

What is essential form?

Steven Henry Madoff

In any case, this speculation and so many more are raised by current society and art, the first reflected in the second. And I thought it might strike a hopeful note to end with a visit to another studio, Robin Hill's. As evening settled we drove to an outskirt of Brooklyn. Through an open garage area filled with trucks, we entered her building and climbed the stairs. Here was a large room with rough white walls. Tools, wood boards and cutouts, maquettes, and some finished works in wax filled the room. A table was in the corner, and she pulled an extra stool down from the wall so that we both could sit. Her new piece *Partner* was in the middle of the room. Its wax smelled vaguely of a honeycomb and there was something else recognizable about it. The peculiar form, utterly symmetrical, was reminiscent of an erect figure clothed in a dress – a headless, abstracted woman.

Hill denied the resemblance, although she didn't say it was impossible. She spoke about a cache of photographs she found in Kansas City 12 years ago, pictures taken by a young woman in the 1930s. Those images had subtly influenced her work; she couldn't say precisely how. We looked at a few of them published in a magazine, and the intimacy of the subjects – high school friends, family portraits, and self-portraits – somehow focused the gaze of the camera so that each detail of an arm folded against a bodice or the cut and pattern of a dress was intensified, blocked out and shaped in the spare black and white photographs. Staring at her sculpture, she said that she saw undulations creating a shape. Light seemed to emanate from the wax, softening its contours. When you walk around behind *Partner*, you see there's an open-ended cone, a sort of funnel, built into it that lies at an angle off the main cavity. There's very much of a feeling of an inside and an outside; the internal geometry invisible from without, while the rounded volumes that form the front of the piece have some semblance of distended rectangles or triangles wrapping around the sides, chopped off at the top.

We looked around the room at the other pieces lying there. They were less complex than *Partner*, which is most recent and possibly the direction she's heading toward. The ones you see now, *Lean To* (*Mary Lou*) and *Down Down Down*, have fewer elements and are far more unitary. Yet they aren't exactly Minimalist – the surfaces show too much of the hand for that. *Down Down Down* is a cylinder laterally striped by its supporting cardboard structure with a cone inside it that's far more visible and central to the work than in *Partner*. And *Lean To* narrows towards its top, a single form with a ridged front that makes it look like another series of triangles with their longest points neatly removed.

Her work, though it's open rather than sealed, and curved rather than sharp-edged, shares with Wood's sculptures a love of geometric forms changing as you survey the object, playing out one form against another while constantly referring back to basic shapes. Differences, you might say, are still mindful of the absolute; there is only a gentle pulling at the universal. Was this the primal template in its first cast of wax, still expanding, contracting, and bending until it found its essential forms? Too poetic, no doubt. Yet the more extreme practice of collage is nowhere to be seen here. Form and identity are closely linked in the abstraction of her pieces, and I remarked how each of them is so resolutely anchored in pure geometry. Yes, Hill replied, there's an incredible orderliness to the work that she can't escape.

Yet it seemed in that moment, and in this one, that hers is not an escape from order but a return. Here again is the pleasure in the geometric, the building blocks of reason. Essential form leaves its trace everywhere in her art. And in the time that you take to look at this work, there is perhaps a small respite from uncertainty, a flight from it, and a homing toward the absolute touched by personal expression. It's a complex ambition, and each of the artists in the exhibition have fought with it. What has happened to essential form? Where has it gone and why? Those are the questions they ask. And here are their answers.

Douglas Beer
Tom Butter
Andreas Gehr
Robin Hill
Carmen Perrin
Vaclav Pozarek
Martin Puryear
Jürg Stäubli
Robert Therrien
Steve Wood