

HYPERALLERGIC

Sculpture Today: A Discussion with Joy Curtis & Rachel Beach



by Hrag Vartanian
March 18, 2011

On Wednesday, I wrote about two painting shows (Kristine Moran & Gianna Commito) that I felt shared an aesthetic connection. Today, I wanted to draw your attention to two sculpture shows on Ludlow Street by two artists who I've been following for years, Joy Curtis and Rachel Beach. Both artists work in three dimensions and their work appeals to me for their intelligence and sophistication.

Empty is Run About Freely by Curtis at Klaus von Nichtssagend gallery is comprised of a series of architectural "ruins" that she fashioned from the walls of an old Manhattan building. They are ghost-like and shifty but they have the elegance of antiques and the natural beauty of driftwood.

Beach's *Gather-er* exhibition across the street at Blackston Gallery is more monumental. She has stepped away from her usual interest in surface and perspective to tackle more resolute forms that are determined to confront the viewer head on.

These two sculpture shows made me consider what it must be like to be a sculptor today. I decided to interview both artists together via email in order to understand their work through their words. The following conversation took place this week. They have been edited for clarity.

Hrag Vartanian: *Both of you have been making sculptures for years. Do each of you consider yourselves sculptors or do you prefer to be known simply as artists or perhaps something else?*

Joy Curtis: I came to understand art as a child through image-making, and when I went to school, I studied painting. Pretty quickly my paintings became more overtly object-like, until I became deeply interested in making these sort of gross, body-related objects, props and special suits for very unstructured performance

In grad school, I continued with these ideas, but I became more of the actor in a non-public performances (in my studio) that would simply result in evidence of an event, and the evidence was very physical, abandoned-looking, object-oriented works. I am not very interested in specific categories of art making, and I consider myself an artist.

Rachel Beach: "Sculptor" is a term I don't really identify with, though it's obviously appropriate. When I think about making things I am thinking about how an object in a room is different then an image of an object in a room; how encountering those two types of things trigger different ways of thinking; about what happens when you combine those ways (you can see how tied to painting I still am).

When I was making paintings I got very interested in the disjunct between the image and the chunk of wood and canvas it was sitting on. I began thinking about artworks that seem to be self-aware, that take respon-



A view of Joy Curtis's "Empty is Run About Freely" show at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery.

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The entrance to “Empty is Run About Freely” at Klaus von Nichtssagend

sibility for themselves. Like Magritte’s image of a pipe, or Frank Stella’s early objects that were shaped by what was being painted on them and vice versa, or Mel Bochner’s canvases telling you how big they are. This is how I started thinking about sculpture.

HV: *What do you think happened to the term “sculptor”? I feel like the only time I hear it used nowadays is in art history books. I never seem to come across many people who identify with the label anymore.*

JC: Well, just Google images of associated with the word “sculptor” and you get an impression of a subtractive process, such as stone carving, or monumental objects existing in the public realm, that often don’t seem to be imbued with an awareness of anything or any context beyond themselves. While I rarely make site-specific objects, there are vectors of relationships that I believe need to be understood such as: other objects sharing the space with an artwork, qualities of light, the relationship between the work and the human body, memory impressions, and also the amount of time it takes the viewer to apprehend all of these things.

RB: There is something about saying “I make sculpture” that seems very open, but something about saying I am a “sculptor” that seems more closed. I think part of contemporary art-making/sculpture now — is a desire to be open, flexible and combinatory, rather than singular or authoritative. The term “sculptor” seems definitive and limiting.

Conversely, it doesn’t seem strange to label oneself a painter. Perhaps because engaging with painting means actually embracing and utilizing a specific set of tools, whereas “sculpture” (over the years) has expanded to

include a much wider array of materials and formats including video, installation, performance, even elements of photo and painting. Has “sculpture” perhaps become a catch-all? I’m thinking that this came from the need for schools to make departments; as ways of making art began to change there was nowhere else to put such new methods. In this way, the word “sculpture” grew to be associated with this myriad of ways, whereas “sculptor” got stuck in time.

I think it’s interesting too that “sculptor” seems more tied to the action of “sculpting”—the etymology of which comes from “to carve, engrave” (ie. not where sculpture is at these days), whereas “sculpture” is a ‘what’, and therefore is more tied to material and object. (Interesting too to think that “painting” and “painter” both seem tied to material.)

HV: *Something I found really interesting about both your shows is the role of architecture in your sculptures. Joy, you actually used architectural details as molds for your work and then construct these objects from the fragments, while Rachel, I didn’t fully appreciate your architectural references until I started photographing your work and realized that the forms and their angles felt related to the rooms and doorways nearby, as if they were echoing the space of architecture without being obvious of the intention.*

How do each of you view the relationship of architecture and sculpture? I’m asking this because I’ve been thinking a lot about many contemporary architects (Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind..) who seem pre-occupied with sculpting dramatic structures that visually stimulate the viewer, as if they were trying to be more sculptor than architect. What are your thoughts?

JC: The possibilities for making sculptural architecture can probably be attributed to technology, both in terms of newer materials possessing amazing physical properties, and also 3-D rendering. I view the architectural phenomenon as part of our contemporary moment. Just like any cultural trend, society learns something from it, and then readjusts its interests and priorities. The architectural renderings and models, which are

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just as much a part of our visual consciousness as the actual buildings, are often more over the top. I appreciate the imagination of many of the starchitects, but often, especially after a few years have passed, these buildings begin to look dated at best, and resemble failed utopias at worst, which has always been the case with architecture, starchitecture or not.

As far as my own work is concerned, my references come from much more modest architecture, vernacular architecture, which is where I think most of our day to day experience takes place. I don't think architecture and sculpture necessarily have to be related, just like I don't think the bowl I am eating out of bares any relationship to the room around it. In my work, I have chosen to make this a concern because I want to conflate and recreate the rooms, perimeters, and spaces of my experience, as if I had applied Cubism to my memory.

RB: I think mostly about the architecture around me. I look broadly at the city skyline, shapes and silhouettes around me and think about styles and histories co-existing; also specifics like the negative shape created by the edge of my neighbor's shed, or the seam where my studio wall meets the floor.

I'm very interested in planar elements — walls, ceilings, floors. I get excited about irregular shapes that happen when walls crash into other architectural necessities — dormers, soffits, sloped roofs. Also the surface of structures, thinking about how something is built vs. how it appears; something very factual vs. something invented or applied.

I'm also interested in the edge of things — where one thing transitions into another thing. And especially,



Left: "Mirage I" (2010) and, right, "Mirage II" (2010) are made of paper, hydrocal and Fiberglas. (+enlarge)



Curtis's "Displaced, Distributed, Forced, Displayed" (2011) is the only dark sculpture in the gallery.

when something transitions into nothing. I'm very interested when an object acts on the air around it, makes the space next to it seem strange and interesting — invisible space being made into something that has existence and import, that seems to have form.

I also love the idea of haptic sense — a lesser known sense dealing with what your body feel like when it's near to things, but not necessarily touching them. It's a body relational sense and also a predictive sense based on what you know about what you've touched or experienced before. It's really interesting and relates very much to architecture — architects need to think about what it feels like to walk down a certain width of hall, what it feels like to transition into a wide-open space or turn an angular corner and encounter a vista or wall.

When I make sculptures I think very much about what it feels like to stand next to them and move past or around them. I'm relying on your haptic sense of space and negative space, your perceptual predictions about moving through something you are looking at.

As for starchitect buildings, they seem to operate as images of buildings; look at this building. They often seem more about the overall, less about a spatial encounter with a human. Generally, good buildings do both. It will be great to see them age — then we will know better how they succeed and fail; which ones become dated and grad-school-thesis-project-looking and which ones get more interesting.

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HV: *Joy, that's very interesting that you mention memory. This latest series has a dream-like feel but also a sense of distortion. I kept walking around your work because they seem to change so much from each angle. In the case of "St. Virga" (2011), I actually felt a little disoriented looking at it. It seems to visually shift and play with notions of perspective and space. How do you experience the piece?*

JC: One of the goals of my work in the past was to make objects that are memorable, and by this I mean employing ideas of formalism, both in terms of physical shape outline, psychic resonance, and relationship to forms in the world of which almost every modern person has some knowledge, such as exposed plumbing, kitchen countertops, window displays, poorly-planned suburban architecture. Ideally, I would like someone to walk away from my work, and have a dream about it at night.

With these pieces based on molding, I personally find them difficult to apprehend and remember. For example, I have been working on a piece very similar to "St. Virga," and I will look at an image of St Virga on my computer, then walk into my studio, and have to go back and look at the photo again, because I can't remember a certain configuration of two of the parts. I do it over and over again, thinking that I understand, and then when I touch the parts, that image in my mind goes away.

I have also tried to draw St. Virga from memory, and have tried to rotate it in my mind, and again place it on the page, and I find it totally impossible to move around it in my mind. For quite a long time, I was working with planar elements; it is not hard at to remember planar elements, and to rotate them in the mind's eye, so this is an interesting change for me.

HV: *I had the same experience with the work, Joy. It was as if my mind couldn't grasp it fully so I found myself walking around it a lot. You chose to display it off the ground, that seems deliberately non-architectural, and it also gives it a mirage-like quality, like it may dissolve or disappear. Why?*

JC: I originally decided to make a hanging piece, "Bust of the Basement" (2010), as a way to use upper space. I have focused on the floor a lot in the past, and it felt fresh to me to think about suspension. For "Bust of the Basement," the support is about the size of a drop ceiling panel, and that was a very conscious decision. I also wanted to create an abbreviated cave-like atmosphere in that piece.

Suspending "St. Virga" was a means to use gravity in a couple different ways; the top was made on a horizontal surface, and the bottom half was pieced together while it was suspended, so its center of gravity adjusted itself periodically. Also, virga is atmospheric rain that never reaches the ground, and often happens in the desert.

I enjoy that these pieces are quite heavy but sway a little bit.

HV: *And Rachel, your works are very different in that they feel very grounded in the earth, like they are weighed down. They have a monumentality about them that I don't think I've seen in your work before.*

Where your previous work feels flirty and playful, this series is more resolute in its determination to confront the viewer straight on. It seems to say, "This is what I am. Take it or leave it." They feel more ambitious. Were you conscious of that?

RB: You're very accurately describing a feeling I have about the work. With this work I think about the ac-



"Bust of the Basement" (2010) hangs in the background framed by "Displaced..." and "St. Virga"

tion of stamping your feet firmly to the ground, locking your muscles, setting your intention and bracing against something (such as time — past, present and future). There is a determination to that, and an inevitability.

Monuments come from a very human desire to create definitive markers — assertions of being, a stamping of our mortal foot. I do want the objects to hold an archeological residue of this idea.

When I first started working on these I did a lot of thinking about what had value and meaning, how things had value and meaning and why we needed these things. I looked at a lot of structures that had been left behind by extinct civilizations (Aztec architecture, the henges throughout Europe, even abandoned mine shafts); mysterious structures that seem so specific but are, in many ways, unknowable, even vaguely magical.

I wanted the works to project a very specific and direct logic, without necessarily revealing the nature of that logic. I wanted them to be tough and determined but ultimately mysterious.

On a more basic level, I was thinking very literally about structure and weight, about the actual, physical thingness of things.

HV: I'm going to turn the tables on both of you a bit and ask if each of you see a connection between your current shows. If so, what do you think it is? I'm asking because I often notice artists pick up on aspects of each others work that those of us who aren't visual artists often miss or disregard.

RB: The first of Joy's works to catch my attention were the simple geometric propositions — the plaster pod wrapped with folded paper and the leaning slabs. These pieces have a solid factual existence while also appearing to betray the nature of the material. This feels similar to my wood constructions, which are both solid and weighty but also structurally improbable, seemingly supported by the space around them. Both of us are invested in the reality of our materials, but also in applying a fiction or unlikeliness.

The larger sculptures — gothic structures composed with broken ornamental molds — suggest a crumbling decline. When contrasted to my sharp geometries — which we've already described as having a monumental, sturdy presence — connections are less obvious. However, both works get at ideas of time and life-cycle, though approached from opposite ends of the spectrum: decay vs. permanence.

I've also spent a lot of time thinking about ornament, particularly its use as a transitional element at the seams of things — the edge between a wall and a ceiling, the line of a doorway demarking inside from outside. To me, my work is obsessed with edges, sides and seams, so that is a big connection as well, albeit possibly more personal.

There are some strong connections in our use of negative and positive space, where both of us have used actual cut-out or empty space to provide a window through the sculptures onto other sculptures or the space beyond.

Both installations, while made up of singular sculptures, really try to use the room, pushing and pulling the viewer around.

JC: The main connection I see between my work and Rachel's is the coexistence of the real, palpable, weighty material with the artifice of surface. This is a connection between us that I recognized even prior to our current shows.

I think we are both interested in perspectival tomfoolery, and I mean this in a playful way. These shared interests indicate to me a questioning of the difference between the real and the ideal, between reality and the hypothetical, image and actual. It is the difference between what the mind's eye desires, and how bringing the object of desire into physicality and into time inevitable challenges this perfect image.

HV: Do either of you see obstacles for creating sculpture today? I know painters often feel left out of Biennials and other major surveys, and considering how much painting is made compared to other mediums (or dis-

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played at art fairs) they really are always underrepresented, but do artists who make sculptures have similar perceptions?

RB: Size and weight is a huge obstacle. Sculpture requires additional tools, additional space, additional hands, additional money — think forklifts, shipping, installation logistics, storage.

I think sculpture is often left out of smaller group shows or fairs for sheer logistical/financial reasons. Space in museum shows or Biennials is great for large sculptural projects, but can be a rare opportunity.

From an art collector perspective sculpture is a harder buy, especially in New York where space is at a premium.

Many sculptural projects become impossible unless an artist is able to find outside funding and support.

JC: The main obstacle to making sculpture in my experience, is the limitation and preciousness of space and real estate here in New York. I have a relatively large live/work space, but I have to be very careful with some of the materials I use in light of the fact that I live in my studio. I think most artists living in urban areas can relate to these concerns, but especially those who make sculpture.

Storage also becomes a big issue, and can become a bit of a mind weight even during the production of a piece. I also think that sculpture is a more difficult sell than painting, video, photography, because potential collectors often have their own space and storage issues. So yes, as Rachel mentioned, seeking outside funding becomes very important. As far as the viewer's receptivity to the form, I think people are always interested in looking at objects.

Joy Curtis's *Empty is Run About Freely* at Klaus von Nichtssagend (54 Ludlow Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) continues until April 10, 2011.