

Diving in

Alexia Mellor uses performance art to examine dreams and expectations

By Dory Hulburt

Editor's note: This marks the beginning of a new column in Tempo. "Imagination," as the title implies, is about the creative spark that lies at the heart of all creative endeavors. In this column, we will profile artists who live and work in Taos to find out what makes them tick, what inspires them and how they do what they do.

There comes a time in the process of maturation that we "put away childish things," relinquish some of the dreams we had as youngsters, and shoulder life's responsibilities so our children have space to dream.

Few respond as imaginatively to that rite of passage as did artist Alexia Mellor.

"I'm never going to become a ballerina," said Mellor, age 35, nor will she realize her dream of becoming an Olympic swimmer.

But in recognition of the transition, and perhaps in an attempt to grasp dreams slipping into the past, she dove headlong into an Olympic training regimen that incorporated not only her love of swimming, but performance art, feminism and community.

For 37 days she followed an Olympic swimmer's training schedule at the Taos Youth and Family Center and Quail Ridge Inn, tracking her progress with daily photographs and a written log.

Her last day of swimming was Tuesday (July 19) and the project will ultimately become an installation called "Carving the Road to London," inspired by her plans to



Tina Larkin

Alexia Mellor, right, notes how making friends has made the project easier.

travel to London for the 2012 summer Olympic games.

The title and form of the project are also influenced by Eleanor Antin's 1972 conceptual artwork, "Carving." Antin explored sociological pressure on women to conform to arbitrary, culturally defined standards of beauty by taking four black-and-white photos of herself daily while she underwent a strict, 36-day diet.

According to commentary on Minneapolis's Walker Art Center website, provided via a link on Mellor's blog, Antin "claimed that even though the material was her own body, she was still working in the traditional mode of Greek sculpture, and her intention was to 'make an academic sculpture.'"

For Mellor, the differences in intent between her "Carving" and Antin's, reflect the evolution of femi-

nism in the intervening 40 years. Mellor's project documents a challenging, self-empowering process, while Antin's is the play-by-play of starving a body. Yet, in 1972, Antin's act arguably seized from male sculptors the right to define her own body — even if she still adhered to their aesthetic standards.

We have come a long way, baby.

Both Antin and Mellor display their photographs in a grid, which brings up Agnes Martin, Mellor's second major influence in the "Carving" project.

Mellor came to Taos in 2003 for a two-week visit with her mother, gallery owner Jan Mellor, and ended up staying for two years and earning her artistic chops with mentors like Ray Vinella and Gary Cook. At the same time she absorbed Agnes Martin's legacy, which only became larger as Mellor went through the

fine arts master's program at the Museum School-Tufts University in Boston, where she learned of Martin's place in the canons of art history.

Martin was that rarity, a female "force to be reckoned with in the art world," who allowed nothing to stand in the way of her drive to make art, said Mellor.

Mellor saw Martin's influence at every level of the "Carving" project, from the gridding of the photos, to the tiles on the locker room walls and in the swimming pool — which was paid for by a minimalist artist, now deceased, who preferred to remain anonymous.

(Indeed, once you start thinking about Martin, and studying her work, you start to see grids everywhere, and end up convinced that

she created the grid, and that the grid is the basic stuff of the universe. Gridism, anyone?)

"I feel like her commitment to the community here is certainly part of what I'm doing," said Mellor.

The community embraced Mellor's project. When she broached the idea to the Taos Youth and Family Center, "to my surprise, they responded back immediately and were thrilled at the idea." Similarly, when she began doubling her workouts on day 24, and needed a different site, due to conflicts with the center's pool schedule, the Quail Ridge Inn pool was placed at her disposal.

And in the locker room, where she photographed herself at the end of each swim, Mellor got to know other women. "I had to warn people, because it's weird when I'm pulling out a tripod and camera in the locker room," she said.

Her fellow swimmers confided their fears of coming to the pool because of their body images or because the other swimmers would be better than them.

At some point during the process Mellor let go of her desire to recapture her youth and was reborn via her baptismal submersions, shifting her focus from competition to showing up every day, pushing herself, and acknowledging when enough was enough. "You have to be OK with that," she said.

What makes the swimming project art?

"I look at art as a means of visual communication," said Mellor. "The best way to communicate is to experience."

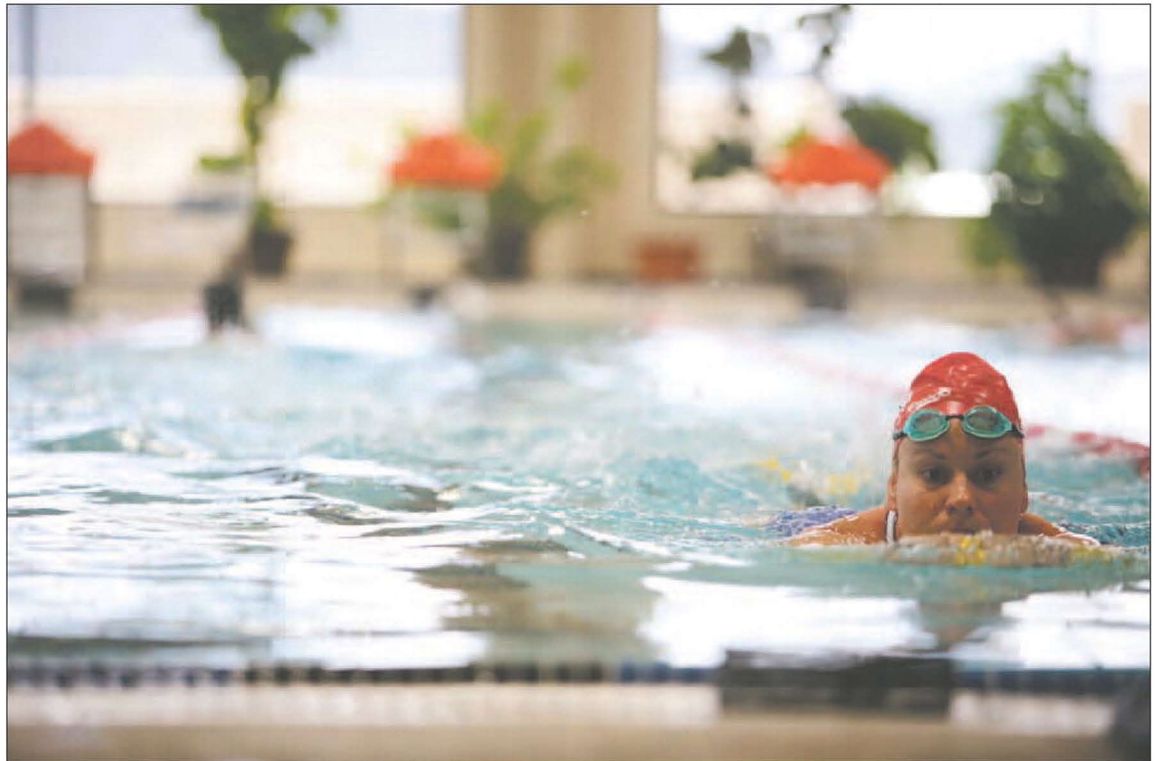
At the crux of her experiment, and much of her work, is how to engage a community that doesn't walk into an art institution.

"Carving" fits neatly into a larger theme she will explore at September's Inter Society for Electronic Arts (ISEA) conference in Istanbul, where Mellor will organize a series of events around performance and new media art titled "MIND THE GAP." The focus is on bridging gaps between scholars and artists, as well



Tina Larkin

After each session, Mellor sets up a camera on a tripod to take pictures of herself in the pool's locker room.



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Mellor takes her laps at the Taos Youth and Family Center swimming pool.

as in other areas, like economics and politics. (ISEA will be in Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Taos in 2012.)

Mellor sees "Carving" as bridging

gaps in time, feminism, visions of the female body, art and sports. She is in talks about exhibiting "Carving the Road to London" during Taos's

2012 Year of Remarkable Women.

To see Mellor's photographs and log of her experience, visit www.alexiamellor.com.