

Pam Hall as House: A Conversation

Hurmat Ain in conversation with Pam Hall

This conversation between Pam Hall and Hurmat Ain, which took place in December 2021, is framed within a 'house' as a metaphor and a verb, in response to Pam Hall's work. Hall's practice is a way of life and houses many lives within itself. The following conversation gives insight into Hall's practice around women's labour, everyday life, domesticity, and performance of living. It would not be possible to speak of Hall's many years of artistic production in a few hours, yet this interview is an attempt to capture a fraction of that vast practice, or prayer, as Hall often refers to it. The reader is being invited on a walk with Hall through an imagined house, in the hope that this exercise provides context for witnessing a specific stream of her works and thoughts around performing house/housing.

Pam Hall is an interdisciplinary artist and scholar whose work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally, and is represented in many corporate, private, and public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada. Her artistic practice includes installation, drawing, object making, photography, film, writing, community-engaged collaboration, and performance, and has explored the fisheries, the body, female labour, placemaking, the nature of knowledge, and notions of the 'local.' Her work is often collaborative and includes communities distant from the pristine spaces of the gallery, the studio, and the museum. She has worked with doctors and medical students on wharves, in fish plants, in medical schools, and in distant farmers' fields; settler and Indigenous fishers on both coasts of Canada; workers in the food-service



Pam Hall, *Building the Work House*. Performance space, The Rooms, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2014.
Photo by Pam Hall, pamhall.ca

and fish-processing industries; and knowledge holders in Fogo and Change Islands, Western Newfoundland, and Conne River. She has lived and worked in St. John's since 1973 and graduated with an interdisciplinary PhD from Memorial University in 2013. For details, see pamhall.ca

Foyer

As a feminist, my foray into house/home was very much an act of resistance. It was kind of like a 'fuck you' ...

Hurmat Ain: Your survey show, *HouseWork(s)*, in 2014 showcased your practice from the past ten years. One can see in this show that so much of your practice invests long periods of time and labour in single projects. Could you speak about the performative and durational quality of your work?

Pam Hall: Yes, I think you are right to see this thread of continuity and duration in my practice and indeed in our lives. Everything takes time, and you must put in the effort. For me, it comes especially from very old notions of trying to build an ongoing professional creative practice as a woman and as a mother; I was practising inside a larger context of life over which I did not have control. I didn't have the luxury of studio assistants or help. There were a few occasions where I was able to hire a nanny for big projects when I was travelling, but essentially my practice has never been isolated from daily living. I got my practice back after I had my daughter, so I have never worked without that awareness of deep and continual connection to 'everyday life.' My work has come from a practice of living in a female body, in a place, in a community, in a culture, in a specific period. Like many artists, I return and revisit the same questions or similar questions from a different point of view. You never really use up a good question. This also gives a temporality to the work because suddenly the fish I flew in 1997 are in conversation with the fish I flew three months ago on Fogo Island, thirty years later ... and they are deepening and sharpening the conversation from which they emerged. Art takes time.

Hurmat: You frequently use the image of a house in your work, which closely resembles a childlike drawing of a hut. Could you speak about the graphically annotated shape of a house, as it appears in your work?

Pam: As an artist who's been using language for many years in my work, I'm very interested in the spaces between the constructed material object and its representational forms. I'm also very interested in how, over a lifetime of practice, you begin to make your own code, and for me, it's the little line of the stick house in my earliest drawings as a child. Most kids' drawings of their first home, depending on their culture, include a stick form which is enclosed. It is so tenuous and so profoundly powerful. When you think about it as a border or a fence, it can be terrifying. If you think about it as an embrace, it can be a symbol of safety. For me, that little construction, the triangle-on-top-of-the-square house, has literally become a piece of my own sign language, and it is coded and loaded now with all the cultural, developmental, and personal history because it's been in my work for so many years. I've been aware for a very long time of my work as a kind of engagement or conversation with others. If I'm working with a clichéd sign like that little house, I am very aware of how that's read, how it's used in children's toys

and cartoon movies, and I try to be attentive to the meaning that's already packed into that sign or symbol.

Hurmat: The concept of 'house,' as a verb, is very transformative in your practice. What does 'house' mean to you as verb (a doing) and as a collaborative way of working?

Pam: While I am building these representations that are signs, symbols, marks, and video gestures, I am also doing the other house building that is neither symbolic nor representational—that is, the material part of my practice, where I am taking a heavy line into the world and making a closed container that I can lie inside of safely or that I can use to invite someone to engage it as a closed space. Often, in the material or physical housing, I am collaborating with others, building things with them that I could not build alone (a prayer house or even a village of little houses), acknowledging perhaps that we do nothing alone but always already in relation and connection with others. Then, I'm also doing it in my non-creative life or my non-art life. I'm doing it here in this space where I live, building that house, building home, making sanctuary. I am very interested in the difference between housekeeping and homemaking—in making a place that is welcoming and safe for those who live here with me.

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Pam: I did a body of work called *Marginalia* (2004–2010) that played deeply with language. It was one of the first places that 'house' began to appear consistently as a word or symbol that I was speaking with to Margaret Dragu [performance artist], my partner in that project. [*Marginalia* was a visual dialogue between Hall and Vancouver-based artist Margaret Dragu. The bicoastal artists worked separately on 'memory cloths' but in daily conversation with each other.] It was also the first large five-pole house that I made as a way to 'house' the daily archive that we built together over the four years of that project. It was a good context to explore the meaning of everyday words related to women's work, emotional as well as physical. I made a square about caregiving that said, "Caregiving, caretaking—oddly not opposites," and so I think about that tension: that was all service. The 'homemaker'—that is what my mother was called—was a label for women that I rebelled against. It was a derogatory term for many young women of my generation, a trap, an obligation, undertaken without choice. After many years of choice and the privilege of stewarding property, I see the making of home or the keeping of house now as much more profound and intentional.

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As bell hooks would say, the margins are often the best place for resistance. For me, this meant to roll my sleeves up and say I'm not making a home the way I was told—you know, this is my mother's world, or this is Martha Stewart's world, or this is the world of conventional, privileged white, middle-class, educated women (I am all those things, right?), pursuing those goals in a very predictable and institutional way. Rather, I am working to make a place where kin can gather, where community can form, and where sanctuary is more than just a Wi-Fi network!



The Work House, in Pam Hall, *HouseWork(s)*, at The Rooms, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2014.

Photo by Ned Pratt

wind—doing research—before I ever brought them into conversation with workers in a bakery or a fish plant. My tiny little first *House of Prayer* (2008), made from my dead father's linen handkerchiefs, was my first piece of research toward the gigantic community house of prayer (*Towards a Newfoundland House of Prayer*, 2013–2014).

Pam: I always start small, a wish here and a prayer there. A single apron on a clothesline turns into a few dozen. And eventually 100 aprons; they are even more effective in drawing visibility to the labour and women's work. I am drawn to the referential layers and iterative meaning in bigger quantities. So, I had hundreds of aprons, and I thought I needed to make a *Work House* (2014). I was tired, but I had these two remarkable friends, my closest friends, who also happen to be the awesome Lois Brown (one of the most important dramaturges and theatre directors in the country) and Anne Troake (the experimental film director and choreographer). They both happen to be able to sew much better than I. So, I thought: What can I do? How can I share this adventure? I got a grant, and I paid them performance fees to work with me in the gallery for 4 hours a day for 10 days. We built a 40-hour workweek, and we three women built that house in public. We had three ironing boards, three irons, three sewing machines, and all these strings around us. And we were sewing into these panels; we'd get a panel done, and we'd loop it over a rope. We eventually built a big wall of panels, and when we were done, the gallery closed for the day. I threaded the house together, which I had initially designed for *Marginalia*—a five-pole house which



Pam Hall, *Building the Work House*, live performance at The Rooms, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2014.

Photo by Pam Hall, pamhall.ca

Kitchen

We are skirting around a word here that is rarely used in the art world and even less in the academy, and this is 'humility.'

Hurmat: I had initially framed my questions about your work from a durational perspective, and I feel like what you just said about the collaboration, or the presence of other people, also relates to their time in your work. Could you share something about the 40-hour-long performance in *HouseWork(s)* that used kitchen aprons?

Pam: I love that we're coming into the kitchen because the collaborative part of my practice, especially, is about my concept of hospitality. In the *HouseWork* show, a lot of the work was selected to share a balance between my public work (my social practice with others) and my private, solitary research practice. Almost always, before I begin a public or collaborative project with others, I have done something private. I was flying aprons all over the Bonavista Peninsula by myself in the October

hangs above the floor and literally just collapses and rolls up. I had amazing help from the gallery staff, and we (four guys and the two hydraulic lifts) raised the house, so the next day, when the gallery reopened, it was there! This was a gift to me ... a gift to my friends.

Hurmat: Let's speak about the works that deal with women's labour. In *HomeWork: Doing the Math* (2014) and *Dressing Up Work at Auntie Crae's* (2007), you explored the work of women at Auntie Crae's—a 30-year-old bakery and specialty food shop in Newfoundland. In the latter, you installed almost 200 aprons in Auntie Crae's bakery and kitchen and did portraits and data mapping to mark the labour of the staff members. Here, you have taken the tediousness of domestic drudgery and made that into a position of power. How do you do that, Pam?

Pam: I think a lot of it is just genuine curiosity. When I did the *Auntie Crae's* installations with the aprons and started interviewing workers, to count their hours ... one question led to another, and eventually you ask someone, "Well, how many cookies did you think that you made since you started working here?" and somebody said, "Oh geez, I don't know, maybe half a million cookies in the thirty years that I've been here." That to me is a transformative piece of information ... a kind of 'art

math' ... that challenges so much value in the capitalist system because it's invisible. If you don't count it—it doesn't count!

I started noticing this at the cafeteria at the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University when I was artist-in-residence there (1997–2000). This woman has been spooning macaroni and cheese onto a tray for 8 hours a day, for how many days? It's not impressive until you stop to look at it, and you must look carefully; I think that's my job as an artist. I'm supposed to be a professional looker—someone who is trained and experienced as an observer. I am supposed to SEE things. I think that's where the word 'seer' comes from. I mean, you can't say thank you if you don't see the gift. To me, that making visible, rendering discernible, is a useful artistic intervention into the community, into the culture of care and stewardship. Part of the labour, the female labour work, comes from that impulse, to make it visible. It is WORTH seeing, don't you think?

Laundry

This is a place where you are in the weather all the time.

Hurmat: So much of your work deals with the politics of textiles in one way or the other, from domestic to industrial. How do you look at textiles in your practice?



Pam Hall, *wrapped/wrapt in the landscape, Women's Work Blanket #1*, Grates Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador 2021.
Photo by Pam Hall, pamhall.ca



Pam Hall, *She Makes Fish, Dressing Up Work*, Maberly Fish Flake, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006.
Photo by Pam Hall, pamhall.ca

Pam: I didn't mean to be a textile artist and really don't consider myself one since I am not 'skilled' in those techniques. Oddly, more and more over the years, I have been engaging with textiles. Part of getting here is that I worked my way out of the limited, two-dimensional frame that my art training left me in. The move away from formal art materials was part of it, and because materials and materiality mean a lot of things, I began to choose materials based on the meaning I wanted to make. When I wanted to speak about the fishery, I chose a fishnet, partially because I had access to one. The guy I fished with was going to throw it in the dump. So, I spent a whole winter in my studio making this long, red rope out of this fishing net and professional fishing line and knots without really knowing why. It was amazing when it was done—filled with the daily ritual of solitary stillness and hard physical making. My daughter called it "the big red line" for drawing on the world.

When I wanted to talk about female work, I looked for a material that had its own muscle, connotations, and stereotypes,

and so the apron became a profound material, already storied, performative, and historied. When Margaret Dragu and I were doing *Marginalia*, we didn't want to make stuff that looked like 'art,' so we used non-art materials: torn-up old bedsheets, discarded clothing, bits and pieces of our everyday lives. Eventually, we made more than 4,000 [daily squares] over the four years that we worked together. That's what got me into fabric because it was not precious. I started going to Value Village to buy old used things ... pillowcases, sheets, aprons. That's exactly where the *Dressing-Up* work came from—it came right out of *Marginalia* because I saw the female labour in the hand-embroidered aprons and realized I might invite others to see that labour too.

Hurmat: You make these beautiful, colourful, and animated works with found, reworked, and repurposed textiles. And then you install them so they can fly in the wind, sometimes on clotheslines, like the cod-shaped windsocks (*Re-Seeding the Dream East*, 2017). There are other works, like the *Memory*

Blankets (2020–ongoing), which are draped around bodies but also flying. Then, there are site-specific installations with aprons (*Dressing-Up Work: The Apron Diaries*, 2006–ongoing) and the streams of flag-like cloths (*Path to the Wishing Place*, 1988–1989). All your textile pieces are activated and alive. Like the fish from *Re-Seeding the Dream East*, they must be flying. Why is it so important for you to have them all perform?

Pam: That’s what it is, since we’re trying to make something special or discernible. Paul Klee said, “Art does not render the visible; rather, it makes visible.” I make blankets because I want to wrap them around women, and I want those women to tell work stories and share recipes and feel the comfort—wrapping all this other women’s work around their own shoulders. [The *Memory Blankets* series includes blankets made of things with histories of their own such as aprons.] If I just handed you an apron, your first instinct would be to tie it around your waist, but it doesn’t invite you into speculation, provocation, reverence, or anger. In the same way, if I fly 150 aprons in a meadow by the sea, they have a kind of magical quality. If you’re going to be an artist, you must know how spectacle works; you must know how scale works.

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Then, there is the other thing—this is a culture of wind. Every Newfoundland community you go into has a clothesline, covered with clothing drawing in the wind. Every ship that goes by has flags, fluttering in the wind. The *Prayer House* (*The 32 Day House of Prayer*, 2008) is all about being in the wind and also echoes Tibetan prayer flags. The prayers are somehow activated by the wind ... set free. I think there is something about turning the artistry over to nature in these site-specific landworks that the artist is supposed to be ‘in charge’ of. It is an admission of the myth of control; nature is something we never really master—like collaborating with wildness, weakness, and weather—something we do as humans every day, whether we admit it or not.

Living room

... because I live in a 125-year-old house, and I can see all the labour other people put into it for me. I feel this obligation that I must leave it better than I found it.

Hurmat: I have borrowed very liberally from philosopher Michel de Certeau in the format for our conversation as ‘house.’ He speaks of spatial stories and their role in informing language

and culture. In *Practices of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau builds a relation between urban spaces and the stories that are performed in those spaces. But here, I am keenly aware of the differences in approach to the formalism that he speaks of and the voice you speak through your work; they are structurally distinct. How do you see that connection?

Pam: I’m very pleased you see this in my work because not everybody does. One of the threads I see going through everything, including the housing work, is this notion of pushing back or undertaking resistance using the forms and structures of the institution against itself. I’m making radical encyclopedias that are challenging Western epistemology, and they are going up on the walls of university libraries. It took me a long time to embrace some of the things that I had rejected as a younger woman, a younger artist trying to build a career, trying to build status and credibility in the male world of modernist stuff and doing my own thing. One of the questions it raises is, can you make art outside the institutional context? Can it be art if it’s about something so ordinary?

Hurmat: Speaking to that, much of your art-making is about the ordinary and about life around you. What does it mean to be an artist from Newfoundland? How does that play into the idea of home for you?

Pam: I think it plays a huge amount. I would be making work about my place if I was still in Montreal, if I was still in Quebec, if I was still in rural Ontario, if I was living in the north of Scotland. I respond to the world around me. The fact that the world around me is Newfoundland is significant to my work. It is a very cohesive culture, though not as cohesive as the stereotypes would have you believe. This is a culture in which I was ‘other’ for a very long period, just as I was an anglophone in Montreal. I’m quite comfortable being the other, I have never really been in the majority, mostly because I was a woman sitting at the man’s table. A lot of my work has directly addressed the specificity of Newfoundland: its notions of place and enmeshment in one’s place, its notions of sustenance/subsistence, of reliance/resilience, of labour and hospitality, the tensions and tenderness between rural and urban. I’m very suspicious of the modernist notion of universality. I think what is universal is that everybody lives somewhere in particular. And this is what a lot of my work is about—in Newfoundland, it’s very easy to feel that powerful sense of the specific, the particular, the local. Zita Cobb, who founded the Fogo Island Inn, says the questions we need to ask ourselves are: “What do we have? What do we know? What do we love? What do we miss? What can we do about it?”

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Building a Village, in Pam Hall, HouseWork(s), Kamloops Art Gallery, British Columbia, 2015.
Photo by Pam Hall, pamhall.ca

Pam: A colleague of mine, Bonnie McCay, is a retired sociologist who once described my work as a love letter—a long, ongoing love letter to place. And I don't disagree with that. But I think it's also a long and ongoing research investigation of: Where am I, and how do I fit here? What do I value here, what do I love, what do I want to hold on to, what do I want to not forget?

This printed interview is a mere fraction of the conversations I had the privilege of having with Pam Hall. I have used some powerful phrases that she shared during our conversation as quotes, and these should be read as poetic text. This text is being used to help us transition between the imagined spaces of our 'literary house' and the housing works that Pam Hall refers to in her practice.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Hurmat Ain is a Pakistani-born artist and scholar. She is a PhD student in the Theatre and Performance Studies program at York University. She holds an MFA in performance art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied as a Fulbright Scholar.



Pam Hall, video projection on the Reardon House, Tilting, Fogo Island, 2021.
Photo by Pam Hall, pamhall.ca