



Looking for people with Hedwige Jacobs

REVIEW | *In an inviting and busy exhibit, it's second, not first, impressions that reveal*

By **Annelise Gelman** - February 21, 2019

“All this must go into a letter,” wrote poet John Ashbery, in “The Skaters.” “Also the feeling of being lived, looking for people, / And gradual peace and relaxation.”

In her solo exhibit at Austin’s [Women & Their Work](#) gallery, [Hedwige Jacobs](#) — Singapore-born, Dutch, Houston-based — brings that “feeling of being lived” to center stage in a series of drawings and painted installations that almost exclusively feature small, stylized human figures.

Join Hedwige Jacobs for [an evening drawing games 7 p.m. Feb. 28](#).

Suggested donation of 1 to 5 used envelopes for the artist to use in later projects. Exhibit continues through

It’s an inviting and busy exhibit, with a surface appeal that reveals more and more subtle detail over time. It’s second, not first, impressions that are a theme in Jacobs’ practice. Her “Tiny Drawings Series” spans an entire wall at eye level, with postcard-sized pen illustrations of silhouetted people, accompanied only by the occasional shadow. At first glance, the figures seem normative — thin, upright, intact — and almost homogenous, differentiated only by a dress here or a change in height there.

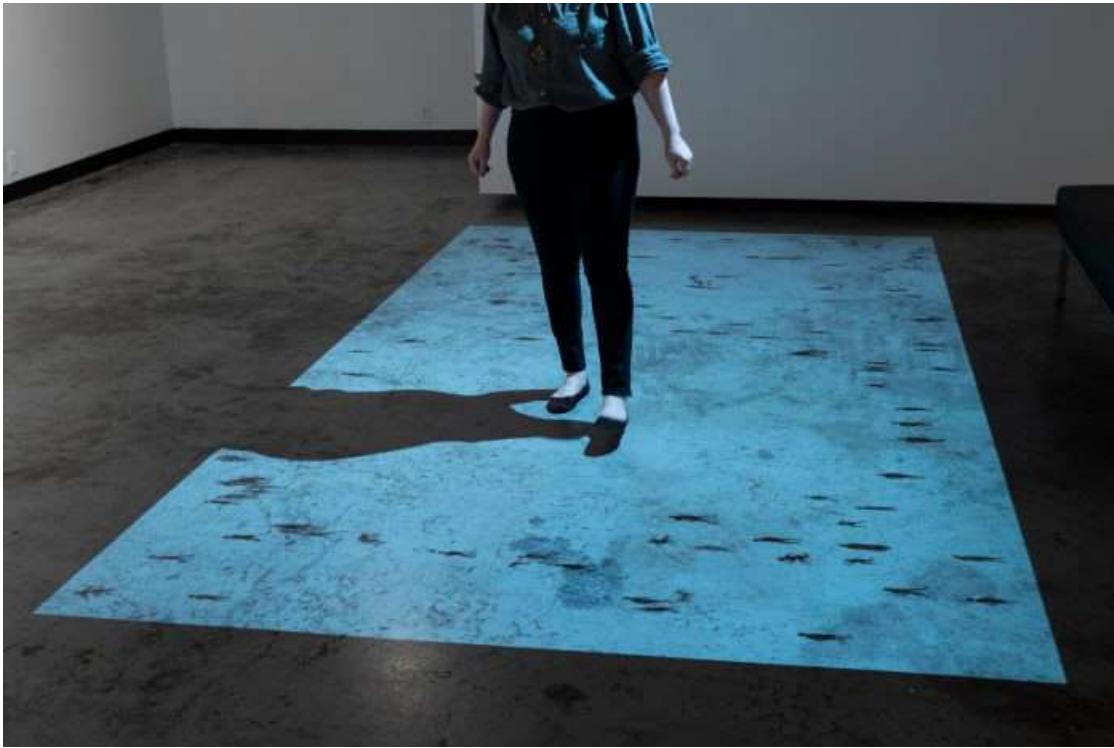
But the longer you look, the more you see how what Jacobs excludes — environment, structure, color, light — allows variation to emerge. Some limbs are detached from their torso. A figure shifts between child and adult, depending on your perspective. A circle of people reminiscent of Matisse’s “La Danse” becomes an inverted wheel, their shadows spokes.



Hedwige Jacobs, "Tiny Drawings Series" at Women & Their Work. Photo courtesy Women & Their Work.

Glancing between an adult holding hands with a child, a couple walking their dogs, and groups of figures communing (dancing?), it's easy to get carried away by the cuteness of the drawings. It was only on the "second impression" that I began to notice their violent undertones. The man I initially thought was raising his arms in celebration is actually being held by a woman at gunpoint. Tiny splotches next to a prone figure suggest blood. Two figures may be swinging a third between them in play or trying to rip him apart by force. Jacobs' intentional play with *déjà vu* and not-so-innocent first impressions make us complicit when the situations of these figures — their details elided — may really signal domination or danger.

These valences are most captivating in "Personal Space," Jacobs' sole interactive piece. A large floor projection animates her silhouetted figures across a blank ground given texture by the gallery floor, generating alluring, mesmerizing social patterns. Here, the full force of Jacobs' imagination of the social public has free reign. Each figure has its own personality and unique habits of motion. One crawls; one somersaults; one runs, touching his hand to his face repeatedly; one pushes a baby carriage; one hobbles, hunched over an umbrella. The figures never seem to interact with each other, and when they intersect they simply overlap for a moment, then continue on their way. This imperturbability, combined with the artist's choice to animate their gestures in loops and restrain the figures in their projected frame (when they hit an edge, they simply turn around and walk in another random direction), gives the freewheeling, whimsical style of the drawings a sinister, trapped aspect.



Hedwige Jacobs, "Personal Space," installation view at Women & Their Work. Photo courtesy Women & Their Work.

As an interactive piece, "Personal Space" also invites gallery visitors to walk into the projected space. At first, stepping into this crowd is delightful — the figures scatter before your giant feet (each illustration is only a few inches tall). Your shadow obliterates them. However, this, too, turns to isolation and entrapment. After a few moments, the figures adjust to your presence and seem to attempt to make contact, but they are programmed not to intersect with the space you occupy. They can only continuously approach the place where you stand, their legs churning, without going anywhere.

In Jacobs' world, taking up space in public is as isolating as it is gratifying; to be seen is also to be in the way; to be responded to is also to disrupt. In asserting their individuality, Jacobs' figures are unable to connect with each other or to form an efficacious collective. Looking at "Personal Space," it's easy to draw analogies to any number of real-life public squares, where physical crowdedness and social isolation are always (paradoxically?) correlated.

Video by Annelise Gelman

If these drawings allude to loneliness, they never dwell in it. "If I could, I would cover everything with my drawings" wins the viewer over by sheer enthusiasm and charisma. Jacobs' freehand drawing style, even on scrap paper (as in her very charming cloud of recycled paper envelopes collected over the course of a decade, "Inside of Envelopes"), never feel like doodles, but rather glimpses into a fully-formed world that encompasses the full spectrum of humanity and all our ways of relating to each other and navigating social space.



Hedwig Jacobs, installation view of "Inside of Envelopes," at Women & Their Work. Photo courtesy Women & Their Work.

The envelope project in particular is beautifully intimate — a glimpse into the artist’s private, personal collection — while offering a window into Jacobs’ fascination with form. The patterns and colors on envelope interiors often go unnoticed (or go directly into the recycling bin), but here their patterning scaffolds Jacobs’ figures, determining their postures and attitudes, providing barriers and bridges for their bodies, and a welcome relief from the “Tiny Drawings” mise-en-scènelessness.



Hedwig Jacobs, installation view of "Inside of Envelopes," at Women & Their Work. Photo courtesy Women & Their Work.

In “The Corner Room,” a faux living room installation, Jacobs turns to woven patterns rather than social ones, but the effect remains the same: a dizzying series of nested relations, revealing more and more detail the longer you hold its gaze, complex and utterly human.

The patterns remain black-and-white (echoed in the monochrome static fuzz of a television screen), forcing the viewer's attention to shape and structure.



The artist's attention to detail transcends fastidiousness to arrive at something more like loving attention — the attention that leads her to paint not just the lampshades, but the surfaces of light bulbs inside them, and to extend her patterning to the undersides of the rocking chairs and shelves. Even the brackets and screws holding those shelves up — I knelt down to look — are painted. Curiously, the woven patterning covering the walls doesn't extend behind the patterned curtains, leaving some parts of the installation — like certain white walls in the gallery — blank.

"If I could, I would," these blanknesses seem to say, "but I can't." The show's moments of incompleteness, though, don't feel like an act of surrender. It's the necessary and vibrant incompleteness of a project in progress, a life that is still being lived.



A painted lightbulb and shade, part of Hedwige Jacobs' installation "The Corner Room," at Women & Their Work. Photo by Annlyse Gelman.

Annelise Gelman

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Annelise Gelman is a writer and artist currently based in Austin, Texas. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Iowa Review*, the *PEN Poetry Series*, *The Awl*, *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the poetry collection *Everyone I Love Is a Stranger to Someone* (2014).

