas. Just like the sculptures, in one way they can seem very solid and timeless, but in another way they are fleeting and ephemeral visions.

What do you do when you're stuck or have an artistic block? What would you describe your creative process like- do you work in waves, or every day, set a schedule for yourself...?

It's strange, I really don't have one way of doing things; it's different every time. I work pretty consistently. It takes me so long to make a piece. Even if I have a mental block, I always have something I can be doing with my hands, or some part of the piece that I can be working on while I'm thinking about it. I am kind of obsessive. Maybe it's obvious but it's hard for me to stop working on something once I start!

### What projects do you have coming up?

Right now I'm about to start working on a room-sized installation for a paper sculpture exhibit at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont that opens this spring.