

Robin Hill: Multiplying the Variations

University Art Gallery
School of Fine and Performing Arts
California State University, Stanislaus
Turlock, California

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Robin Hill: Beach Debris 2003
Cyanotype on paper, mounted on wood, ten panels, 108-1/2 x 25-3/4 inches each
Courtney Lennon, Weinberg Inc and Don Soker Gallery

Cotton batting, plywood, ping pong balls, washers, stand-mounted lights.

disused filing cabinets, plaster, wax, computers and CD players were among the unlikely list of items in Robin Hill's recent exhibition at CSU Stanislaus. Her art – at once graphic, sculptural, installation-like, oblique-like, photographic, sonic and not a little conceptual – transcends traditional genre boundaries.

Many of her mini-quasi-installations are directly interactive, the contact being initiated by the viewer mastering the courage to touch, encouraged by the suppression of the visual in preference for the tactile as a major material strategy. Viewers might be startled by the immediate translation of touch into sound, as in most surprising in "Kardex", made of an early 20th Century filing cabinet with 29 slim drawers, the opening of some of which triggers a sonic backdrop by composer Sam Nichols in addition to revealing photographic images of the human ear, the latter surely a pun on the sounds experienced in this way.

Further references to "obsolete" nineteenth-century technology create a magical marriage of effort and effortlessness in "Beach Debris" where nine 108-inch long vertical cyanotypes lean against the wall at equal distance apart. The vertical panels with pairs of hands at their upper edges suggest gravity, and chunks of debris seem to cascade from the hands. This ironically disguises the process of their manufacture, in which the objects to be reproduced must sit for prolonged periods on the horizontal surface of the cyanotype paper. "Beach Debris" might be a slow motion take of the process of making Duchamp's "Three Standard Stoppages" – a process of a process, and gains added resonance through the prevailing notion that Duchamp's stoppages could not have been made in the way he stated, by dropping meter-long pieces of string onto canvases from a height of one meter. The visual lie in Hill's work is clearly of a more honest variety than Duchamp's and integral rather than supplementary to its visual dynamics.



Robin Hill, with composer Sam Nichols, Kardex 2006
Installation view, multi-stoppage cabinet, 80 x 60 inches, interactive sound, assorted found objects, dimensions variable.
Courtney Lennon, Weinberg Inc and another year in LA

The fact that meanings are so trenchantly embedded in the very fabric and manufacture of these works provides the locus for interpreting them. Relationships among materials, processes and meanings are so oblique, or idiosyncratic, however, that meanings have to be unexcited, unimpeded or uncovered from their material envelopes. The viewer must actively engage with works even where they do not strictly require physical interaction to be fully perceived. In this fashion the formally interactive works like "Kardex" and "Say it Back" provide the cue to the more subdued interactiveness of all the other work.

Part of the unpacking solicits a type of puzzle-solving mentality, and the ability to link sensory and cognitive experiences in unexpected, unpracticed routines. This yields a startling synthesis of perspectivism, the notion that all viewpoints are somehow equally valid), with an insistence on the essential modularity of existence, for which the best metaphors, those conjured directly by the work, are bluntness or genetic codes. The seemingly casual methodology, a type of homage to serendipity in which many of the materials or components are found and recycled by the artist, is counterbalanced by a formalism based on themes and variations suggesting that chance is, in fact, a complex form of order.

Duchamp's work and its disciples in Conceptual art have tended to demote the visual in a particular act of sensory denial. Hill's work manages to subdue the visual sufficiently for it to act as a metaphor for the other senses in addition to suggesting a code or formula that underlies appearance. The code can only be discovered through its synthesis of all of the senses in which they are ultimately understood as traces or pointers towards the actual. Thus Hill's work is deeply conceptual without succumbing to the intellectual posturing of some Conceptual art.

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