

# Examining Ideas through Intermedia Artwork

Ellen Mueller's drawings, videos, interactive installations, performances, and social action artworks explore social and political issues such as climate change, the 24-hour news cycle, and our media-filtered world. However, drawing and collage are also important elements in her work, and she derives inspiration from interaction with people, communities, and nature. She is a truly intermedia artist who explores a single topic through a variety of processes and media.

## Intermedia Explorations

Mueller's work often invites viewers to participate in the act of performing or creating the work, as in *Eating & Making Together (Cheese Sculptures)* in which the artist and a group of participants eat Babybel cheese and create a collection of small sculptures from the wax packaging, all while engaging in discussions about big ideas or important concepts.

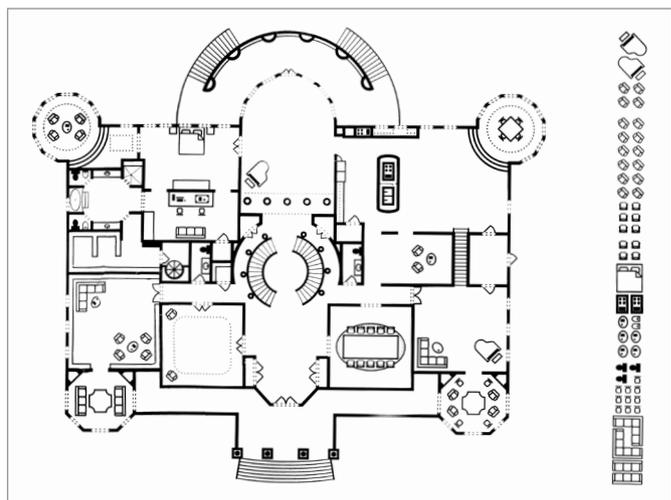
The *McMansions* project (see centerspread) examines the phenomenon of large but often cheaply made houses that populate many American suburbs. The colloquial term "McMansions" is used to criticize both the lack of creativity and pretense of wealth that many people believe these homes represent. The project ranges from architectural drawings of the interiors of the homes to 3D-printed models and simplified stainless steel sculptures hung from the ceiling in what Mueller calls a "cloud formation." These 3D models are meant to provide a simplified contrast to the complex and ostentatious homes shown throughout the series. She has also created a series of short digital animations titled *Planning a Starter Castle*, which feature decks, houseplants, chairs, and antique door handles (Mueller calls these "stereotypical markers of affluence") which move in slow, hypnotic repetitions.

## Art History: Intermedia

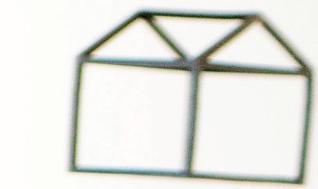
The installation, performance, and interactive experience arts of the last several decades have made it clear that art is not a vehicle simply for escaping the increasingly complex physical world into some idyllic realm. Mueller's work can be traced to the rise of conceptual art in the 70s and 80s, as well as current trends towards multimedia and digital art.

## About the Artist

Raised in Fargo, ND, Mueller received a B.A. in Theater Arts and a B.S. in Design Technology from Bemidji State University, Minnesota, and an MFA in Studio Art at the University of South Florida, Tampa. When not creating and exhibiting her artwork, she works as the director of Minneapolis College of Art and Design's MFA program.



Top: Intermedia artist Ellen Mueller. Bottom: Ellen Mueller, cut vinyl mural. Part of an ongoing project, *McMansions*, 2017. Exhibited summer 2018 at Living Arts of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Original photo by Emily Steward. Images courtesy of the artist.





*Ellen Mueller, Single Home [Installed]. 3D-printed stainless steel houses, 2 1/2 x 2 1/2 x 2 1/2" (6 x 6 x 6 cm) each. Part of an ongoing project, McMansions, 2017. Exhibited summer 2018 at Living Arts of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Photo by Emily Steward. Image courtesy of the artist.*

## ARTIST Q&A

**When did you first realize art was what you were born to do?**

**Ellen Mueller:** I have always loved to draw, ever since I was quite young. That love of drawing developed into larger and more complex artistic interests as I grew and attended various art workshops, classes, and summer camps as a kid. I was lucky to have access to these kinds of resources in addition to arts activities in my school, and it has had a lasting impact on my development as an artist.

**What are some of the biggest influences on your work, including other artists, events, or things outside of the arts?**

**EM:** Seeing the work of other artists is a huge influence on my work. Each week, I try to get out to see at least two or three exhibitions in the Twin Cities, which has an incredibly vibrant art and design scene. When I was living in a more rural setting, I would make a point of seeing as much art as possible when I would get out of town for conferences or other trips. I'm also very influenced by nature, and try to get outside as much as possible. I find a lot of inspiration at residencies in widely varying landscapes, and tend to do a lot of walking to process my thoughts and plans for new work.

**You work in a variety of media. Do you feel there is one that particularly conveys your message better than others?**

**EM:** I have always loved an interdisciplinary approach. I constantly cycle through various modes of working because concept drives my work more so than material choices. I tend to move from working in more isolated ways (drawing, video editing, 3D modeling) to more public and collaborative ways (interactive installations, social practice works, performances) because I find each one feeds me in a different way, and both exhaust me in different ways. By switching between these modes of making, I keep things fresh and interesting for myself.

**What is a typical workday like for you?**

**EM:** My days are typically packed. I direct the MFA program at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, so much of my day is holding meetings, organizing events, and advising students. I'm constantly processing feedback on every aspect of the program and formulating solutions to make it stronger. I coordinate with nearly every department on campus to ensure students have the most positive experience possible during their two years with us, and later as alumni. My day often melts into the evening as I attend openings for current students and alumni, helping different people to network and build their careers.

**Do you have specific strategies, rituals, or routines that help you work and/or generate ideas?**

**EM:** I process a lot of ideas through the act of collaging. At each residency I attend, I try to find a local publication, such as a newspaper, magazine, etc., and I use that local

imagery to create collages. Often the absurdity and humor found in juxtaposing different images helps me to arrive at new ideas. I also do a lot of thinking while driving long distances or walking around my neighborhood.

**What is the role of your support community: assistants, art dealers, collectors, art critics/journalists? How do you develop this network of support?**

**EM:** My support community is a huge part of my practice, and it consists of other artists, gallerists, curators, friends, and family. I don't sell a lot of my work, in part because that's not one of my central goals. Instead, I have a significant community engagement element to my practice because many of my works are interactive. I attend a lot of events to support others in my community, in part because I also want them to show up for my events. Without the support of my community, none of this would be possible.

## DISCUSSION

Before introducing students to Mueller's *McMansions* series, have a discussion about houses and homes. Ask questions such as:

- What kinds of places do people live? Does everyone live in a house or apartment?
- What is the difference between a house and a home?
- What makes something a home?
- What does it mean to feel "at home" in a place that is not your home?

Record student responses and ideas on a whiteboard, then show them several pieces from the *McMansions* project, including architectural drawings, sculptures, and animations. Discuss how each media is used to explore the same set of ideas or questions in slightly different ways. Explain that this can be called intermedia art-making.

## STUDIO EXPERIENCES

- Write down three to five "big" questions—things about life or the world that you wonder about or worry about. Choose two of these questions and explore them through drawing, sculpture, and digital media.
- Write down broad topics that relate to contemporary life on scraps of paper and place them in a container (e.g., homes, the environment, health, political topics, social issues). Join groups of three to four collaborators and pull one topic from the container. Discuss how you might create artwork that explores this idea, and how you might use different media to create it. Record your plans in a sketchbook or a planning sheet. Create three to five artworks exploring this topic. 🌀

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