

# Scratching the Surface of Things



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Installation view, Robin Hill's 'Slide Carousel' (2014) at Ramon's Tailor (all images courtesy the artist)

SAN FRANCISCO — “... Instead of feelings or human adventures,” wrote Francis Ponge, the French Surrealist “poet of things” in 1942, “I choose as subjects the most emotionless objects available.” Ponge used language exhaustively to give expressive life to “mute” items: flowers, seashells. For him, considering objects in this way was “a need, a commitment, a rage, a matter of self-respect and that’s all there is to it.” Artist [Robin Hill](#)’s installation work addresses the phenomenology of objects with a subtle fervor that would have made Ponge proud. For a show last month titled [Slide Carousel](#) at Ramon’s Tailor in San Francisco, Hill made approximately 300 rubbings of the same 1960s Eastman Kodak slide carousel — the technology that allowed artists to show slides of their work, pre-computer, and lay photographers to illuminate many a suburban living room.



Ramon's Tailor, a storefront gallery housed in a former tailor shop in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, was hung wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling with Hill's mandala-like rubbings. The installation featured several cement casts of the carousel placed around the room, as well as a video loop showing Hill's hands pressing Aqaba industrial hemp paper around the carousel and vigorously rubbing its surface with a graphite stick. The hauntingly meditative space Hill made with *Slide Carousel* represents a distillation of 30 years of thinking through objects. Since the late 70s, Hill has gathered up materials that often go unnoticed, such as plastic shopping bags, Dixie cups, and string, and carefully worked them into environments that invite a certain focused attention to the contours of built reality. The objects Hill gleans are often handheld; to experience her work is to have a heightened awareness of relational gestures between hand and body, object and self.



Detail of Robin Hill, 'Slide Carousel' (2014)

I met with Hill at Ramon's Tailor earlier this month, on a gloriously clear spring day, to see *Slide Carousel* as well as speak with Hill about the particular conditions of her practice that have led to this moment in her work. Hill, who has been on the studio arts faculty at UC Davis since 2001, came to California after 25 years in the New York art



world. Interactive installations she's shown at [Lennon, Weinberg](#) (the Chelsea gallery that represents her) have incorporated large-scale drawings, cyanotypes, and sculpture made from procured institutional detritus: obsolete lab equipment, chemical transport cabinets, and outmoded filing systems (her 2006 piece *Kardex* invited viewers to open and close the drawers of a 1970s metal Kardex cabinet filled with photographs of ears, and which was mic'd to trigger a sonic backdrop by composer Samuel Nichols). The slide carousel as an object of inquiry came into focus with Hill's 2011 show *Case Discussions*. For *Opaque Condition*, Hill placed opaque rubber and wax casts of the carousel on lit-up projectors, offering the object as a sensual crucible of ridges and curves. She thought her engagement with the slide carousel would end there.

Then last summer, Hill was invited to India for a studio residency at the Sanskriti Foundation in New Delhi. "I decided that I really needed to throw myself into the path of the unknown," Hill said of her preparation for the work she'd do there. "When I got there, the last thing I wanted to do was be in a walled commune with other artists, making art, while there were people cooking their dinner on cow dung coals and living in tents right outside the building. My familiar habits and my way of working were not compelling enough to keep me in the studio. So I kind of liberated myself from studio practice, and spent my time there out and about, *noticing things*."





Detail of Robin Hill, 'Slide Carousel' (2014)

“When I came back, my desire was to see if I could have a more contemplative, focused, present studio practice, where I could engage with my work in a way that wasn’t about having a project and meeting a deadline. I really wanted to go into the zone.” After years of working with found objects in complex configurations, the practice of *drawing* leapt out at Hill as an immediately-available way to take up the contemplative questions and ideas she’d encountered in India. “My idea of drawing is that I could cultivate that sense of being really engaged and not worrying about the future, or what the work means in terms of the overarching ideas, and just be deeply involved in my work. That’s what I was willing into being. I realized that what I wanted to do was continue this very quiet, simple mark-making. I noticed one day that I had a rubbing of a slide carousel that I’d done





Detail of Robin Hill, 'Slide Carousel' (2014)

The dual imperative toward bare-bones mark-making and honoring the container made by the gallery aligned seamlessly in *Slide Carousel*. In the light-filled space of Ramon's Tailor, each carousel rubbing was a singular entity, similar to the others, but not identical. In its repeated use of the circle, Hill's piece calls to mind Yayoi Kusama's famous deployment of the polka dot. Both Kusama and Hill are invested in emphasizing objects through devices of perception such as shadow and reflection. Just as Kusama's "Infinity Mirrored Room — The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away" (2013) used a discrete mirror-and-light-filled space to create visual infinity, *Slide Carousel* creates a space that overflows with a continuous physical gesture, one that insistently "scratches the surface" of an object. In viewing *Slide Carousel*, I found myself vicariously curious about other textures in my environment, such as the grain of the wood floor or the soles of my shoes. How would it feel, through rubbing, to "draw" the surfaces of those objects, to extend their lives out of the realm of the utilitarian and into that of the aesthetic? There's an