

MORE THAN A PRETTY FACE



LEFT: Schuleit in her studio. ABOVE: A mental-health center carpeted with flowers for Bloom.

Name: Anna Schuleit
Age: 32 Job: Painter and installation artist
Location: Brooklyn, New York Famous Words: "The last thing I want to do is make mental patients feel violated for having suffered from an uncontrollable illness."

GERMAN-BORN ARTIST Anna Schuleit went from anonymous to Einstein virtually overnight, thanks to a call from the MacArthur Foundation announcing that she'd won a 2006 "Genius" grant for \$500,000. Schuleit, one of the youngest recipients of the prize, focuses on turning unexpected places—from hospitals to small islands—into oversized "canvases" for her work. While constructing *Habeas Corpus*, she wired an abandoned mental hospital to play the music of Bach and asked former patients to tell their stories; for *Bloom*, she carpeted the Massachusetts Mental Health Center with an arrangement of 28,000 flowers. Currently a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, Schuleit uses her art to celebrate those who are often overlooked.

Q: Your artistic style is pretty unique—what do you call it?

A: There's a field called oral history, where people tell the stories of their

lives in their own words. What I'd like to be is a collector of *visual* history, where people draw what they remember of their life experiences.

Q: *Habeas Corpus* was a 28-minute musical installation at a former mental hospital. How did it work?

A: The idea was to make the building "sing," to turn an abandoned structure into an instrument by filling the hollows and voids inside the building with voices, as you would use the hollows inside a guitar or violin. I chose a recording of Bach's *Magnificat*, played through strategically located speakers, making it seem as though the music poured through windows and doors.

Q: Why the interest in mental illness?

A: There's this quote, "The degree of civilization of a nation can be measured by the way it treats its weakest citizens." I've always been drawn to telling the stories of those citizens.

Q: \$500,000 is a lot of cash! Has it changed your approach as an artist?

A: As a visual artist, there are many ways to stay afloat. You can take another job, which I have a million times, or you can try to make your work the money-earning source. If I'd signed on with a gallery, it would have been easier, but I also would never have been able to go "underwater" for long stretches of time, when I needed to work without any outside input. I was more or less penniless—making \$10,000 or \$11,000 a year, which is about poverty level in New York state.

Q: Tell us about your next project, in Boston Harbor.

A: It takes place on an island that's uninhabited, but like an old piece of leather, it's marked by layers of previous human use. The installation uses glass and reflective surfaces to tell the story of the island's former residents—about the absence of these people and what marks they made on the land that are still visible today.

To learn more about Schuleit's work, log on to anna-schuleit.com. For information on how to apply for a grant through the MacArthur Foundation, log on to www.macfound.org.