

REGEN PROJECTS

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The pilgrimage to the Chelsea galleries is often a disappointing one. The galleries are largely homogenous in feel, and much of the current art on view there seems to be in a contentious struggle with the overwhelming architecture of their commercial spaces. It surprises me then that so little has been said about the impact of Chelsea on contemporary art production (scale, scale, scale). To date, Louise Lawler's first exhibition at the Chelsea incarnation of Metro Pictures, in which she showed sumptuous large scale photographs of the renovation of an old industrial site into a pristine gallery space, was the best attempt to try and render this new gallery situation in a critical, as opposed to self-evident, fashion. So too the move out of SoHo (a "mixed use" neighborhood) means that the folks one encounters on the labyrinthine path to cover the galleries are also remarkably similar: artists, art students, collectors, critics, gallerists, curators, German tourists. There is no longer any lip service paid to a serendipitous viewer, a mere passerby. One might enjoy the clarity of such an activity, an imperative to go and look at art and not become distracted by shoe shops, or to sneak an errand at the post office. Or one might feel, instead, a bit like a tourist—Chelsea as "destination."

Within this context, it was especially interesting to arrive at Rachel Harrison's most recent show and immediately be confronted with an installation of propped pieces of cardboard that both obscured the viewer's sightlines and created a maze-like space that was slightly awkward to navigate physically. The movement through the pieces of cardboard revealed small viewing inlets of a series of highly repetitive photographs, punctuated by a handful of sculptures. The photographs were tightly cropped images of the same window of a suburban home, deeply

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Rachel Harrison, *Untitled, Marilyn in Stor-All box*, 24 x 24 1/2 x 14 1/2", 2001. (Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery.)

reminiscent of Dan Graham's *Homes for America*. In almost every photograph a human hand, or hands, was pressed onto the windowpane, fingers splayed, with the emphatic gesture of "I am," or, "I was here." The home, located in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, belongs to Romana Collado, who claims to have sighted the Virgin in this window. The photographs depict the hundreds of people who flocked to the location as a pilgrimage site.

The cardboard is baffling, literally, as it deflects and impedes movement. But it is baffling in another sense as well in that it is confusing. What is it there for? It might seem gimmicky, a sleight of hand or a device designed to turn photographs and sculptures into "installation." But I became interested in the literal *and* metaphorical senses in which the word "baffle" functioned in this work. My dictionary offered "hoodwink" as a synonym for "baffle," and, in the endless game of dictionary logic, the verbs "to deceive" and "to trick" were offered as clarifiers for "hoodwink." In a twisted turn of art historical logic, I was reminded of Richard

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Serra's list of verbs—to roll, to pour, to throw, etc.—all of which registered a new immediacy and physicality to the act of making sculpture in 1964. More importantly, Serra's list crystallized the importance and co-equivalence of the artistic process to its final product.

Yet Harrison's sculptures not only conjure the legacy of the 1960s; the more surprising referent is the commodity fetishism/commodity critique sculptures of the 1980s. Mass-produced commodity goods, some with an edge of kitsch, were set atop freestanding plinths or simple shelves. A ceramic blue Confucius-like figure gazed at an equally blue stone twice his size, each perched atop a shiny back Formica column (shades of Donald Judd). The "base" retained its translucent peel-away protective covering stamped "Formica," as if straight from the factory or the Home Depot. A pair of ceramic Dalmatians—mother and pup—confront a white cardboard envelope, miraculously pinched and propped to resemble Jeff Koons' monumental puppy made of flowers. This ensemble was placed upon a mirrored rectangular form that evoked the work of both Robert Morris and Robert Smithson. Yet unlike the pristine surfaces of Morris' cubes, here the edges of the object were marred by small pieces of masking tape, like Band-Aids on scraped knees.

To see such bald morphological and conceptual references to artists such as Haim Staibach, Jeff Koons, and Ashley Bickerton felt particularly pointed. Harrison's installation suggests that perhaps one of the reasons for the current resurgence of interest in 60s practices is that they might offer a way to slip out from under the burdens of "critical work" of the 1980s. The elusive quality of much 60s work—what might be called in Serra, Hesse, or Morris' work a kind of lyrical or poetic stance against Greenbergian formalism—is desirable in the current moment perhaps because of their seeming opacity to theoretical or critical language. There is a real appeal to the potential fluidity of meaning offered when process and experience become the privileged terms over and above product. However, one faction of 80s art implied that process over product wasn't enough of a critique. Or, to be more precise, 80s commodity critique work said that a more pointed exposure of the commodity form was needed, for no matter what the emphasis on process, there was always a product, a non-site, to be bought and sold on the market.

The critique of fetishism—commodity fetishism in general and the fetishism of the art object in particular—seems to be the terrain in which Harrison wants to place her work. Her's is a splatter attack, as strategies of the 60s and the 80s are both deployed and come under the gun. Her use of commodity objects utilizes the readymade's tactic of elaborating upon, or collapsing, the tension between the commodity good and the art object. Likewise, her use of kitsch suggests that it is the class manifestations of taste and preference that determine the arbitrary distinctions between these two forms. Many of Harrison's sculptures also carry within them the undertow of another strain of 80s work: the critique of representation

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and identity-based art. The sculptures abound with stereotypical imagery—the Chinese scholar in flowing robes, the voluptuous Latina on the La Morena chili peppers can, the handicapped Barbie doll—each speaking to a generic, canned, marketed, and commodified version of identity. Likewise, each provokes the discomfort of the ironically used stereotype—the insider's laughter. If these knowing jabs at 80s conventions establish a range of fetish-critique (commodity, kitsch, identity as fetish) then Harrison's use of the minimalist cube as a sculptural base points toward yet another form of fetishism. Minimalism may have debunked certain fetishized notions of the artist's hand, but it in turn fetishized the slick surfaces of industrially produced materials and machine fabricated art work (hence the remaining peel-off protective coating on the Formica cubes).

Harrison's productively crossed wires of 1960s and 1980s art demonstrate that the shift to process necessitates an examination of different types of verbs. If for Serra the list of verbs were tied together in their concern with physical activities bound to the sphere of production, then the verbs associated with 1980s work were bound up with consumption: to shop, to choose, to delegate (to one's assistants), to fabricate, or rather, to send out to one's fabricators. But lest such a list seem too flippant or cynical, there are other verbs as well: to question, to challenge, to critique. And what of the verbs in Harrison's work: to baffle, to trick, to believe, to deceive, to have faith? And this list is held together by a curious relation to desire. What do we want? And in what form do we want it? For the most potent action denoted in Harrison's latest body of work is to make a pilgrimage.

Which returns us to the march to Chelsea. The art boom of the 1980s produced a contradictory set of trends: the reemergence of painting and a highly touted market for art as a luxury good and an investment, as well as a body of critical art and critical dialogues around the politics of representation. Chelsea marks the return of a boom art market, more affluent than even the halcyon days of the 80s. However, now there is almost no questioning of the luxury status of art, let alone a full imagining of what role art might play in (the formation of) a critical culture. To this end, the uniformity of Chelsea's spaces, its participation in the art-as-global tourism market, and the homogeneity of its audience may have significantly contributed to the real dearth of critical work to be found in its galleries. Harrison's pilgrimage photographs image a kind of intense longing for something to believe in, however apparitional, and they are arranged in dialogue with sculptures that everywhere show us the fissures in the art we believe in. What binds and separates the two bodies of work is the cardboard which baffles our ability to see the works, all the while creating intimate spaces for us to be near them.

In the history of Western civilization, desire has long been bound up with sight. Perhaps this is why the visual arts have always been such a fertile ground for utopian and critical, as well as libidinous, thinking. The status of sight—the verb to see—is another major component of Harrison's installation. In each of the sculptures we are presented with a figure gazing at an object, usually one that reads as having some form of aesthetic value. And what the camera sees in the photographs is a deeply embodied form of seeing. There we see repeated, again and again, the pilgrim's desire to see that which is not normally seen, and the use of touch as an extra measure of sensory possibility and verification. The installation gets at a poignant fundamental: we still very much want to believe in what we see and see somewhere represented that which we believe in. It is perhaps for this reason that the unhappy pilgrimage to Chelsea continues.