



GRAVITAS

TARA DONOVAN, DEBORAH HEDE, REBECCA HOLLAND AND SUSAN YORK

Curated by Jan Riley
September 7 – November 9, 2008

Opening reception: Sunday, September 7, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

In her essay for Rebecca Holland's first New York exhibition at Moti Hasson Gallery in 2005, Anne Ellegood wrote that Holland's work is "... about becoming, not existing. It is about process, not object. It is about noticing the extraordinary in the familiar... .To experience one of Holland's pieces is to be cognizant of the act of seeing."

All of the work in this exhibition is about noticing the extraordinary in the familiar and being cognizant of the act of seeing. **Tara Donovan, Deborah Hede, Rebecca Holland** and **Susan York** are all post-minimalists whose works are created from multiple parts or repeated gestures. The objects they produce, using familiar materials in startling ways, are subtle, and richly reward close viewing.

One of the unexpected gifts within the invention of the minimalist object was the ability to control time and to create simple narratives by asking the viewer to navigate through the piece, or around an array of pieces. The time spent in physically exploring the piece was intended to change the viewer. Early minimalist objects were made by industry to the artist's specifications. The artist's "hand" was neither required nor desired. This process created objects that, although

beautiful, were often severe and cold. And time spent in their presence could be bleak.

Later post-minimalist objects, often created by women, were made of softer materials — fabric, rubber, wood. These objects were more subjective than objective and often referred to the body. Walking through a field of unique objects of this type created not only a narrative of time passing, but also one of time spent in discovery.

Younger generations took the repetition used to create minimalist sculpture and created site-specific pieces that altered space — often through the application of hundreds or thousands of identical things to the surfaces of a designated space. Ann Hamilton's work with pennies and honey, rose petals, fabric, and graphite was seminal and opened the way for artists to use the tools of multiplication and labor, not only to transform a particular place, but also to create unique objects.

Part of the impetus for *Gravitas* was the exhibition *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties*, curated by Lynn Zelevansky for The Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1994. In her catalogue essay, Zelevansky wrote, "If the



Deborah Hede *Hidden Interval #1*, 2008



Deborah Hede *Hidden Interval #2*, 2008



Rebecca Holland *Green Planks II*, 2008

Minimalism of the first half of the 1960s was largely a male preserve, Post Minimalism, which coalesced toward the end of the decade, at approximately the same time as the contemporary 'Women's Movement,' was in part defined by women. ... Post-Minimalism, which often involved an emphasis on the artist's touch, sometimes evoked the primal, and could be emphatically hand-made, extended the boundaries of what was acceptable to the art world. ... The pointed utilization of previously disdained materials and styles generally associated with femininity — for example, the creation of work that emphasized the decorative, or was deliberately craft-oriented — changed the face of contemporary art, and greatly expanded the boundaries of what is acceptable."

The artists within *Gravitas*, whose works are made of graphite, sugar, paper, lipstick and charcoal, have taken full advantage of this expanded vocabulary and have enlarged it still further by returning to the original minimalist vocabulary of geometric

shapes and grids. The difference these artists bring to these now familiar forms is the addition of the hand labor required to make them.

Donovan, Hede, Holland and York deliberately use their work practices and their deceptively simple forms to achieve transcendence, both for themselves, during the building process, and for the viewers of their finished works. Donovan's sinuous curls of paper plates, billowing clouds of Styrofoam cups, and shimmering piles of plastic drinking straws both transform space and transcend their mundane materiality. Hede's laden drawings grow outward, one tiny sift of dust on top of another, until they are so dense that they pulse softly and seem to shift like miniature mounds of coal — literal landscapes resting precariously on

their paper supports. Holland's cast-sugar planks are translucent, but so intensely colored that they create intervals of contrasting color between them so that they flicker. The wall behind them and the air in front of them become indistinguishable from the planks themselves, as they move in and out of focus. York's geometric graphite forms refuse to stay still. The soft sheen of their surfaces makes them appear to be liquid and, like mercury, they slip from one's grasp, their apparently straightforward geometry shape-shifting into fluid curves and planes.



Rebecca Holland *Crush*, 2008

One can see also, in the laborious building practices of these artists, the ultimate transcendence of mundane, feminine, domestic labor. How many times is the same plate washed, the same floor scrubbed, or the same clothing cleaned? The full sum of that domestic effort exists as something that is truly negative, only visible when it is *not* spent. The works within *Gravitas* are created using the same repetitious movements: rubbing, scraping, smoothing, crushing, gluing, over and over and over again. But here the effort is visible, cumulative, and vested in a concrete object, which remains after that effort has been expended.

Tara Donovan is known for her commitment to process, unusual material choices, and the ability to transform familiar objects or substances into challenging new forms. Using large quantities of a single ordinary object — such as paper plates, pencils, straight pins, Scotch tape, Styrofoam cups, or fishing line — she literally grows her sculpture through accumulation, creating highly tactile works with a strong element of surprise. The true composition of her works becomes apparent only upon close inspection. In a 2006 interview with Oriane Stender for *Artnet*, Donovan stated, “My investigations with materials address a specific trait that is unique to each material. I was particularly drawn to the scalloped edge on the paper plates.... In a sense, I develop a dialogue with each material that dictates the forms that develop. With every new material comes a specific repetitive action that builds the work.” Speaking about the structure of her pieces — which are suggestive of landscapes, clouds, cellular structures, and even mold or fungus — for her exhibition at the UCLA Hammer Museum in 2004, she said, “It’s not like I’m trying to simulate nature. It’s more of a mimicking of the way of nature, the way things actually grow.”

Deborah Hede’s drawings are composed of many layers of charcoal. Starting with the inherent grid laid within the handmade paper she uses, Hede draws a 1-inch square grid over that in pencil. On top of that pale guiding grid, Hede applies as many as 15-20 layers of charcoal, saturating the paper and creating a residue of charcoal dust. She then pushes the dust into patterns that sometimes follow the grid and sometimes work against it. Each drawing is fixed in stages and the resultant pieces are heavy, delicate and fragile. Over time, Hede has introduced color into her drawings, as well as imagery, which includes fragmentary walls, vegetation and arches. She has described



Susan York *Tilted Column*, 2008

her drawings as “repetitively made by hand in a regular manner, like a heartbeat, or breathing. It is a daily activity and encounter. The paper accepts the hand’s movement, laying down the charcoal, and brings to the surface a complete moment in time.” The element of time is important to Hede because she is concerned with memory, the mystery of what we store as well as the ephemeral nature of its retrieval. With her building process of layering and erasing, Hede is creating her own palimpsests, which reveal fragments of her past mark-makings still residing under and beside the most recent strokes. Hede’s works remind her of a quote about Robert Morris’ drawings which she paraphrased for me: “a mirror surface for touch itself — the drawing touching back the artist’s hand.”

In Rebecca Holland’s choice of materials, her unique ways of using them and concern with architec-

tural space, she is similar in approach to Donovan. Holland's temporary site-responsive pieces have included 35,000 yards of thread floated into elliptical piles on a floor, and rooms filled with milkweed and dental floss. For the past several years, Holland has been experimenting with sugar. In 2003, she covered a basement floor at Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory with over 4,000 pounds of melted and poured sugar. In her studio in Santa Fe, Holland melts and dyes beet sugar in large vats. She pours it and allows it to harden in rectangular molds to create vibrant, translucent planks that stand against the wall. Or, she smashes the cooled sugar to pieces, making a heavy sparkling dust she uses to highlight architectural features, or cracks in the gallery floor. Finally, she pours the molten sugar over tiny bits of trash, such as discarded pop-tops and cigarette butts, to create miniature sculptures she calls *Debris*. In her most recent pieces, Holland has turned from sugar to lipstick, covering squares and rectangles of beech wood with layers of lipstick, colored India ink and varnish. The lipstick runs intermittently under the ink and varnish and the resultant pieces look like deep red landscapes — rainsqualls, falling across the grain of the wood.

In describing the process by which she creates her graphite pieces, Susan York has stated, "Repetition and labor are my benchmarks. I am transfixed by the constant circling of my hand across the graphite and the gradual silvering of the surface as my hand rubs across it again and again, hour after hour." One of York's influences is the work of the Constructivist, Kasimir Malevich. She once stated, "I looked at a reproduction



Susan York *Tilted Column*, 2008

of *Suprematist Painting: 8 Red Rectangles* for about six weeks before I saw that one line was tilted. I had felt that tension but had not seen it. This is very interesting to me. How do you create tension that is viscerally felt but not necessarily seen?" In York's graphite sculptures, one edge, or plane, is often slightly turned. And in her graphite drawings, she creates rectangles and squares that are very subtly shifted from true. This subtle shifting activates all her pieces and gives them a vibrancy and depth belied by their simple shapes. Her most recent sculptures have grown in scale and play with gravity. Columns of solid graphite descend from the ceiling and hover just above the floor, or float against the walls with nothing but light beneath them.

The title for this exhibition, *Gravitas*, came to me after viewing a small sculpture by York. It seemed to have a specific gravity of its own, and substance beyond its small size. It was only 10 x 8 inches, but it held a wall easily. Puzzling over this quality, the word *gravitas* came to me. The sculpture was like a small, dark Madonna, an icon. And, as I studied the other works in the exhibition, I realized that all of them had the same quality of calm, quiet surety. From the multiplication of gestures and the layered effects of physical effort, each artist within *Gravitas* has created a warm and inviting form of minimalism that uses deceptively austere shapes to offer the viewer the delight of recognition and invention. □

— Jan Riley
New York, NY
September 2008

All statements by the artists are from conversations with the author, unless otherwise stated.

BIOGRAPHY

Jan Riley is a New York-based independent curator and arts writer. She has held curatorial positions at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and the Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, and writes frequently for *Sculpture Magazine*. She is currently the Registrar for Knoedler & Company.

C H E C K L I S T

TARA DONOVAN

UNTITLED (Paper Plates), 2006
Paper plates and glue
32 x 46 x 42 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
PaceWildenstein Gallery

DEBORAH HEDE

HIDDEN INTERVAL #1, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
24 1/2 x 19 3/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

HIDDEN INTERVAL #2, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
24 1/2 x 19 3/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

HIDDEN INTERVAL #3, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
25 15/16 x 18 7/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

HIDDEN INTERVAL #4, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
26 1/8 x 19 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

HIDDEN INTERVAL #5, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
26 1/8 x 19 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

HIDDEN INTERVAL #6, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
26 1/4 x 19 3/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

IMMATERIAL CONDITIONS #1, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
26 1/8 x 19 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Aaron
Payne Fine Art, Sante Fe, NM

IMMATERIAL CONDITIONS #2, 2008
Graphite, charcoal and
pastel on paper
26 1/8 x 19 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Aaron
Payne Fine Art, Sante Fe, NM

REBECCA HOLLAND

GREEN PLANKS II, 2008
Cast sugar
84 x various widths x 3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist

CRUSH, 2008
Cast, crushed sugar
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

LOVE LETTER #6 – LOVE LETTER #9,
2008
Ink and lipstick on wood
Four pieces, 15 x 15 inches each
Courtesy of the artist

SUSAN YORK

TILTED COLUMN, 2008
Solid graphite, steel
70 x 14 x 15 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
exhibitions 2d, Marfa, TX

TILTED COLUMN, 2008
Graphite pencil on BFK Rives paper
88 x 42 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
exhibitions 2d, Marfa, TX

TILTED RECTILINEAR SOLID, 2008
Graphite
14 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
exhibitions 2d, Marfa, TX

Susan York thanks the Joan Mitchell
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creation of *Tilted Column*.

Cover: **Tara Donovan**, *Untitled (Paper Plates)*, 2006

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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