

*The Studio Visit* by Myrel Chernick

Caroline picked up her watch from the dresser in the bedroom and strapped it onto her wrist. It was tight, the buckle slightly digging into her skin. She looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall. I'll have more time if I pace myself by the watch. I'll keep it on for now, even though it will leave a mark. The visit was scheduled for eleven, which left plenty of time for Caroline to be ready early and for the curator to call and mention casually that she was running

late. Or she could say that something had come up and she needed to reschedule. She could even cancel outright without any excuses or apologies. It had happened before.

Already anticipating the tension of the next two hours, Caroline glanced into the studio at her newest work. She could barely make out the paper cutouts, which moved almost imperceptibly in the unlit room. She had a lot to do to get these pieces ready: when functioning they required complete darkness, as well as all the electricity in the loft. She checked the lights repeatedly and obsessively before each visit, worried that



*She looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall.*

they would blur and shift and the bulbs blow at the last minute.

It was important for her to determine the final order of the viewing now. She didn't need any surprises. The sculptural work used so many different lights that her tiny studio really heated up. During winter mornings or late afternoons she could stand it for about twenty minutes, but by the middle of a sunny day even that was too long. If she showed another piece first she had to move equipment and cords around, with the curator standing there in the dark. When Caroline was already nervous this process could be very awkward.

She could almost smile now as she remembered the worst studio visit ever. The woman, who was scheduled to arrive at eleven, had called at ten

and said she had needed to make an unexpected visit to her holistic doctor in Connecticut. She couldn't possibly be there before one, she said. Was that all right? Of course, Caroline had replied, straining to prevent the sweetness in her voice from developing a rancorous edge. Of course, come whenever you like. (I have nothing better to do than wait for you all day.) That visit had been a disaster. The curator, who got there even later than her original estimation, was tired and distracted from her trip to Connecticut and whatever ailment was preoccupying her, while Caroline was anxious and edgy from the long wait. She was previewing a new projected slide piece that depended on carefully choreographed movements when the equipment went haywire. She could still feel her hands trembling as they jammed the buttons on the projector, bumbling through the explanation while the timing was completely off. "Keep me informed vovof your subsequent projects,"



*The sun was streaming through the back windows this morning.*

were the curator's parting words. "Thanks so much for accommodating me." Of course they had never seen each other again. But that was a long time ago. After that visit Caroline changed her attitude. She convinced herself not to have any expectations, as hard as that was. And yet a friend who thought highly of Caroline's work recommended today's curator, who had rescheduled only once with plenty of notice. She also lived in the neighborhood, which made her less threatening in some ways. Maybe they had passed each other on the street. There was a lot at stake for Caroline here though, as she showed her new work for the first time.

She collected the dirty breakfast dishes, straightening and arranging the kitchen as she moved around the loft. She regularly offered coffee or tea to her visitors but was relieved when they preferred water after the long climb up four flights of stairs. She placed a cup near the stove and set the water glass on the counter next to the door. The sun was streaming through the back windows

this morning, reflecting off the building across the airshaft, and highlighting the filthiness of the glass. The windows, impossible to clean even if Caroline had the time or the inclination, were streaked and pitted, but produced unusual shadows that she had often photographed. As she moved around the brightly lit space she calculated how long she had lived and worked here. It was usually one of the first questions she was asked. More than twenty years now, she would answer, almost surprising herself. When she moved in she was a young artist with the world at her fingertips, the neighborhood was expanding and galleries were opening right and left. She was thrilled and excited with the possibilities that existed for her then. Her work was formal and grand, and she created ethereal installations of light and paper and projected words that filled the entire loft. When her husband moved in he needed a place to work too, and then the children took up space as they grew, so her studio shrank in size. Still she was lucky even to have a studio here. Almost all of the artists as well as the galleries had been forced out by the high rents. Without the loft law to protect her she would be gone too, and despite the filth and congestion of the streets below she couldn't imagine living anywhere else at this point. Most of the buildings on her block had been sold for huge sums of money, and there were dollar signs in her landlord's eyes. He was civil, even pleasant with her when she dropped off the rent in his office on the second floor, but he had never put a penny into improvements and she knew he regretted this building full of ungrateful tenants.

Caroline walked back to the kitchen table with the cup of the coffee she had just prepared. She brushed off a few crumbs left over from the children's breakfast and sat down. In case she doesn't have much time I'd better start with the most recent work, although we'll have to move around quite a bit. After sitting there for a few minutes, she glanced at her watch and, seeing that it was nine thirty, got up and walked toward the bedroom door. She had always disliked this trajectory through the bedroom to her studio. She spent a lot of time cleaning—the bed needed to be made, papers arranged, clothes put away—and she would have preferred to display less of her private life. Although her work since the birth of her children incorporated aspects of domesticity, it did not include the quality of the bed linen or her embarrassingly chaotic personal space. When she sensed her visitors lingering in front of the family photos or the window with its view of lower Manhattan, she regretted never having cut that door through the living room wall directly into her studio. Of course the issue arose only at times like this. Once the stranger left she never thought about it.

She cleared a space on the studio table for her coffee cup, then knelt down on the floor to disentangle the extension cords that reminded her of orange snakes. She had photographed them in that state. Now she brought them out into the common room, so they could be plugged into separate circuits. When she



*The extension cords reminded her of orange snakes.*

first worked on the light pieces they were all plugged into the same line and were constantly tripping the switch. She would be on the verge of achieving the effect she was looking for when she would hear a sudden popping sound, followed by silence and pitch darkness. So she had devised her system of extension cords. For the first time in a while she was working with projected light, these new pieces referring back to her earlier, large scale installations, and as she worked out the kinks she remembered hours spent locating and connecting ancient electrical circuits in old buildings. She had been showing regularly then, and every installation was an adventure and a challenge.

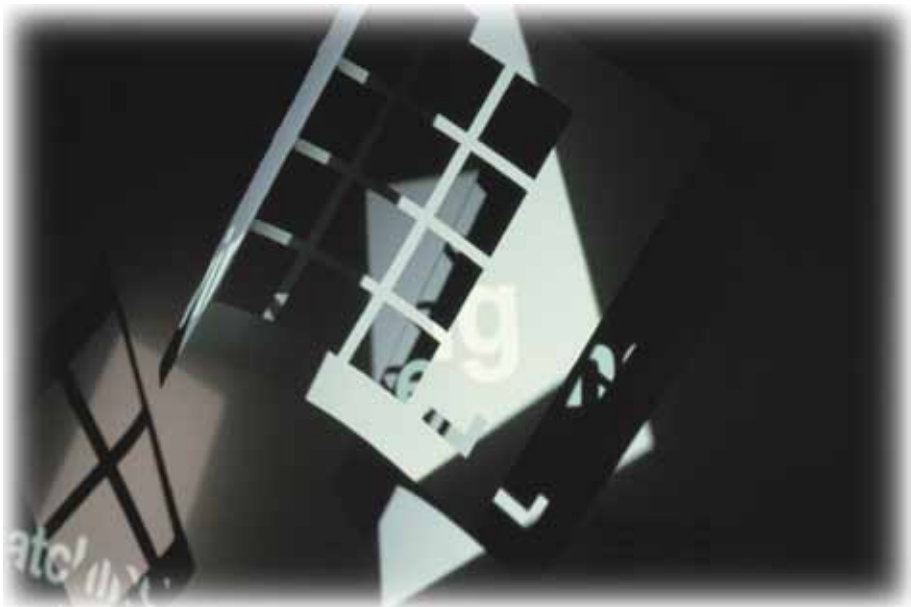
After she plugged in the cords Caroline came back to the studio and turned on the power strips, one by one. Her pulse quickened as she pressed the last switch. She closed the door and stepped back, surveying the altered space. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness and the fans kicked in, the pieces began to move slowly, randomly. She could still marvel at the dense and layered three-dimensional shapes that resulted from the light passing over and through these paper cutouts, dangling from the ceiling with nylon fishing line, invisible in the darkness. The light fused into the forms, edges shimmering, while the dense black shadows, dancing, sliced through the surface of the wall. The projected words, suggested by her current ambivalence toward her adolescent children, were fractured and fragmented with the desultory movement of the cutouts. When her children were small Caroline assuaged her guilt from abandoning them for the selfish pleasure of making art by including them in the work. They complied eagerly with her requests while she videotaped them, inventing rituals and performing gleefully for the camera. Now it was more complicated. She resented their demands on her time, the arguments and accusations, the defiant stares. And yet she dreaded the day, not so far in the future, when they would

be leaving home. She escaped into the studio to maintain her equilibrium. She had always loved the look of projected text, the visual evocation expanding the significance of the carefully chosen words. Each slight shift of the paper created a new shape, with new angles and layers and meanings. There was just enough light to decipher the short texts she had so painstakingly hand lettered onto the wall. She half recited, half read in a soft voice, each phrase evoking an image or a memory:



“She had a fleeting vision of small bodies in motion” had been the impetus for the idea of the cutouts as windows or barriers. She could see the children passing her by, growing, separating, and leaving, in a continuous process that began at the moment of birth. She had often taped them at their games, from a distance, marveling at the inventiveness of their continuous play, sometimes wondering at her need to record it all, to get it down on tape, to have something concrete to hold onto.

Another phrase, “she listened for the sound of his footsteps on the stairs,” brought back a recent afternoon spent worrying about her son Sam. He had been coming home late from school without calling to let her know. As the hours passed her concentration dissipated and she gave up trying to work. When he finally showed up, cool and nonchalant, with an excuse he’d been rehearsing along the way, she was too exhausted and relieved to dwell on her lost studio time. She wanted to hug him and scream at him simultaneously. But she held back. If she yelled at him would it make him even more defiant? She wondered what he did and where he was during those missing hours, questioning how



much she knew about him these days. He had grown up quickly this year, going to parties and hanging out on weekends with his new friends. She moved on to “Suspicion: days of silence and regret, of brooding anger, questions unanswered,” and her voice trailed off, thoughts drifting to an acrimonious exchange earlier in the morning. Her daughter had stormed out of the house, yet again, without saying goodbye. Simone, from the time she was tiny, had an almost preternatural sense of Caroline’s emotional state, and often chose to act out during those times when she was under the most pressure. Her most recent crime consisted of ignoring one of Simone’s rambling complaints about her English teacher’s ludicrous assignments and unfair grading practices, a minor offense in Caroline’s eyes, but which precipitated a “you care more about your art than you do about me,” and the slamming of the door. Today she let Simone go without following her into the hallway for a last minute reconciliation, hoping the long subway ride would calm her down. Caroline knew she would suffer for it later, and was prepared to make amends, but for now she pushed away the guilt and turned to the door of the studio where a thin ray of sunshine penetrated from the bedroom on the other side. She opened it wide, turned off the surge protectors and checked her watch. Ten o’clock. Sally hasn’t called yet, so there’s a good chance she’s on her way.

She walked back through the bedroom to the living room, pausing to straighten the books in the pile by the bed, removing a pair of shoes from the doorway, glancing again at the clock as she passed. The tension was mounting as the hour approached, and Caroline used these simple tasks to maintain her

calm exterior. She closed the door that led to the children's room, then stopped to look at a wall of photographs. When she first started working on these pictures she hadn't intended for them to accompany the three-dimensional work, but she was happy with the way they complemented each other. The longer texts accompanying the photos, short episodes she recorded during bouts of insomnia, described incidents of material lives, momentary impressions and revelations. Her children were testing her, with the stirrings of adolescence, to see if she could be trusted. She had always loved to watch them as they negotiated their days. The texts were obliquely related to the images, leaving room for speculation and mystery. She had photographed the paper cutouts—the results were abstract enough to function as compositions of light and dark with edges of color—and paired them with other shots of light and shadow she took on the fly, keeping her camera loaded and ready. Her friends seemed to appreciate the relationship between the stories, brief glimpses and memories, and the abstract shapes, but she hadn't shown them to a curator yet.

In the bedroom Caroline stared briefly into the mirror at her face, picking out the newest wrinkles, wondering if she should wear her customary red lipstick, then took a pair of black pants and tunic from the closet and laid them carefully on the bed. Her artist's outfit had been much bolder in her youth, when she sported a shaved head and tight skirts and dressed in bright colors. With the weight she had gained in middle age she wouldn't wear anything like that now. Besides, she liked the elegance and the slim lines of the black clothing. And she wanted the emphasis to be on the work. She turned around and looked at the clock again. Almost ten thirty. It was really time to get moving. Not that anyone had ever been early, but she couldn't take any chances. She hurried to get her bathrobe from the closet, stumbling over the extension cords in her way. Exactly why I warn people to be careful, she admonished herself. Robe in hand, she ran to the bathroom, threw off her clothes and got into the shower. As she relaxed under the running water, she fantasized the perfect visit. "What great work, of course we'd love to give you a one-person show, I'll call you next week to talk about the details..."

The loud jangling of the buzzer startled her. How could this be? How long have I been standing here, she wondered. It couldn't possibly be eleven o'clock already. Caroline quickly turned off the water, threw on her robe and ran to pick up.

"Hello..."

"Hi this is Sally, I know I'm a little early, but I thought you wouldn't mind."

"Of course, no problem. I'll buzz you in; it's the fourth floor. The elevator doesn't work so you have to walk."



*A million pieces lay there, sparkling where the sunlight reached them, mocking her.*

She panicked. There she was, after all her careful preparations, standing in the middle of the room, undressed and dripping wet, with, depending on the physical condition of the woman coming up the stairs, anywhere from two to five minutes to dry herself off, get dressed, and greet her at the door.

At any other time the situation might have seemed comical, even to Caroline. Now she turned around so quickly, flung herself almost, toward the bedroom with such intensity that she barely kept her balance on the wet floor, slippery with the water dripping off her body. She reached out to the wall to steady herself and, with that sickening sensation of knowing what is going to happen but being powerless to do anything about it, knocked over the water glass that she had set so carefully on the counter. As she stood there in disbelief, the glass flew, crashed, and shattered into a million pieces that lay there, sparkling where the sunlight reached them, mocking her.

She sprang for the bedroom, threw on the clothes that, thankfully, she had lain out on the bed, and ran back to the living room. She bent down to pick up the largest piece of glass in her path and opened the door. Sally Carmichael was leaning against the railing, looking rather bewildered.

“Hi, I’m Caroline, sorry to keep you waiting, I had a little accident.”

“I’m Sally. I thought I must have the wrong floor.” She held out her hand.

Caroline transferred the piece of broken glass to her left hand, put it behind her back and held out her right.

“Come in. But be careful. There’s glass everywhere.”

Sally stepped gingerly into the room, and Caroline guided her away from the mess toward the sofa.

“Please sit here for one minute while I clean this up. Then I’ll explain everything.”



As she reached for the broom Caroline noticed her left hand was bleeding. She was oblivious to the pain until she dropped the piece of glass in the garbage and awkwardly swept the rest of the debris into a pile near the wall. She set down the broom and, reaching furtively for a roll of toilet paper on the shelf by the closet she knelt down and wrapped a thick wad around her hand.

She stood up and tentatively approached the woman on the couch, keeping her left hand behind her back. Sally looked back at her inquisitively.

She wasn't young, thank goodness, she was at least as old as Caroline, maybe older, and she wasn't fashionably dressed. Her jeans and sweater were casual and her shoulder length hair was streaked with grey. She didn't appear to be wearing any makeup, and wasn't beautiful either. Caroline, who lately felt older than almost everyone else in the art world, was relieved. Sally worked at a mid-sized museum outside of the city that had a good reputation and a decent budget. Caroline tried to explain:

"I was a little late getting into the shower. When you buzzed I stumbled and broke this glass..."

Sally stared back at her, impervious. "I have another appointment. Let's look at the work."

She seemed brusque at that moment and as Caroline stood there with her hand behind her back, hair damp and uncombed, clothes somewhat disheveled, she wondered what Sally was thinking. Just another crazy, unprepared artist... She hadn't planned it this way at all. What had happened to her carefully orchestrated sequence?

"Come with me."

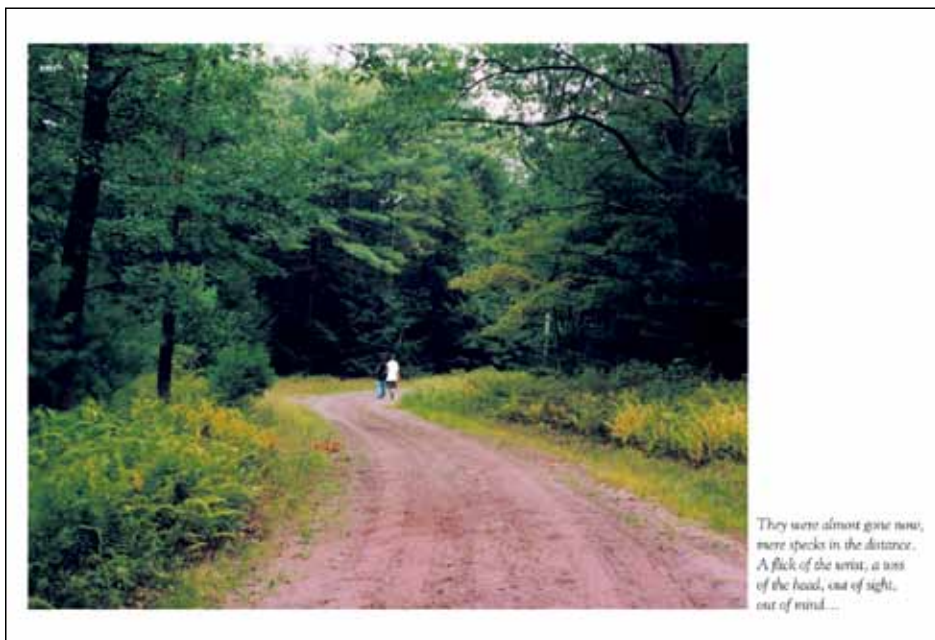
Caroline led Sally through the bedroom into the studio, closed the door and quickly turned on the power strips. Fortunately none of the lights had shifted since the earlier run-through, and as the room lit up she felt the same palpable excitement, despite the pain in her hand that she tried hard to ignore. She turned her attention to Sally, who was moving slowly and gradually through the space, focusing intently on each piece and then pausing to read the text on the wall. The expression on her face had softened to a half-smile. Caroline took it as a good sign.

When Sally came back to the center Caroline moved closer and began to describe her history and the genesis of this installation. She mentioned a few of her earlier pieces, her life with her twins and their involvement with her work. Maybe it was the condition of her hand but she loosened up and talked about the ethereal beauty of light and shadow and the pain of separation that she wanted to embody here.

She worried about going on too long but Sally listened closely, watching her with interest. With more of a smile on her face she commented on the

many layers and changing forms that she observed in the work and asked a few technical questions. Then she talked about her own son who had gone to high school nearby and was now a college student, and they compared notes. She mentioned how difficult it was when he left home, and Caroline felt grateful for the years she had left. She was also appreciative of the unexpected connection. These visits were always about so much more than the art, and the maternal link was unusual.

She kept her hand behind her, shifting it occasionally to relieve the throbbing, glancing at Sally to see if she noticed, and was careful to have her go first when they moved out into the daylight to look at the photographs. Nothing had changed in the room since they left it and Caroline was careful to steer Sally away from the bits of glass in their way. They spent some time reading and discussing the texts and images. Sally focused on some of the details in the pictures, the lights and darks, and asked thoughtful questions about the implied



stories. She said she particularly enjoyed the shadows reflected across walls and through windows and the shot of the children walking away into the distance, which reminded her of an incident with her young son, who had once been lost in a similar setting. Caroline was beginning to relax when Sally glanced at her watch, turned toward the door and announced, “time to go.”

Caroline had planned to offer her some catalogues and other documentation but was reluctant to reveal her hastily bandaged hand. She let Sally retrieve her coat and bag from the sofa and noticed how she stepped gingerly while she followed her to the door.

She was about to mouth her customary closing remark but Sally spoke first.

“This was an unusual visit. Perhaps I seemed rushed but I found the work stimulating and original. My colleagues will be contacting you in the near future. We’re working on a new project that I think you’ll find interesting... Good-bye. And take care of that hand.” She smiled and moved over to the stairs.

“Good-bye. And thanks for coming. I’m sorry about the chaos.”

She was gone. Caroline stood motionless in the doorway until the footsteps grew fainter and she heard the building door slam. She shut and locked the door to the loft and looked up again at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was just a little past noon, but the morning seemed far away.

She felt suddenly exhausted and weak, and the throbbing in her hand grew stronger as she brought it out from behind her back. Blood was seeping through the top layer of the now sodden and sticky wad of toilet paper. The pile of glass shards lay in the corner while other smaller pieces sparkled here and there on the floor where the sunlight hit them. They beckoned to her, waiting to be photographed, but then, cradling her damaged hand, and carefully circumnavigating the stray fragments of glass, she made her way carefully towards the broom in the corner.