

## Rachel Niffenegger

Born in Evanston, IL, 1985

Lives and Works in Chicago, IL and Amsterdam, NL

### Education

- 2012-Present De ateliers, Amsterdam, NL  
2012 MFA, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL  
2008 BFA, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2013 Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL  
Club Midnight, Berlin, DE  
2011 *Rachel Niffenegger and Paul Nudd*. Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL  
2010 *As you pass by and cast an eye as you are now so once was I*. Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL  
2009 *Trichotillomania*. The Post Family, Chicago, IL

### Group Exhibitions

- 2013 *Hoochie Coochie Man*. Tracy Williams, LTD, New York, NY  
*Physical and Virtual Bodies...in the name of any signification whatever*. Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, NL  
*Psychosexual: An exploration of the abstracted gesture* (curated by Scott Hunter). Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago, IL  
2012 *Limbodrome*. de ateliers, Amsterdam, NL  
*Power of Consumption*. Club Midnight, Berlin, DE  
*Ground Floor*. The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL  
*MFA Thesis Exhibition*. Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL  
*Big Youth II*. curated by John Corbett and Jim Dempsey, Bourouina Gallery, Berlin, DE  
*NADA New York*. with Western Exhibitions, 548 W 22nd St., New York, NY  
*Facial Expressionism: Immanence Envisaged*. Cerritos College Gallery, Norwalk, CA  
*Painted*. Curated by Tyson Reeder, Green Gallery East, Milwaukee, WI  
2011 *Female Artist Auction*. Dejoode and Kamutzki, Berlin, Germany  
*Ryan Travis Christian Collaborates*. Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL  
*Doomsday Film Festival Art Show*. 92Y Tribeca Art Gallery, New York, NY  
*Seeing is a Kind of Thinking*. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL  
*The New New Chicagoans*. Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chicago, IL  
*West, Wester, Westest Part 2* (curated by Ryan Travis Christian). FFDG, San Francisco, CA  
*Heads On Poles*. Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL  
2010 *Exhibition 7.06052010*. Mvseum, Chicago, IL  
*Breakout Artists*. Art Chicago, Chicago, IL  
*If You Can Hold Your Breath*. Ceri Hand Gallery, Liverpool, UK  
*Ox-Bow Centennial Exhibition*. Grand Rapids Museum of Art, Grand Rapid, MI  
*Pink Paint*. Riverside Arts Center, Riverside, IL  
2009 *Big Youth*. Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, IL  
*Artists Run Chicago*. Hyde Park Art Center, Hyde Park, IL  
*Now That's What I Call Painting*. Scott Projects, Chicago, IL  
*Luther Tiny Toother, Roots and Culture*. Project Window, Chicago, IL

2008 *Portrait*. Hallway Projects, San Francisco, CA  
*Ah, Decadence!* Sullivan Galleries, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
*Staff Infection*. OxBow School of Art Gallery, Saugatuck, MI  
*Thesis Exhibition BFA*. Gallery 2, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
*Covert Prestige*. Deckerleu and Bensley, Chicago, IL

### Grants, Fellowships & Residencies

2012 Cary Lane Graduate Stipend, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL  
Joan Mitchell Foundation Nominee

2011 Art Theory and Practice Graduate Fellowship, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL  
Dedalus Foundation MFA Fellowship Nominee

2008 Ox-Box School of Art and Artist's Residency Fellowship, Saugatuck, MI  
Graduating Fellowship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
Excellence in Leadership Award, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

2004-08 Merit Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
Academic Incentive Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

### Artists Lectures

2009 Visiting Artist, Harold Washington College, Chicago, IL

### Selected Bibliography

Stoepel, Whitney, "Bad Movies and Good Art (Interview with Rachel Niffenegger)," *Jettison Quarterly*, Fall 2011

Cristello, Stephanie, "Big Youth: Two Years After It's Close, Where Are They Now?," *Chicago Art Magazine*, September 16, 2011

Uribe, Vincent, "Rachel Niffenegger: Artist of the Week Interview," *LVL3*, September 14, 2011

Ruiz, Steve, "Rackroom: Interview with Rachel Niffenegger," *ArtSlant*, June 2011

Viera, Lauren, "Rachel Niffenegger and Paul Nudd at Western Exhibitions," *Chicago Tribune*, June 10, 2011

Garza, Evan, "Bodily/Fluid: Rachel Niffenegger and Paul Nudd at Western Exhibitions," *New American Paintings*, June 1, 2011

Klein, Paul, "Rachel Niffenegger & Paul Nudd", *Art Letter*, May 19, 2011

Garza, Evan, "Must See Painting Shows: May," *New American Paintings Blog*, May 6, 2011

Foumberg, Jason, "Review: Jim Nutt," *Modern Painters*, March 11, 2011

Ritchie, Abraham, "The Inadvertant Chicago Biennial," *ArtSlant*, February 7, 2011

Fox, Laura, "Heads on Poles," *New City*, January 17, 2011

Roulo, Robyn Farrell, "Arts=Slant Chicago Picks The Best of 2010," *ArtSlant*, December 27, 2010

Viera, Lauren, "Best of Galleries 2010," *Chicago Tribune*, December 27, 2010

Lee, Sasha M., "Rachel Niffenegger," *Beautiful Decay Book 4: Exquisite Corpse*, September 2010

Best of Chicago, "Best Emerging Artist," *Chicago Magazine*, August 1, 2010

Atkinson, Craig, "If You Can Hold Your Breath," *Interface*, July 5, 2010

Kuennen, Joel, "A Vital Apartment Gallery," *Artslant*, June 14, 2010

Viera, Lauren, "Rachel Niffenegger and John Parot at Western Exhibitions," *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 2010

Westin, Monica. "Rachel Niffenegger: as you pass by and cast an eye as you are now so once was I", *Flavorpill*, May 8, 2010

Chicago Guide, "Rachel Niffenegger Western Exhibitions," *Chicago Magazine*, May 2010

Christian, Ryan Travis, "Interview: Rachel Niffenegger," *Fecal Face*, May 2010

Donovan, Bill, "Rachel Niffenegger," *Beautiful Decay*, March 4, 2010

Best of Chicago, "Best Painter Under 25," ← *Newcity* November 12, 2009

Speckman, Ben, "Studios: Jeremy Tinder and Rachel Niffenegger," ← *Proximity Magazine*, Issue #5, Fall 2009

Roulo, Robyn Farrell, "New Kids on the Block," *Artslant*, August 2009  
Pearson, Laura, "Big Youth," *Timeout Chicago*, Issue 231 July 2009  
Gannon, Victoriaia, "Hallway Bathroom Gallery," *KQED Arts*, November 23, 2008  
Silverman, Jessica, "Studio visit with Brian Nuda Roche," *Whitehot Magazine*, November, 2008

# ARTslant New York

TRACY WILLIAMS, LTD.  
NEW YORK

## Interview with Rachel Niffenegger - Steve Ruiz

**Chicago: June, 2011** - Rachel Niffenegger made a name for herself in the late twenty aughts painting beaten up, violently rendered heads in grey and pink inks and oranges on paper. Since then, she's entered Northwestern's Masters of Fine Arts Program and has brought her figuration off the page and into space, while smoothly strengthening her work's connection to Chicago's history of painting people with body problems. For Niffenegger, those problems can be pretty severe, even severed - dead and crispy, but uniquely elegant.



**Rachel  
Niffenegger, Crackled  
Sherbet Blood  
Nose, 2010, watercolor,  
acrylic, gouache and  
spray-paint on paper,  
30 1/2" x 22 1/2", 34" x  
27" framed; Courtesy  
Western Exhibitions**

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**Steve Ruiz:** *Your [tumblr](#) is gross, but I think it makes a great companion to your practice and I have been following for a while now. The Internet in general and tumblr in particular is full of brutal creepy pictures, and you share some good ones. Is this where your interest in violent figuration started?*

**Rachel Niffenegger:** For me, using figuration and depicting the body in distress has always been the most logical way to talk about my experience, psychological state and fear. In my early work the images always came from an internal and intuitive process, and while I still use this process there is a lot more collecting and looking at the ways society represents horror and death. RRRZZZNNN is part of a more extensive visual catalog that I chose to make public as it began to have more influence on my work. It is also a way to experiment with more jarring juxtapositions than I am able to in my sculptures at the moment. In the images on the tumblr I am less interested in graphic displays of violence than I am in how the cheesy plastic body changes and is charged by the real and visceral.

**SR:** *What is your material selection process like? Some of your work uses fairly unconventional items, like false teeth and eyeballs. Do you keep a collection in the studio, or do you seek those types of items out for particular pieces?*



**Rachel Niffenegger**, *Striped Head Hair with Tied X*, 2011, watercolor, acrylic, plaster, paper, tape, wood, wig, polystyrene, spraypaint and string, 38" h x 32" w x 10" d; Courtesy Western Exhibitions

**RN:** The materials I use are rooted in painting and a regurgitation of past works combined with found objects. The sculptures typically start out with a base of crumpled paper bound with tape and then I add layers of watercolor, acrylic, and plaster with other objects embedded. I first began using the teeth and fake body parts to create an uncanny juxtaposition with the more formless bodies I am constructing. Now, most of the new work is tied to a pile that I have in the studio made up of torn up sculptures and paintings, strips of fabric, hair, latex peelings, string, wire, fake teeth, concrete and plaster dust, etc. Work comes in and out of the pile at a fairly rapid pace and the bits are incorporated with acrylic mediums to get the gritty, mottled skin effect you can see in a lot of the work.

**SR:** You made a jump from painting to painterly sculpture a few years ago. With your recent work, and especially with the introduction of the stained drapery elements in some of your latest pieces, it seems like you're looping back around to incorporate two dimensional surfaces. Do you find the distinction between painting and sculpture useful when making your work? Is it something you consider?



**Rachel Niffenegger**, *Shroud (Anemone Eye)*, 2011, Watercolor, acrylic, spray-paint, plaster and mixed media on fabric on paper, 26" x 18"; Courtesy Western Exhibitions

**RN:** I started incorporating objects in the beginning of the shift as both a formal tool and a way to solve compositional problems. Now the fact that they are objects with an emphasis on painting is much more important to the content of the work. Sculpture has physicality and gravity and painting has texture, color and wetness. For me, the combination of the two is used to work through ideas of perforation, surface, skin and what is beneath it, formlessness and the way things emerge from and go back into the ground or the plane. The cloth and shroud pieces are being used as ways to make and talk about painting as a trace of an object and for me to more closely knit the two together.

**SR:** *You currently have a show up at Western Exhibitions with Paul Nudd. I love the pairing, as you both are coming at this distressed figure from opposite angles: your works as displays of the body affected by death - burnt, decayed, and rotten - and his as displays of the body afflicted with life overgrown, infected, parasitical. How long have you known Paul's work?*

**RN:** I think the first time I saw Paul's work was at a small independent booth he had at Art Chicago in 2004 or 2005. He had all of these small insect and worm drawings covering the booth, swarming around him. I have admired the obsessiveness in which he works since then. We have been showing together in several group shows over the past six months so it is nice that our work now has the opportunity to have a more intimate conversation.

**SR:** *Have you ever seen a dead body?*

**RN:** Yes, but only shortly after death or embalmed. Though, I'm not as much interested in real, visceral death and gore as much as the psychology around it.

*ArtSlant would like to thank Rachel Niffenegger for her assistance in making this interview possible.*

(Image: Rachel Niffenegger's personal photo by Sarah Trigg)

# LVL3

## Artist of the Week: Rachel Niffenegger

[Rachel Niffenegger](#) lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. She is currently pursuing her MFA from Northwestern University. Niffenegger recently had a two-person exhibition with [Paul Nudd](#) at [Western Exhibitions](#).

***Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do.*** I received my BFA from SAIC in 2008 and am currently working on my MFA in Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL.

***What materials do you use in your work and what is your process like?*** In addition to painting materials such as paper, paint, fabric and tape, I use materials from a collected pile of sawdust, concrete, ash, hair, teeth and torn up and discarded work. Each piece has part of the pile in it, mixed in with acrylic medium as a sort of magic dust that gives them life and a connection to each other.





*What kinds of things are influencing your work right now?* Shrouds, auras, effigies, doppelgangers, ghosts, mummies, rituals, mutilation, formlessness.



***What are some recent, upcoming or current projects you are working on?*** I'm currently working on a Lithograph with [Anchor Graphics](#) in Chicago. It is a new process for me and has allowed me to really focus on the act of drawing and simplify during a time when I have been using excessive layering. I will be beginning my thesis work soon for the Spring of 2012.

***How has your work developed within the past year?*** I have been working on doing site specific installations that haven't been shown yet where I make work on a tarp or ground where it is meant to be shown. Instead of making polished objects I have been trying to show some of the process because the way each piece is created, destroyed and transformed is important to me. The sculptures are dragged and busted as they are made and it creates this mark making on the ground which further ties together my interest of where painting and sculpture intersect.

***What artists are you interested in right now?*** Huma Bhabha, Lynda Benglis, [Daniel Gordon](#), Paul Thek, Nathalie Djurberg, Agathe Snow.



***What was the last exhibition you saw that stuck out to you?*** [Dan Gunn's](#) 12x12 at the MCA.

***Favorite music?*** Anything sad and folksy, Bill Callahan, Silver Jews etc. But I do really love the new Girl Talk album for working in the studio.

***What were you like as a kid?*** I owned the entire Goosebumps collection, traced the drawings in Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark and my favorite toy was “Dr. Dreadful’s Squeemy Snack Lab” where you could make candy skin, brains and boogers.



***Any upcoming shows we should know about?*** I'm showing a collaboration in [Ryan Travis Christian's](#) show at [Western Exhibitions](#) opening October 21st. I'll have some paintings at [Domy Books](#) in Austin in October as part of Monster 6 and the Northwestern Thesis Show at the [Block Museum](#) in May 2012. Not everything in 2012 is ready to announce just yet so keep your eye peeled.

\*Portrait via Joseph Rynkiewicz.

## Hyde Park Art Center's 'Ground Floor' graduates

September 19, 2012 | By Claudine Ise, Special to the Tribune



Today, earning a master of fine arts degree is widely thought to be essential to a successful career as an artist. Chicago's many prestigious art programs, five of which ranked among US News & World Report's 2013 list of the country's 100 best graduate schools for fine arts, attract students from near and far, and with them, regularly renewed infusions of the idealistic DIY energy for which the city's art scene is known.

But there's also no disputing that the art schools here pump out far more MFAs than the city's cultural economy really needs. There are only so many adjunct teaching positions out there, and even fewer tenure-track jobs. Nor does a coveted spot on a commercial gallery's roster guarantee that an artist will make a living from their work.

So what's a new MFA grad to do?

Some high-tail it to bigger art markets in New York or Los Angeles soon after graduating. Others stay to build on professional relationships they've formed here. They all hope they'll have the time and means to keep making and exhibiting art. In an effort to provide greater opportunities for the latter, Hyde Park Art Center's "Ground Floor" exhibition highlights 11 recent MFA recipients who have, for now, chosen to remain in Chicago.

All were selected by a panel of jurors led by photographer and Columbia College professor Dawoud Bey, and including art historian Huey Copeland and artists Sze Lin Pang and Jason Salavon. Juried shows don't typically have an overarching theme tying individual artists' works together, but in this case, it would have been nice if the organizers had come up with a shared statement about why these artists in particular stand out from the rest of the post-MFA pack, and why their art matters today. They haven't, and without that, "Ground Floor" feels a bit, well, groundless.

Part of the problem is that, even with that MFA in hand, few artists come out of grad school with substantial bodies of work to their name, nor are their artistic identities fully formed. It takes a few years more for all that to gel. At least two "Ground Floor" artists are slightly ahead of their peers in this regard. Rachel Niffenegger (Northwestern University) has been exhibiting her drawings and sculptures at the commercial gallery Western Exhibitions for several years now, and Eric May (another Northwestern grad) is the founder and director of the nonprofit gallery Roots & Culture. Among other endeavors, May is known for fostering convivial cultural gatherings; for "Ground Floor," he's vending hot dogs and other classic street food three days a week at lunchtime.

Niffenegger's filmy fabric pieces usher you into the "Ground Floor" exhibition space. There's a creepy, ritualistic feel to her sculptural installation inside, which combines ash-gray agglomerations of paper and plaster — they look like mummified body parts — with crude, sticklike forms arranged in diamond and X shapes. More fabric pieces, in a bruised palette of purpley-reds and bluish-greens, hang from these sculptures and from the wall. Bits of crumbled plaster and other debris litter the floor beneath one piece. It all looks like something out of "Lord of the Flies," but more stylized — and feminine.

Niffenegger already has something going for her that many would argue is key to post-grad success: a well-developed, idiosyncratic yet instantly recognizable style, which in her case unites girlish and grotesque sensibilities in ways that are more attractive than they are repulsive. Hers is a marketable aesthetic right now, yet there's rich potential in this work to penetrate deeper and unsettle us in ways that mere shock value can't.

Of course, having a singular style isn't the only way that young artists distinguish themselves. It's increasingly common to see artists reject style in favor of research-based work whose final form varies. University of Illinois at Chicago grad Jeremy Bolen's abstract prints seem to fall into this category. He shows a group of photographs that appear to depict the night sky, but based on their titles, it seems they were actually made at Red Gate Woods forest preserve in Cook County, where radioactive debris is buried. The prints have a gritty texture, and in fact, the object labels indicate that they've been coated with contaminated soil collected from the burial sites. Now *that's* unsettling.