



## E.V. Day with William Corbett

*by William Corbett*  
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E.V. Day is a New York-based installation artist and sculptor whose work explores themes of feminism and sexuality, while reflecting upon popular culture. Day received her MFA in Sculpture from Yale University in 1995, and she began her dynamic Exploding Couture series in 1999. Day's work in paper, created during a Dieu Donn  Lab Grant residency in 2008, employs an innovative technique of embossing pigmented fishnet stockings and hardware into thick casting paper pulp. Her work was on display at the Dieu Donn  exhibition space from October 15th to November 25, 2009. Day is represented by Deitch Projects.

To usher in the 2009-2010 season of the New York City Opera, Day created a site-specific installation of her sculptural work, made from a selection of vintage City Opera costumes and suspended overhead in exuberant simulated motion. This installation, first on

view from November 5 to 22, will reopen from March 18 to April 18, 2009 at the City Opera's David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center in New York.

Day discussed her recent work and artistic process with poet and critic William Corbett at Dieu Donn  Papermill in New York on November 3. Mr. Corbett is Writer-in-Residence at MIT, an editor of *Pressed Wafer*, and lives in Boston's South End.



Bride Fight, (2006). Two Bridal Gowns with accessories, fishline and hardware.

**William Corbett:** You were born in New York but raised in Connecticut. Where did you go to school?

**E.V. Day:** I went to Hampshire College [in Amherst, Massachusetts]. I really liked it because it was significantly less conventional than my education in Connecticut. It's a liberal arts college with requirements, but ultimately you create your own major and do a final thesis project as in a graduate program. I loved my educational experience there because I was guided by my interests, and felt like the quality of the results mattered not the grade. The most challenging part was convincing your committee of professors that you were ready to graduate. Some people are born talkers and they can talk their way out of or into anything, but that is a fact of life. Anyway wanted to go to Hampshire because I knew I did not want to go to an "art" school, but I knew I wanted to study art and many other subjects, which Hampshire is known for as an interdisciplinary school Bill: So you thought of yourself as perhaps an artist?

**E.V.:** Perhaps an artist. I knew I wanted to get a real education first and then have something to make art about. This residency at Dieu Donn  has been sort of like my experience with school—I wanted to try everything, learn new techniques but wasn't sure what I wanted the work to be and I couldn't imagine what it would look like. It was a leap of faith, you gotta go with your instincts and pray it doesn't come out looking like a cardboard egg carton! The really

exciting thing about this residency is that I knew whatever I did end up with would be new. I had never thought about working with paper pulp, its not so predictable because there are so many options and you can really get your hands into it, and also, it's not something you can practice at home. You move in, you learn some basics, like making sheets of paper and then you ask questions: "What would happen if...? What do you think about this? Let's try this." Images come to my mind in three dimensions. In the end, I was able to compress my 3D images into 2D form, but it's still three-dimensional work to me—just flattened and compressed in tension.

**Rail:** I want to find out what your major was at Hampshire. What did you create for yourself?



Carmen, (2009). Carmen costume from NYC Opera, plastic flowers and daggers, fishline and hardware.

**E.V.:** I ended up concentrating in fine arts and art history! I did enjoy my science lab classes

**Rail:** Then you went to Yale for graduate school. What did you expect to happen there?

**E.V.:** I was at Yale from 1993 to 1995. I was living in Los Angeles when I applied, and I didn't want to move back east. I really love Los Angeles, but I decided to go to Yale, and I've been here on the east coast ever since.

**Rail:** Then you came directly to New York City?

**E.V.:** I did. I lived near the Gowanus Canal. Now it's a kind of hot area with lots of artists. Back then...mmm...I can still smell the canal...putrid metallic....

**Rail:** You had a working studio?

**E.V.:** I had an illegal live-work space, with three other artists. It was huge and fabulous and the most inexpensive studio I've ever had. It's not like that anymore...We took over the space mostly for our studios and carved out a bathroom with a shower, ran a gas line for hot water, built another story and staircase for the bedrooms. The ceilings were 22-26 feet high.

**Bill:** What were you working on when you were in the Gowanus studio?

**E.V.:** My grad thesis show was a series of dissected wetsuits that I thought of as deconstructed superheroes. The wetsuits were suspended in open vitrines with stainless steel wire. Ironically I started working on smaller things in my huge studio. I started making drawings based on the floor plans of Hugh Hefner's private jet, that ultimately became a blueprint series.

**Rail:** When you say small...

**E.V.:** Actual blueprint drawings, 18 × 24 inches. I was playing with the presumptuous language of architecture so they appeared to be documents with scaled instructions one could build from. Thinking big, but in plan view. The original floor plans of the 60's jet are wonderfully curvaceous and I repeated the interior elements for each successive drawing so each one became progressively larger and resembled animated cell growth gone out of control. I wanted to depict experiential fantasy space. Space you could imagine walking through.

**Rail:** Did you have a day job at the same time?

**E.V.:** Well, at this fabulous Gowanus studio, our landlord was also an architect who had a business selling industrial flooring products and I helped him a bit in his office and was freelancing for artists, galleries, building crates etc., and about a year later got interested in commercial art direction. I got gigs doing set dressing, building or sourcing props through friends who were already established. I worked on productions at many different levels of budgets, but even the lowest paying gig paid more than freelancing did for an artist or gallery, at least at my level of experience. I really loved the work. I loved working with crews, the team effort, and the content of many of the commercials was so banal that it made my art ideas seem important! After you've spent a day on a commercial set watching soap stars say "Daytime TV" over and over and over the value of a pursuit in art shoots into high relief. The commercial

work fueled my artwork in many ways. But basically it paid my rent and more. I liked the constant problem solving of making things, and it gave me confidence to risk making art from bad ideas, or the clichés and tropes I work with now.

**Rail:** For anyone who reads about your work, fashion and couture comes up. And now, for your current show at the New York City Opera in Lincoln Center, costume comes up. What is your definition of fashion?

**E.V.:** Fashion is sort of a blanket word that covers the idea of trend. It doesn't really connect with me as a term to describe my work, but its used loosely to refer to styles of clothing. If you look at this [indicating fishnet material stretched on a frame], you can see that this is basically a stripper's bodysuit. There are holes where her breasts would be revealed, and then the rest of the material is wrapped around her. This work is about the action of the body and my interest in architecture. But is this fashion? I suppose there is an 80's reference to fashion, but these fishnet body suits are still widely available. For my work, I pick clothing that appeals to me, that has potential to translate ideas through its inherent structure about releasing gravity, ecstasy, and transformation of the image of the body and ends up having emotional impact. To me, this fishnet body suit is an architectural skin stretched over a women's body that visually enhances her physical architecture. It's something that I don't remember from growing up in Connecticut, where you were expected to select clothes that were socially appropriate. This was always difficult for me as far as I can remember. I never felt proud wearing something appropriate, I felt invisible. Those rules just did not compute with me, and I guess that's what stuck—and now I'm here with the fishnet bodysuits. I find it fascinating to appreciate the way things are made for the female body and to talk about one's experience and energy when wearing garments designed for expression. So in general my work is not so much about trend or fashion, but the potential of form. But, in 2001, I made an installation piece called G-Force, with two hundred thongs stretched out as if flying across the Whitney-curated space at Philip Morris/Altria in New York. This piece came directly out of a trend in fashion popularized by Britney Spears—Hi-rise thong exposed over the hip with the low-rise jeans. One hot New York summer it looked like every woman's underwear was flying out of their pants on the street. I thought that was quite interesting-and hilarious, simultaneously sci-fi and Brazilian.

**Rail:** G-Force: of course, like g-string. What do you think about couture?

**E.V.:** Couture is an art form. It's a one of a kind garment, like a sculpture. It is a unique singular expression by a designer. That idea of couture comes up because it's unique, specific in

style and is carefully constructed. It's the highest level of the craft and then it is different from the craft of costume, which is more like constructing a building or a prop to be performed in. The most interesting thing for me lately has been working with retired pieces in the costume archive at the New York City Opera. I relate these pieces to couture, because costumes are constructed like I've described. They are the ultimate in garments; they're built to last through many performances, maybe for years. I was just at the City Opera today, and they're refurbishing all of these incredibly intricate costumes for the Nutcracker ballet. All of those tutus—it's very much about sculpture and how it moves and shows up on the stage from far away as well as with the body of the performer. The costume can say more than the character at first glance and gives context. When you see a woman wearing a fishnet bodysuit, it's not about what she's talking to you about. The fishnet bodysuit is louder than her words... When you see a character in an opera, you don't really know what the actor looks like, but you know what the role stands for because the costume says it.

**Rail:** So you'd call a fishnet bodysuit a costume.

**E.V.:** Yes. Like a superhero's.

**Rail:** You associate fishnet stockings with Spider-Man, and you've said that you would like to have that sort of web. Were you interested in comics as a kid?

**E.V.:** No. I think that interest came out of my experience at graduate school, when I was searching for images of women who were independent and powerful and who had their own language. Superheroes are characters that are powerful. They have a mission and have their own particular language and superpower. I was looking for a female version that was a positive character or archetype. There aren't a lot of women characters that are actually viable except for Wonder Woman.

**Rail:** Well, it's bullets and bracelets—my favorite game.

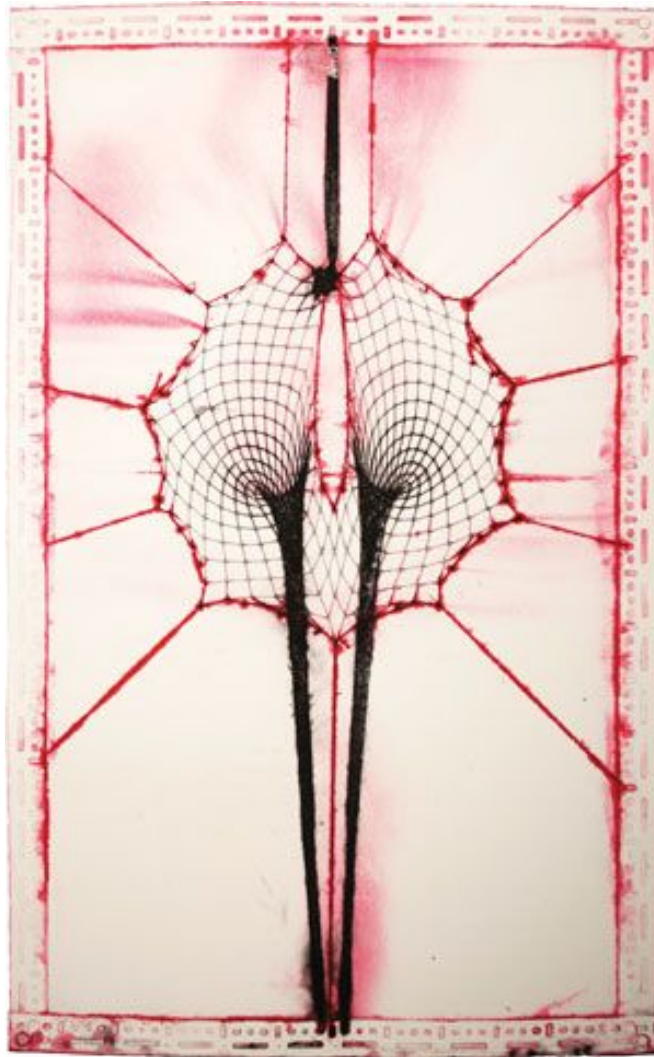
**E.V.:** She can flex. And she has the golden lasso, "the Lasso of Truth", which is the ultimate superpower. If only the United Nations had the golden lasso! Wonder Woman gently lassos a subject and nicely and asks, "So did you really tell that person this?" She doesn't hurt anybody. It's just about the truth. Tell me the truth: what did you say? What did you do? What did you mean? To me, that's a great superhero to look up to.

Spider-Man is another superhero that I really like. I think there is also a Spider-Woman or a Spider-Girl. But, you know, if I was hanging off a cliff and Spider-Woman showed up, it would feel dubious. Right?

**Rail:** “Why are you here?”

**E.V.:** If Spider-Man comes along, you know you’re going to be okay! But if Spider-Woman comes instead, you wonder, what am I going to have to do for you later? I think that’s still part of the question with images of powerful women—whether that power is reliable and trustworthy and strong. It’s funny, because there are so many iconic images of women taking care of babies, but somehow it doesn’t translate into superheroes. But back to the fishnet stockings...

**Rail:** Here is the fishnet, stretched out on a frame. What did you do with it? Did this go in the big Crusher [paper press]? How does this get involved with the paper you’re making?



Shazam (Red and Blue). 2009. Fishnet bodysuit pigment embossing on cotton base sheet. 59.5 × 39.25 inches.  
151.1 × 99.7 cm

**E.V.:** We started with smaller samples of fishnet. I didn’t originally imagine doing a whole body. I started with fishnet stockings to see what would happen. I was thinking about

Spider-Man and Spider-Woman, liking the anti-gravity things that Spider-Man can do, and looking at a lot of imagery of his spider webs shooting around. When you stretch the fishnet stocking, it kind of looks like those webs. I really like the potential energy of the webs in motion. It's about transportation and movement; it's more about travel than about being trapped in the spider web for me.

**Rail:** Parenthetically, the “web” is a loaded image now, because of the Internet. When you walked into this space, did you have that in mind?

**E.V.:** Not at all. At first, I was really worried that I wouldn't be able to figure out something to do. I started with elastic bands and snapped them.

**Rail:** Rubber bands?

**E.V.:** The elastic bands that are on a gift box. I covered them with pure pigment and snapped them into the paper; I wanted to capture that motion energy of the snap. This is what makes papermaking different than making prints. Here, you're working with pure pulp, which is fiber soaked in water, and the pulp entirely absorbs whatever you put into it. You don't get skid marks on the surface. The pigment gets soaked in and embedded into the paper. Sometimes we'd press the paper first and then put pigment on top. And then I got more adventurous, using the whole stocking and trying to completely embed that in the paper.

**Rail:** What's the atmosphere like in the papermaking studio? Noisy? A lot of water? How did you do it, physically?

**E.V.:** Well, I would come in and talk to Paul, who is the master of the art of paper pulp. He is an incredible resource and facilitator of ideas. I would ask, will this work? And he'd say, “Well, this is probably what's going to happen if you do that, but you can try this...” And we would try it together. We went through so much experimentation, which is what was so great.

**Rail:** Had you ever worked with these kinds of machines before?

**E.V.:** No, but I was definitely excited to work with “the Crusher” and “the Baby Crusher”. You've got so much pressure on this paper, and it's squeezing the water out, and you watch your pigment run like a pool of ink down to the drains in the floor. And you think, “We're getting a really good color!” But you wouldn't know; maybe it had all been squeezed out! It's a similar kind of experience to making photography, back when you used to develop in a darkroom. You wait around the Crusher, thinking, “What are we gonna see?”

**Rail:** What do you do if it doesn't work out?



**E.V.:** That was a cool part of the experience. Suddenly you're engaging in this critique: "Well, this is getting a good image here. What if we try a little more pigment?" Once we had an idea of what we wanted, it became this scientific baking procedure, in a way: how long to leave it in the oven, a little salt, a little pepper. I wanted this fishnet to show great definition, but I also wanted the ink to be flowing out. I wanted to create "Shazam", a superhero-like costume transformation busting out of the compression. I came to that idea through all of the experimentation we did at the beginning. Sometimes the ink would take so that there was a visual sense of the pressure and the flow of the pigment, but you didn't have crisp definition. And then sometimes the fishnet would be super crisp. So we wondered, what if we got that definition with this flow of the pigment? We started to create a language and to create other goals within it

**Rail:** Has this work changed the way you think about paper? For instance, did you buy new drawing paper? Have you become more interested in different kinds of papers?

**E.V.:** I am certainly more interested in paper now, but what's neat about this project is that the paper is the object, like a sculpture. So I can't just buy paper and expect it to do what we did here. To me, this work is still sculpture, just compressed instead of exploded. It's a total object. It's not about an image on a surface; you can cut up that paper like a cake, and the dyes go all the way through the material. It's the object of an action, and there's only one. You can somewhat edition the pieces I made, but each one is still unique. The similarities lie in the measurements and the pressure and the temperature. You can edition loaves of bread, but really each one is a little bit different. There is a level of nuance happening here that just doesn't occur in something like lithography.

**Rail:** How many hours did you spend in each session—how many hours in each day?

**E.V.:** It's a full day—nine to five, or ten to six. I always look forward to my days here in the studio. When I am here for a day, there aren't any distractions; we're fully focused on this one special process that you can't do anywhere else. I also have the assistance of Paul and Cat [Cox], and I can look through their archive of past experiments with pigments and pressures. It's a very specialized process, and yet it's still paper—and printmaking, in a certain way. The beauty is in wanting to pull out what can happen from this experiment.

**Rail:** What were your hands doing while you were working? Were you wearing gloves? Were you touching the materials all the time, or were you sitting there and watching?

**E.V.:** Generally, I don't think about wearing gloves, it is a fairly non-toxic environment and your hands are a big part of the process. But if you are working with a lot of pigment it is good to wear gloves so you can take them off and not risk distributing the blue powder pigment on everything you touch. But once your boots are on, your gloves are on, and the music is playing, you're thinking about what's next. What are the ways of attaching these things? What kind of paper pulp might give us this effect or that effect? It's all about experimentation. Your mind is so alive when you're in the studio. One experiment drives the next experiment. And Steve [Orlando] and Cat Cox are around, so you have this whole world of people here, doing many other things and working on other projects. It's a creative hive.

**Rail:** I assume this experience had resonance for you. How did it inform your more sculptural work with costumes? What is the connection between your work in this room and what you've gone on to do?

**E.V.:** This residency is still very much in my mind. I'm hoping to come back and do more work here. There is a particular feeling that I get when making three-dimensional work: I feel potential motion and a sense of space for the future. Making these "monotypes" was a very similar sculptural experience. While I was here, I kept thinking about costumes that have lots of rich decoration and seams. They're so constructed. I kept thinking, what would happen if I put a costume like that in the Crusher and tried to use it as a relief? And I was thinking that there might be other things besides costumes that would be interesting to use.

**Rail:** I understand that concurrently with the installation at the New York City Opera, you're going to take on some commissions involving prom dresses and wedding dresses?

**E.V.:** I think it's a project for the daring. If someone's willing to sacrifice their garment, and there's a story there, then I'm interested in talking about it. There has to be some kind of relationship or narrative about the garment that's larger than just that person; something about the dress has to resonate for me. I've been offering to do this project for a couple of years, but nobody has followed through yet. People are so attached to a wedding dress or a prom dress, and I understand that. I like to pick my own garments for my work, in general, but I'd be interested in someone who really said, "Take this." I'm curious to collaborate if there's a story—and if they want to put a dress in the Crusher, that would be interesting.