



Oppenheim's *At Sea Level* (2011), floor pattern of vinyl contact paper, 30' x 23', from *High Expectations, High Ceilings, and the Floor Is at Sea Level* show. Photo: Mati Elmaliach.

## Student Profile

# Window onto an Artist: Ruth Oppenheim

The view out the tall windows of Ruth Oppenheim's (M.F.A. '11) art studio in Tjaden Hall could be either inspiring or intimidating, depending on the artist. To Oppenheim, her windows, which frame the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art's clean angles and concrete facade promoting the exhibitions within, serve as a constant reminder that she is here to make art—and do nothing else.

Under the windows and along the walls of Oppenheim's studio are "pieces of pieces"—dismantled parts of former artwork, monitors for installations, gifts from others, and an assortment of found objects that have comprised her work. On the floor and on one wall, sticky vinyl pieces, cut and arranged as mosaic tile, are leftover studies for an installation she just finished showing in her native Israel. Her workspace is tidy and warm, and Oppenheim is very much at home here as an artist.

This studio has significance beyond being merely a workspace for Oppenheim, who was recently awarded the 2010 Hartell Graduate Award for Art and Architecture. "I never really had the feeling that 'I am an artist.' I never felt comfortable enough [to say that] because I never had a studio practice," she explains. After graduating from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and then working in an office in New York City, she was appalled to find that in that year of office work she hadn't produced any art, despite having had a studio to work in. She realized that she needed to experience what having a regular studio practice was like—to try on the life of a full-time artist.

When she heard of Cornell University's M.F.A. program, which offered financial support, she found her chance. "I needed an environment where I could feel what it means to have a bubble [in which] to be an artist, because in New York there was the constant struggle of surviving," she explains. "And I wanted an M.F.A. because I do want to go into art education."

During her two years at Cornell, she has noticed a continual redefinition of the meta-theme unifying her work. "I'm realizing that I'm working from a certain level

of frustration—with the way I experience history, or the way history is being registered..." With her work, she examines the system we are all caught in, including herself as the artist, in which we identify with a singular narrative in history in a dualistic us/them paradigm.

"That is the trap; as a human being, in order to define ourselves and grasp some personal truth, we often have to deny someone else's existence. There's a struggle within this system and the way I experience it—and there's no way out of it. I'm trying to point at how it works rather than participate in it, which is extremely difficult, but at least there's some level of awareness," she says.

With her previous work, using found objects, installation, and video, she has touched on this theme with references to personal experiences of travel, family history, displacement, and identity. Her family roots in Germany and Poland are present in her treatment of these themes, as is her identity as a Jewish Israeli woman. Symbols such as a leather suitcase and the oranges associated with Zionism in Israel have been recurring motifs. Her art, while highly personal, reminds us that we all experience history from our own reference points, and that we all frame events as they relate to our personal stories.

As she approached the final days of life as an M.F.A. student, Oppenheim prepared for her thesis show in April. Her thesis continued the meta-theme, using found objects and other media. In fact, the found object she focused on was not something that fit into an exhibition space. It was outside her studio windows—a temporary

mock-up structure adjacent to the museum that is part of the large expansion construction project.

Her treatment of the mock-up structure pointed to how architecture is also involved with history and the politics of history, such as the Modernist movement, of which the Johnson Museum is an example. To Oppenheim, it seemed as if "the museum made an artwork." The mini-Modernist mock-up, with no purpose other than to test the concrete mixture, will be destroyed at some point, but not before Oppenheim uncovered its relationship to its "parent" structure and its historical context.

Her thesis also explored the limited experience of framing the world through windows. "The more you frame, the less you actually see, even though it gives you the illusion that it's becoming a macro." The mock-up structure offered us a window that frames what lies beyond, but as Oppenheim observes, "What you actually saw was a parking lot."<sup>AAP</sup>

—Elena C. Pizarro



Oppenheim at work in her studio.