





Process, iconography, and geography

NYFA talks to Michelle Lopez (Artspire, Sponsored Project; AFP '11 Sculpture) about her current exhibition at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#), building a forty-foot sculpture, and the iconographies of airplanes, flags, and female hair.

NYFA: Congratulations on your current exhibition at the Aldrich Museum, Angels, Flags, Bangs, which features new and recent sculptures from three bodies of work. How did you select these pieces?

ML: Thanks so much! It's been great to work with Amy Smith-Stewart, the curator, and all the great people at the Aldrich to develop the show. The work came from an extension of themes I've been developing: stainless-steel Blue Angels, new wilted pieces in the shape of SOS flags and made with pure lead, and an elevator blanket piece that evoked anime Asian hair. That last piece was a nod to Robert Morris's felt pieces—as a part of the Aldrich's fiftieth anniversary.

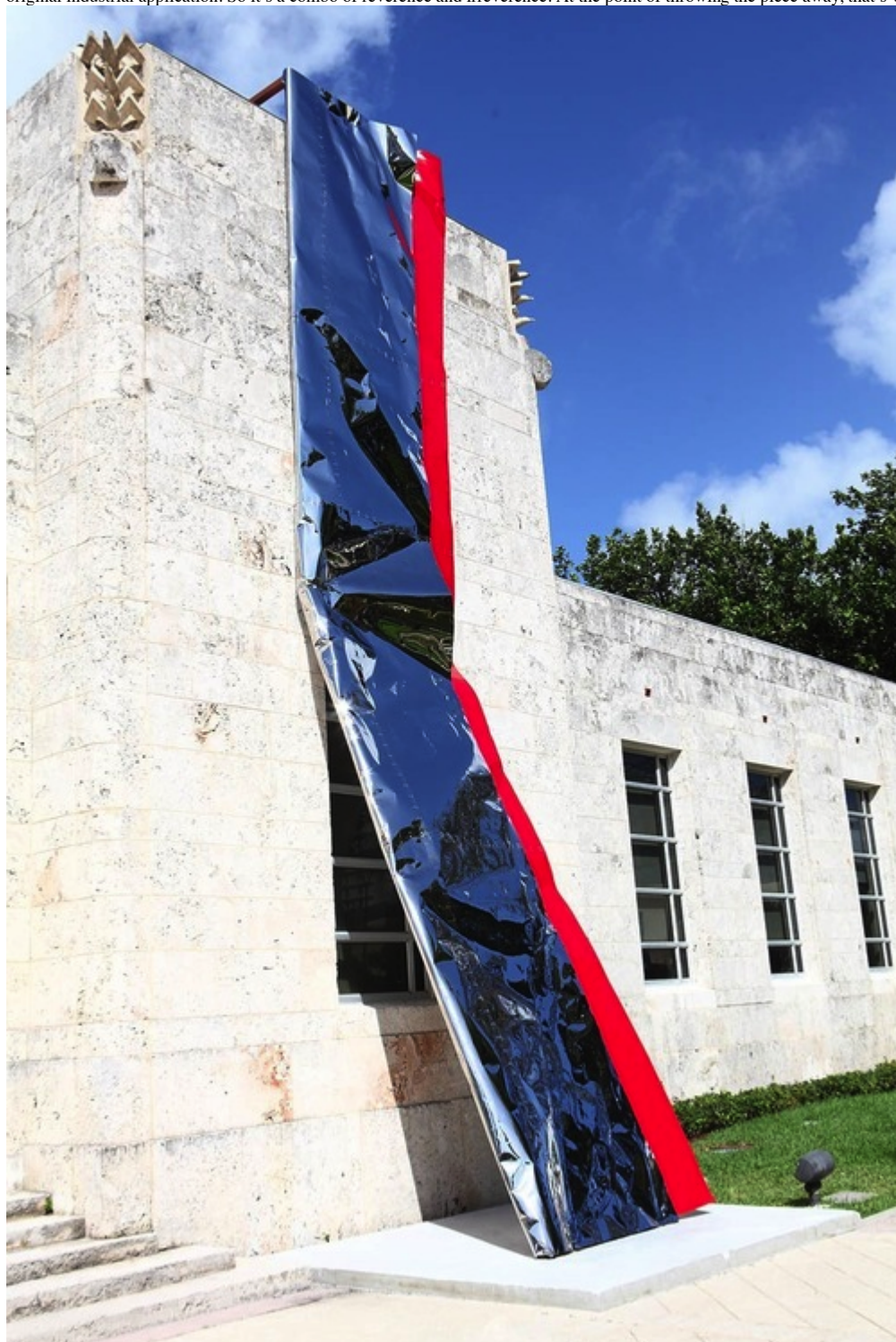
NYFA: You've said that your work "builds inversions of cultural iconography in order to investigate notions of human failure." What do you hope to evoke through these provocative cultural inversions? More specifically, how do you hope your poignant sculptures of wilting and decaying flags will affect audiences?

ML: I don't know how and if it will affect audiences. I think those things are out of my control, and failure is inevitable. In my process, I wanted to take the iconographies of airplanes, flags and female hair and look at notions of power, patriotism, and desire — and wring them of their clichés. I hoped to make a flag, which can be so righteous, or female tresses as something or someone to be desired, and through some kind of artistic intervention, all of those clichés come into question.

NYFA: The pieces that make up the Angels, Flags, Bangs exhibition are made from various materials like lead, steel, and canvas cloth. The techniques you used to

manipulate the materials are equally as diverse, including but certainly not limited to steaming, ironing, sewing, cutting, and crushing. What was the biggest challenge in the physical construction of your work?

ML: For me, material is everything. The cultural origin and the artist's manipulation of material are what determine if a thing becomes a work of art or not. For me, I can be in love with a material, but it's not conceptually right for the project. There is a lot of experimentation and a lot of failure in working with new material each time. I like the challenge of being able to do something with material that you're not supposed to. But then I have a real reverence for the culture in which the material came from—i.e. the original industrial application. So it's a combo of reverence and irreverence. At the point of throwing the piece away, that's when the work begins for me.



NYFA: The Aldrich show is the second exhibition of a three-part series including your first public commission at the Bass Museum of Art and an upcoming solo exhibition at Simon Preston Gallery. For the Bass Museum piece, you used your own body to bend and crush the steel sheets to form the forty-foot sculpture. Tell us about that process and why you chose to play such an active role in its construction.

ML: I have to be involved with my work physically for it to make sense for me. Sounds like a love affair — but I guess it is! The forty-foot scale came from a real desire to make an airplane wing at scale and that “crush” of it physically is what made sense conceptually. So I needed to be a part of that legibility. I guess I’m a control freak. But when I’m in it and thrashing around, I’m so not in control. Something else takes over.

NYFA: Can you share any details with us about your next show at Simon Preston Gallery?

ML: I don’t want to ruin the surprise. I’m trying to make my own mirrors ... lots more to tell, but you’ll have to come and see in the fall.



NYFA: What is your favorite part of creating a new project: the beginning of a new piece, the middle phase of construction, or the end when the piece is finished?

ML: There's so much pre-production research involved — that's not fun — because it's all in the "abstract" at that point. I don't know if it will work out or not until I'm experimenting. And sometimes not even then do I know. The favorite part for me is the constructing where I'm not in fear. I'm just making, and I think artists have to be a little deluded when in the making. They have to "believe" and I like being in that altered state of mind. We are totally absolutely crazy to want something that badly.

NYFA: You split your time between Brooklyn and Guilford, Connecticut. When you are in New York City, where is your favorite place in the city to go when you need inspiration? What about in Guilford?

ML: I've been so busy lately that I've been trying to see art between errands, even if it's for 10 minutes. It's so restorative taking in art — it's like spiritual food, even when I don't like the work. Art will always make me think in a particular way and it's everywhere in the city — uptown, downtown, Queens, Brooklyn. But really the people on the subway are incredibly inspiring. I can't get enough how original and weird they all dress and put themselves together.

In Guilford, walking along the salt marshes inspires me. Looking outside our window, I feel so lucky. It's all nature, bunnies, deer, and flowers, and my son jumping on rocks. What more could you ask for? And then in my work, it's so dark! I like those extremes.





NYFA: You received an Artists' Fellowship in Sculpture from NYFA in 2011, and are currently fiscally sponsored by NYFA for Angels, Flags, Bangs. What has NYFA's support meant to you professionally and personally?

ML: NYFA holds a special place in my heart. NYFA also gave me a 9/11 grant for artists seriously affected by 9/11 back in 2001. So the organization has really been with me through everything, and supported me in my career when it felt really grim. And to have that kind of validation helps keep me going. I received the 2011 fellowship when I was making the show with Simon Preston, and it really fueled my energy for the show. The fiscal sponsorship gave me the support to stand behind my work and ask for help to put together a forty-foot sculpture. Forty-foot. I love how a nonprofit art institution can have such a broad effect with its support on so many levels, for so many artists. It's a real act of generosity.

Michelle Lopez's exhibition, *Angels, Flags, Bangs*, is at the Aldrich through Sept. 21, 2014. For more information about Michelle, please visit her website.

— Interview conducted by Jill Detrick-Yee

Images, from top: Michelle Lopez, *Flag Series (1)*, 2014, pure lead, steel, 96 x 38 x 27, from *Angels, Flags, Bangs*, The Aldrich Museum of Art; *Blue Angels II*, Bass Museum of Art, Miami, December 2013; Installation view of the skeletal frame for *Blue Angels II*, Bass Museum of Art, Miami, December 2013; Installation view of *Blue Angels II*, Bass Museum of Art, Miami, December 2013. All images courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston Gallery.