

EAST CITY ART



Wade Carey Q&A with Annie Rose Hanson, CONNERSMITH Academy 2013 Participant

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Performance detail, Annie Rose Hanson, *Proofing Ambivalence at Room Temperature*, 2013, photograph courtesy of the artist

*I sat down to talk with Annie Rose Hanson at her home in Alexandria, Virginia, on June 21. She is one of the featured MFA students at this year's invitational, **Academy 2013**, at Connersmith Gallery, located at 1358 Florida Avenue NE. This is the 13th annual group show of the work of regional student artists sponsored by the gallery. Now a highly anticipated event in the Washington's art community's calendar, this summer's show is set to open Saturday, July 13. The show will run through August 24. The transcript of this conversation has been reviewed and edited by the participants for concision and clarity. Ms. Hanson and I began as she served mint tea with honey in beautiful Moroccan glasses on her wide, shady front porch in Alexandria's Rosemont neighborhood on the afternoon of the summer solstice. We talked about growing up and going to school in Alexandria.*

Annie Rose Hanson: I've lived here most of my life. I was born in California, moved to New York then came here and have been living here since I was five or six. I didn't really get involved with art until I was out of high school, or late in the last year of high school. I applied to the Corcoran but was rejected originally. I then went to NOVA [Northern Virginia Community College], took some more classes, reapplied to the Corcoran, got in now I am working on making some fantastic art and expressing myself in new and interesting ways.

Wade Carey: So, your journey into deciding that you wanted to be spending a lot of time working as an artist was not the first thing that you decided to do. You had some time to decide that you wanted to be an artist and you had a little time to figure out what you wanted to do as an artist. It started out not necessarily as a sculptor, either. Is that true?

Annie: True. I started out doing photography, actually, which, looking back on it now, I think is kind of funny that I've done little photography work since then. I took a photography class in high school, senior year, and I just fell in love with it, black and white photography. I thought, maybe I'll apply to art school. Unfortunately I didn't get into the Corcoran my first time. So, I went to NOVA [Northern Virginia Community College] and I took some photography, painting, drawing classes just to see, you know, what else I liked and I found I really loved painting. I decided to reapply to the Corcoran as a Fine Arts student and I got in so that was pretty exciting for me. I guess after that I focused mainly on painting and sculpting and only this past year have I actually gotten into performance art which is a new and exciting medium to be in.

Wade: The way that I have tried to reconstruct obviously is very skeletal, working from the evidence that exists that a person can get to without knowing you, going through what evidence you can derive from the Internet, but I see a progression in structure. Obviously, from the notes that I've gathered and from the pictures and from the video, I can see that there is an interest in structure and then in the relationship between the human body and machinery. There is a new fascination, and it's in the work that is featured in the Academy show, which we will talk about in detail in a minute, you are interested in the relationship between the human body and food and machinery, or the way that food is created. I would like to talk first about how it came about that you started making sculpture that interacted with the body.

Annie: That ended up being a school project.

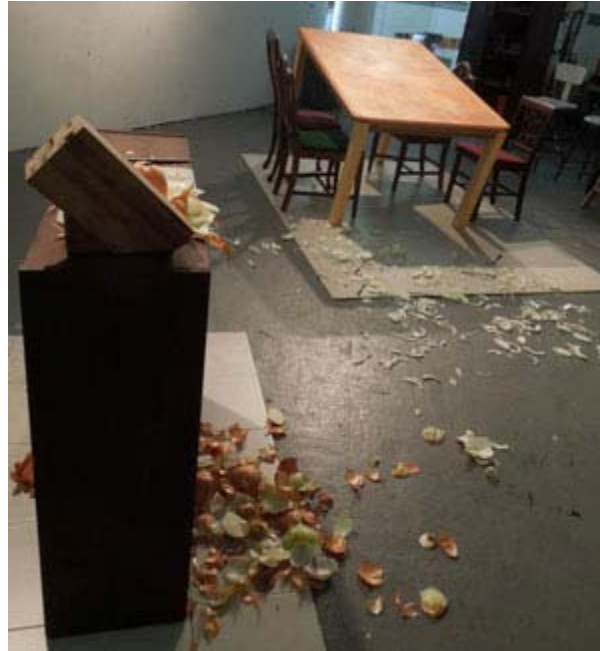
Wade: That's what you've got to do if you're in school... [laughing].



Detail, Annie Rose Hanson, *Wheel of Death*, 2010, photograph courtesy of artist

Annie: Yes. You have to pay attention to what the teachers tell you. The assignment, literally, was object and the body in my “Object/Environment” class. I made this thing called *Wheel of Death*. It was big, welded steel, with spikes on the end of it. I didn’t think it was going to work but it did. I didn’t hurt my head, or anything. It was a great success. After that, I tried to do a spin-off, a smaller *Death Sphere*, but after that I got more interested in doing stuff that was more personal rather than physical if that makes any sense, that had to do with my life and things that were going on in my life rather than just, hey cool, there is this giant death wheel rolling down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Wade: Right. So, how is it personal?



Detail following performance, Annie Rose Hanson, *Dinner Time*, 2012, photograph courtesy of the artist

Annie: Well, this is how I got into performance art. I was going through some family trouble and I thought, how can I put this emotion into art? I was thinking, I keep trying to bring my family together around the dinner table for food. What can I do? I kept piecing things together and I just decided, well, I think I should do this performance. I told my teacher about it. I said, you know, I have this idea, I’m going to have a slanted table. I’m going to cut up some onions. I’m going to be crying. My nose is going to be running. I’m going to be setting the table with glass bowls. They’re going to slide off and they’re going to break. And she goes, well, that seems a little thin... I mean, you know, I don’t think there is much content behind it. I began to question myself after that. Am I an artist? Am I doing good work? Finally, I did the performance piece and it was all about not being able to get the family together around the dinner table and ending up making this big giant banquet of sliced onions, laboring over it, crying over it, and having all just shatter on the floor and me sitting at the table by myself. After the performance, my teacher came up to me and said, “Annie! That was really amazing!” So, I count that a win in my book.

Wade: Thumbs up to that one, crit-wise.

Annie: Yes. Most of my work has dealt with something personal, but even more so now. It has always come from my personal experiences whether it is with my family or with my friends or situations that are happening in my life but outside of my control. Everything has always been near and dear to my heart.

Wade: That begins to answer a question that was high on my list when I was thinking about talking with you and that was how did food come into it and it's not really so much food as how life comes into it and food is clearly an important part of how life comes into it and how food is a way that you get to people and are with people.

Annie: Yes. I usually communicate myself through food, inside and outside the studio! Actually, looking back on all my projects, I found that the one link between them all has been food. Back in sophomore year, I did a piece about home and it was me cooking at home, me cooking at my friend's house and me cooking at work with my work family. It was all about that kind of atmosphere. You are with family. You are in your comfort zone. It is home. Now, I am going into family matters using food as a tool and last year I did an installation piece at the Whole Foods in Alexandria where I took pictures of all the chefs in the back of the house and collaged them on the undersides of the tables. I think that is probably my favorite piece, besides the bread project that I've done recently, because it has my work family in it at Whole Foods. It is cool when you can combine work with art and everybody is happy with it.

Wade: In the work that you have done with the people you work with did the idea just spring up in your head? Did it start with suggestions from people around you? How did the idea germinate to have the pictures on the undersides of the tables?



Installation detail, Annie Rose Hanson, *Food for Thought*, 2012, photograph courtesy of the artist

Annie: School project, again. It was a site-specific piece that we had to do. I was thinking to myself, what can I do that is site-specific? That is one of the hardest things to do. I needed to do something that is close to me, both personally and in distance. It just popped into my head. I thought that if I could just talk to my manager about doing an art project in the café, nobody would see the underside of tables. It would work as a reflection of how the people who are creating your food, even though you don't see them, are still there. I thought it was a great idea. Every night after the store closed I had to go there and work all through the night. But it did just kind of pop into my head. It didn't take me too long to think about it. Food and my work family, it just goes together for me.

Wade: Moving from that project to the one that has been selected to be in *Academy 2013*, let's try to be sort of chronological about it. Tell me the start of your journey being in the *NEXT* show [*NEXT at the Corcoran 2013*, student BFA thesis and BFA/MFA showcase] and we'll move on from there.

Annie: Coming up with a project is always hard. Even before the semester started I was wondering what I was going to do. I knew I wanted to keep going with the food idea because it was something that was important to me. I was thinking, what takes a lot of labor to make? What is something that most cultures have on the table all the time? That is how I chose bread. It is funny because every one of my Moroccan friends ask me, is that Moroccan bread? I found it interesting that in American culture the thing that we think of as bread is in a plastic bag, pre-sliced and lasts up to a week or two. I had my subject matter. I was trying to think of how I could bring in the audience and make them have an important role in how the piece turns out. I thought, well, I like cooking for my friends. I cook for my family. I'll cook for museum-goers. I built a giant cutting board with the help of my dad. It was about 6 x 7 feet. I got little toaster ovens. I dumped out a giant bag of flour. I started practicing with a 25 pound bag. Next, I went to a 50 pound bag. I kneaded all by hand. I mixed it all by hand. I portioned it all out by hand. Pretty much everything was done by hand. I wanted that. I wanted it to be a physical labor of love. I wanted to mimic restaurant quantity but use home-made love and care. I think that most people who go to restaurants these days think that the food only takes two seconds to make and people take things for granted and "please" and "thank-you" are not really thrown around too much in restaurants or even in high retail grocery stores. I think people need to rethink how they treat the people who make their food or handle their food. I want to shed some light on that as well as to let people know that, hey, if I can make a 50 pound bag of flour turn into bread you can make dinner for your family. You can share something with people. It was humbling and a little tiring but it really felt good to share with people who didn't ask. Some people didn't want the bread but they felt bad so they took a piece anyway. An interesting thing happened one night when I was cleaning up. One of the security guards asked why are you doing this? It was a valid question.

Wade: Sure. It should be a part of an art piece, any performance-based piece.

Annie: He was asking, "Why are you doing this? Are you getting paid for it?" I told him, "No, I'm not getting paid." He told me he thought I was wasting a lot of time and money. From his perspective as a security guard, he didn't really see the point. I wasn't getting paid for it. It just seemed like a waste of time and energy.

Wade: It must have seemed pointless.

Annie: Yes. It seemed like a waste of time, energy and money to him. He asked, why was I doing this? I told him I really was getting paid—I get paid in here [gesturing by patting her hand on her chest over her heart]. He goes, oh, you get paid in here [in the heart], you know? I said, yeah. He, goes, Oh! Good! Good job! It just felt good to have somebody say that. I think people need to share more and thank more and please more and complain less.

Wade: There are all kinds of different questions and answers that I thought about asking because I wasn't sure how much as an artist you intellectualized the bread as an artist. Obviously, the bread making is the centerpiece of this performance-based phase of the work that you have been doing. One of the questions I asked myself was would you have the art without—and you have any opinions about—gluten? Do you have opinions about the way gluten is treated in society? You work at Whole Foods. You have become sophisticated because of your work about the politicization of food, the food revolution, and the work of people like Michael Pollan. How many performances of *Proofing Ambivalence at Room Temperature* have you done, so far?

Annie: I've done four, although one was not seen by the public.

Wade: And at the Academy show, are you going to do one performance?

Annie: Yes. I am going to do one piece, at the opening.

Wade: At any of the performances, has anybody come up, or during the course of the proofing, during the span of time from the beginning to the end, has anyone engaged you in any discussion on the politics of bread or the politics of nutrition or the politics of gluten or any other ingredients in the bread?



Annie Rose Hanson preparing for her performance, *Proofing Ambivalence at Room Temperature*, at the Corcoran Gallery in Spring 2013, photograph courtesy of the artist

Annie: I had one person come up to me about GMOs which I thought was interesting because I wasn't trying to make that kind of statement, even though I do have an opinion about it. He handed me a flyer about a soup kitchen—not really a soup kitchen but a vegan soup fest, I guess, where you bring your own bowl and you get a free bowl of soup and you get to talk about how GMOs are bad. I thought that was very interesting. I had a lot of people come up to me and ask me what I was doing. I had one person ask me if this was about foot fetishes because I am barefoot the whole time. I got a lot of interesting feedback but during the whole performance I do not talk. I will smile and will nod or shake my head if it is a yes or no question but other than that I don't like to talk because I think it takes away from the handing off the bread from one person to another. As far as gluten goes, I never really thought about it that way but I don't think I am trying to make a statement about gluten or gluten-free products.

Wade: I thought about it only because gluten is clearly so much a part of the elasticity of bread and kneading is so much a part of the performance. So, without gluten, that performance would not be the same. That was really why I wanted to ask about it. I'm not allergic and I love bread with gluten in it, I'm a big gluten fan. No worries from me. While I was thinking about content, I just thought, I'll bet you there is a lot more people who will think a lot more about stuff—and it is true in general—people will think a lot more about performance pieces than the artist may necessarily think. The artist is performing. The artist is not spending time deconstructing the performance. The artist is performing it. It is the work of those who experience the performance to come up with multitudes of interpretation and that's part of what the art is. I was just curious to find out what things you've learned about the piece from others since you have performed it, and any feedback you've got from people that were things you hadn't thought about it.

Annie: *Proofing Ambivalence at Room Temperature* can be interpreted so many different ways, from so many different angles and that's the beauty of it. I think the most valuable feedback I got was during my thesis preview,

the practice version. I did not have a cropped chef coat on. The ingredients were smaller. A lot of people were telling me, you know, this reads very differently than what you want it to. It reads more like a woman at home who is evoking that whole “bun in the oven” thing. You are trying to give away this bread but nobody will eat it. I thought that was fascinating even though it was not what I was going for at all. I quickly tried to find ways to make it more appropriate to read the way I wanted it to be. Other feedback I got a lot was about my feet. Even though at the beginning of my performance I do wash my feet and hands to keep everything sanitary and to make people feel better. A lot of people were feeling uneasy when they saw a barefoot woman on a giant cutting board kneading bread dough and handing it to people. That was another interesting thing. I thought that if I washed my hands and feet everybody would be OK with it but a lot of people just could not get over the fact that my feet were right next to the bread. Other than that, most of the feedback that I got was that it is more of a loving physical act about sharing which is what I was going for in the beginning. As I said before, it could be interpreted so many different ways. I am waiting for the new feedback to come in. Hopefully, with this next performance at Academy 2013 I will get some more new feedback from a different audience which will be awesome. It will be great.

Wade: I wanted to ask also in general about your experience as a student. Going to art school is different for different people. You already mentioned that it was not a track for you as a person. You did not have a professional track to be a professional artist that started when you were a kid and you knew you were going to go out that you were always going to be an artist. How do you see the Corcoran preparing you to be an artist? Is it something that you self-identify as first? Is it now something that you do see professionally? Is it not something that you self-identify in the forefront?

Annie: I definitely see myself as an artist and I definitely see myself going down that track in the future. I will be more of a professional artist in the future. I will be in more shows. The Corcoran has really helped me out. It was an amazing experience, even though there was some rockiness during the time when there was talk about selling the building. I cannot know if I would have done everything over again but I am glad to have the experience and I am glad to be a Corcoran graduate now. I am proud to be a Corcoran graduate.

Wade: They do say that it is great to have the Corcoran Gallery as space to exhibit in as a student there. Was it a good place to exhibit in? Was it a good place, for example, for you for the *NEXT* show?

Annie: It was a wonderful place to exhibit. How many college kids can say, hey, I got a show at the museum? I love that about the Corcoran. I can tell my grandchildren, yes, your grandmother was in the Corcoran Museum of Art. She was in the newspaper, too. Look at that.

Wade: In the project notes, there was a little bit of what you talked about—and I think this was what you were alluding to when you said that it didn’t read the same way—that people were more overwhelmed with the posture of you being down below and trying to offer the bread and the whole bun in the oven thing that you mentioned—but one of the things you were trying to explore was the mechanics of making bread and the physical process, the repetitiveness of kneading and the repetitive muscular motion that people, and especially in home-based economies where women are doing that work (but men are often making bread in other settings)—but it is the mechanics of the human body and then in other circumstances that same activity is done by machines. That was an exploration that you at least were having on paper. Did any of that bear out in your thinking in doing the work? Is there any future in other pieces? Is bread or are other parts of food culture something that is media for further exploration for you in the future?

Annie: Oh yes, I really want to do more work on food culture, restaurant culture. I am trying to tie in my travels. I started to do it with my bread project. I want to push it further to make it more culturally specific. In thinking about the machine-like repetitiveness of food preparation, I am also interested in the ballet that goes on behind the scenes in a kitchen. I am trying to develop a project called *One Man Kitchen*. It will be a small space with just one

person—me or somebody else—doing every single job in a kitchen. It will basically be a mini-restaurant. Half of it will be kitchen and there will be maybe four tables on the other side. That one person will be the cook, the waiter, the bus boy, just everything. You will get to sit and watch and taste the food and watch this person run around killing themselves working so hard. I am still working that one out and I really am looking forward to being able to do that one day in a gallery space. As far as other projects go, I really want to keep going with the subject matter of food and food culture and restaurant culture just because it is very near and dear to my heart. I have been working in the food industry since I was sixteen. I worked at Trader Joe's and then I moved to Whole Foods and now I am a bistro chef at Whole Foods. That has changed my perspective about how we treat people in the kitchen and how we treat people who make our food. It has opened my eyes. I just want to be able to show other people that side of the food industry—not the side they see on The Food Network, which I love by the way. Something more real.

Wade: There are so many communities and different planes. I don't think there is exactly bad news in the diversification of the food culture as it exists now. There are more healthy and less healthy sides to it. The overall diversity of it I think is a good thing.

Annie: Oh yes. I can have my opinions on healthy food and unhealthy food. I think food is the most common language anybody can understand. Everybody knows bad food. Everybody knows good food. I think it is worth exploring. I think more artists should explore it. I don't want to call it a medium but I think one day it could be a medium. Food art.

Wade: I think it always has been in some ways. Contingent, or a tangent, or whatever you call it.

Annie: Yes.

Wade: Now that you are out of the Corcoran, are you developing ties to a Washington circle of galleries or artists? Are you keeping your options open for staying here, for keeping this your home base or for traveling around? Are you thinking about fellowships? What's in the future, immediate or longer-term?

Annie: In the immediate future I seem myself staying in the area and working closely with local galleries in Alexandria and Washington, maybe even Maryland. I would love to travel for art but I also know that I have to pay for travel. My ideal future would be for me to travel around being able to showcase and to sell my art. People are asking me what I am going to do now that I have my degree. I don't know. I do see myself continuing with art for the rest of my life. Whether I can be in it 100 percent, whether I eat, sleep and breathe art, or whether I just show in galleries a few times and work on the culinary art side of myself, I don't know.

Wade: Do you have any people you want to mention who have helped you to document the work? You already mentioned your father helped you build the bread board but are there other shout-outs for people who have helped you?

Annie: I would really like to appreciate Adrian Parsons who did the video documentation of *Proofing Ambivalence at Room Temperature*. Without J.J. McCracken, I don't know if I would be doing art right now. She was such a rock for me to lean on. She was so supportive and always there whenever I had questions and needed answers. I swear, I probably would not be doing performance art if she wasn't my teacher.

Wade: It is so good to know about people like that. I always ask because everybody has people who are just polestars for them.

Annie: She was truly a godsend but all my teachers at the Corcoran were very supportive in everything that I do. That is another reason why I really like the Corcoran! Also, I don't think I could have pulled off this performance

without my dear Mohamed Alkouh. He was there helping me set up, photographing, and was there whenever I needed help.

Wade: I'll bet he likes the bread, too.

Annie: And he likes the bread, too.

Wade: That would help if he loves bread. So what kind of preparations do you have to make? You know where you will be set up in the studio? You know where you will be set up on opening night? How long does the performance run?

Annie: Yes, ideally, I would have all day. However, I want to give people who come to the opening a chance to see the mixing and kneading process.

Wade: That reminds me of another question. If it a really hot and crowded opening, do you think the ambient room temperature and humidity will be higher and cause the bread to rise faster? Would it make that much difference?

Annie: It won't make that much difference. It's a quick rising yeast. That means that it's not a two-day-long performance. I've done the performance three different times. The *NEXT* opening was about three hours. I had a lot of bread dough afterwards. There wasn't enough time. The second one was four hours. Still not enough time, a lot of leftover dough. The third time I did it the Corcoran opened at about 10 in the morning and it closed at 5 in the evening. That was the perfect amount of time. It was very meditative almost. I was amazed at how many little kids sat down and actually, for a half an hour, just sat and watched. I have pictures of this one little girl who was doing the splits watching me make bread for half an hour. She was fantastic. That was during the opening. On the final day when I did the performance I had little four year old kids sitting down watching me do it and then I had a bunch of high schoolers come in later in the day and sit down and watch me do it. I think I learned so much from that. It was like a child watching the mother or the grandmother—or the father, even—in the kitchen being fascinated with what's going on.

Wade: And learning the culture of bread, learning the magic of bread making.

Annie: Yes. These kids probably haven't seen anybody make bread.

Wade: It's primal. It is really good to learn. It is really good to know how bread happens.



Performance detail, Annie Rose Hanson, *Proofing Ambivalence at Room Temperature*, 2013, photograph courtesy of the artist

Annie: I thought that was the most interesting part of that performance, the kids' reactions. As far as *Academy 2013* goes, the opening is from 6 to 9 PM and I think I will be performing the entire time. I have to figure out whether I am going to clean up afterwards or whether I will cut it short so that I will be out by 9 but I will figure that out. It will be interesting to do it in a different setting with a different audience. I am excited.

Wade: Well, the hotter and the more humid, the better.

Annie: Yeah.

Wade: For the bread, anyway.

Annie: If only they can turn up the humidifier.

Wade: I don't think you will have too much trouble considering it will be July.

Annie: Oh yes. I didn't even think about that.

Wade: It will be fine. It is a nice space but the weather always cooperates if you are looking for humid weather. It is air-conditioned but it is usually a pretty busy crowd. It is a very popular event. A lot of friends and family of the artists will be there. I think it will be a good physical crowd for the yeast. The yeast will appreciate it.

Annie: Usually, when I make the bread I use not hot water but lukewarm just to get it going. As long as you have that and sugar and yeast it will all come together. Bread joke. I am really excited for it. I can't wait. It will be only my third show outside of the Corcoran. That will be great. I told my dad about it and he says, "So, I hear you're an artist now."

Wade: It's more or less official.

Annie: Once you get invited to do *Academy 2013*, you made it.

Wade: Actually, it is a great thing. I am so happy about *Academy 2013*. I have been covering the shows for three or so years. It is especially gratifying to see some of the artists who have been in some of the earlier shows showing up, seeing their work and getting e-mails from galleries here, in New York and elsewhere. I am looking forward to seeing where you go next, too. It will be great to discover what you decide to do next. Anybody that Jamie invites, she has really good reasoning about who she selects. I admire her for what she has done and obviously I am a big booster and super-fan.

Annie: I am so happy for the opportunity to be a part of it. I never thought in my wildest dreams that somebody would say, hey, we want you to be a part of this. But it is happening.

Wade: But you have an energy and something to contribute so you belong there. It is just cool and it is fun, too.

Annie: It is always great when you can combine cool and fun and work and art. Everything.

Wade: Something you really want to do.

Annie: There is not much better than that. Do you want some more tea?

Wade: Yes! That would be lovely.