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## In Conversation: Leah Oates Interviews Melissa Stern

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North Carolina Arts Association  
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Galleries / Museums



Melissa Stern, Conversation, 2012, 28x 7.5x7.5 (each) clay, graphite

## In Conversation: Leah Oates Interviews Melissa Stern

Leah Oates: How did you become an artist and did you know early on that you would be in the arts or did you begin as something else? Were there other artists in your family?

Melissa Stern: I have made things my entire life. . . As an only child I spent a lot of time by myself, as only children tend to do, and I was both a voracious reader and a voracious maker of things. My mother was a commercial artist and she would often work in the evening on her projects at home, after her day job. I would sit near her working on my own little made-up projects.

My family was middle class, there wasn't a lot of extra money but my mother had fabulous creativity and energy, She would come home from work and decide to paint the steps of our house to look like faux oriental carpeting, or paint a room to look like the sky. I grew up in a household of great creativity, color and imagination

LO: What are the themes of your work and what inspires you?

MS: I work like a handyman cobbling together drawings and sculptures from elements found, borrowed, imagined and stolen. I use a wide range of materials from encaustic to clay, pastel to steel. The drawings and sculptures, often made in tandem, resonate between one another, the ideas in one reinforcing the themes of the other.

All of my pieces share a thematic thread. The figurative pieces may appear simple, but that is deceptive. Look again and I think you will find them full of subtle and complex emotion. I am told that the works reads as both dark and funny, and I'm good with that reaction. The work is rooted in childhood memory. These memories are funny and scary, child-like but quite serious. Throughout all of my work I have explored childhood and memory, both personal and collective. For example- I have a long-running series of drawings about school and our collective memories- both sweet and painful-of those years. We are shaped by childhood and these memories chase us throughout our lives.

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- Edge Order Rupture at Galerie Lelong
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- Atle Berner Andersen

Over the years has dealt with interpersonal dynamics: One-on-one relationships, family groupings, schoolyard politics- the intimacy, the loneliness, the humor, the oddity of various combinations of people, large and small.

The dramas that make up my work are individual stories that can be read both personally and politically. Gender, relationships and history are intertwined in my work. To quote- "The personal is political" The relationships between boys and girls are real and at the same time metaphoric for the relationships between men and women; the powerful and the powerless. Of course who is playing what role is all-dependent on the point of view of the observer.



Melissa Stern, Regression, 2012, 17 1/2 x 17 1/2, oil paint, oil stick.

LO: What is your working process? Do you plan things out or play in the studio? Each artist is so different in how they approach their work. How do you approach the creation of your work?

MS: My pieces usually start from a very simple idea- a color, something I saw, a picture, a material. What happens to that basic germ of an idea is the magic and fun of being an artist. Some play, a lot of hours, maybe a false turn or two and then boom- that flash of everything coming together to make an object that I never could have imagined before.....

LO: Why do you think art is important for the world and why is it important for you as an individual artist?

MS: I'm not sure that "art" writ large IS important for the world. I can't cure cancer, feed the hungry, or fix a single one of the world's problems with what I do. But I know that sometimes there is a moment of recognition, of connection between someone and something that I have made. And that's a pretty sweet moment...

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