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YOUR GUIDE TO THE ARTS AT BRANDEIS
PAT OLESZKO IS A

FOOL FOR

THOUGHT

by Susan Metrican
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Women's Studies Research Center
Since the 1970s, multimedia artist Pat Oleszko has addressed social, political, environmental and geographical issues by creating outsize spectacles that employ her self-defined “inflated sense of self,” along with costumed trees, knees, breasts, butts and elephants. She has toured the U.S., Canada, Europe and Japan, and has made dozens of short films. In 1990, the New York Dance and Performance Awards honored her for sustained achievement. Last summer, my art collective, kijidome, commissioned “Hello Folly: The Floes and Cons of Arctic Drilling,” featuring a cast of polar bears and Pat herself as Big Oil.

Oleszko’s newest work, much of which will be made on-site in the Kniznick Gallery at the Women’s Studies Research Center, will be on view from November 21, 2016 to March 3, 2017.

What does the title of your exhibition “Fool for Thought” mean?
The Fool is a time-honored tradition through which I happily skewer any and all. Historically and histrionically, it references the jester boldly entertaining the king, a shaman exorcising social ills and a showman baldly displaying curiosities.

You’ve referred to art as a verb, which makes sense given that you are a performative artist. Did you always think that you would create performative work or did something facilitate that choice?
My mantra is, “I am, therefore I art.” Early on, I wanted to make big sculptures but my supports would inevitably collapse. Too embarrassed to learn how to weld a proper armature, I realized that I was six feet tall and anything I hung on myself would stand up to the challenge. In that eureka moment, I became pedestrian art: using the world as a stooge and the body as a platform. This impulse morphed into creating art that lives and breathes in society, with absurdity as a norm that eases aesthetic barriers through humor, subtle-tease and insubordination.

Escaping the confines of the predictable gets your game up: You can resonate wildly or flail in a dangerous way. Death by humiliation is always present, never mind that it’s jest “artin” around.

Could you tell us about your artistic process and studio space?
My process is I collect and I correct. I find stuff everywhere: words, pictures, odd materials, objects, and diverse ideas from the lost and profound. Then something puts me in a spin; there’s a tragic thumbnail sketch, maybe the title surfaces, which guarantees its completion; and from there the work compounds wildly until I meet and eat the dread/lion.

I have been in the same modest-size loft space in TriBeCa for over 40 years. As I make work to use rather than sell, it keeps growing smaller. In addition to that relentlessly diminishing interior space, I have two storage units. Those fun rents necessitate periodic Ritual Cleansings, truly unique performances that have culminated in several conflagrations (“Burning Pat”), a submerging (“All Abort!”) and a smash pit (“Road Kills”), which somehow aids the transmigration of those loft souls and leaves me elated, exhausted, bereft and momentarily free.

What are you working on now?
There are a number of see/worthy pieces in the works about environmental issues, including a multi-tiered community work in Baltimore called “No/Oz Ark” that concludes in a parade/spectacle. “The Passing Wind Armada” is a windsock piece now in construction, and will be featured on boats and bikes (no planes) on various urban waterways. As most of the recent pieces have been site-specific, the challenge now is how to render the material into a performance and/or installation to reach a larger audience and possibly influence. Mission impossible? I hope not. If da fools shit, bare it.