

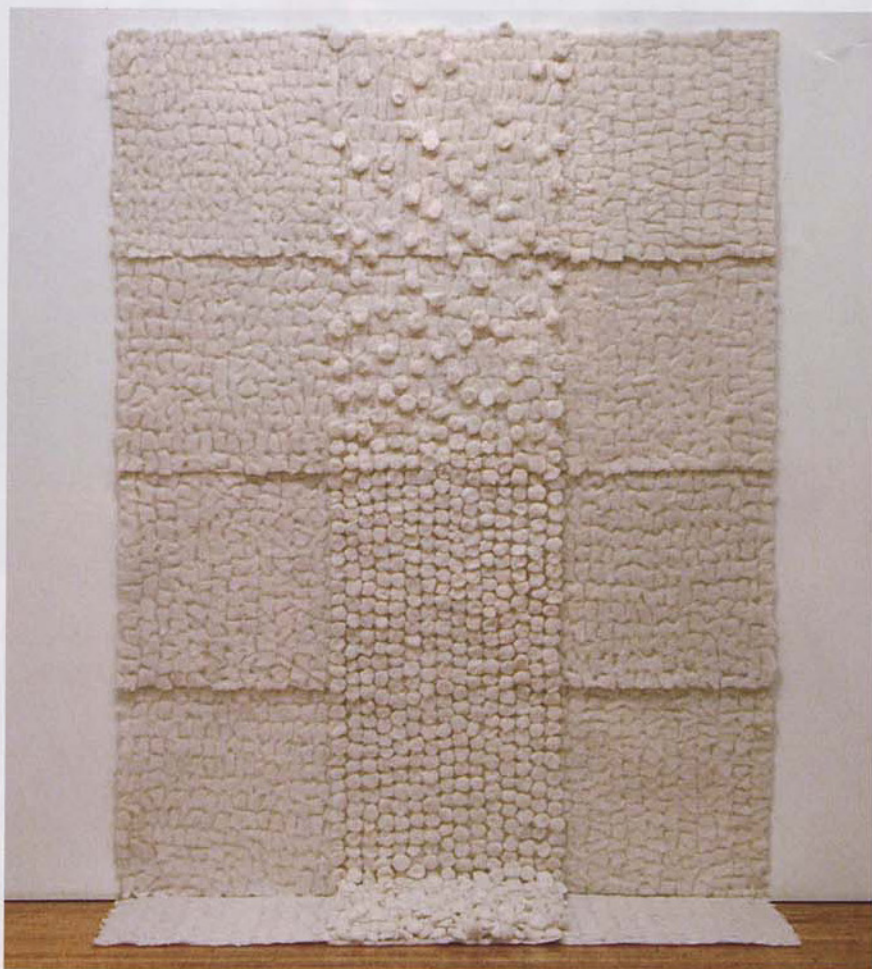
## Robin Hill: Between the Physical and the Invisible

by Denise Carvalho



“Multiplying the Variations,” Robin Hill’s recent exhibition at Lennon-Weinberg in New York City, attempted to create a dialogue between two very distinct environmental influences—New York and California. A native of New York, where she lived for 25 years, Hill drew her aesthetic interests from the city’s energies, contrasting vertical architecture and the excesses of information technology with the subjective experiences of everyday life. Through her more recent California experience she has taken a fresh look at the psychodynamics between urban and rural, exploring anonymity and invisibility in light of spatial vastness, architectural flatness, and a sense of time as stagnant. Her large installations consist of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fragments that culminate in sculptural situations, demonstrating distinct relationships between materials.

Hill’s obsession with the potential of form in space is at the core of her project. While the concrete aspect of her

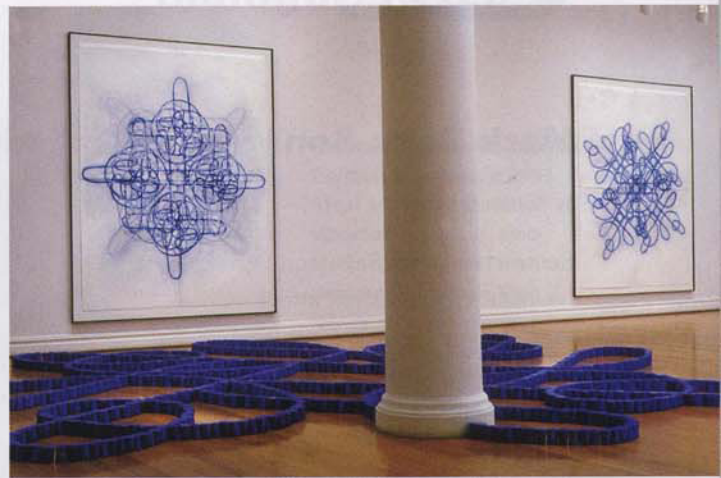


work is expressed through monochromatic colors and massive, repetitive objects, the conceptual tendencies are centered in subtle, playful, and sometimes lyrical relationships of form and language. The move to California forced Hill to reconcile the old with the new. The process of adapting to her new environment has been based on shaping sensitivities to “what is there as opposed to what is not there.” The sense of vastness in the California landscape is important in relation to the notion of absence. This quality resonates in Hill’s work through the relationship between materiality and poetic

**Left: *Concretion*, 2004. Hydrocal, 100 elements, 10 x 10 x 182 in. Right: *Dissipation*, 2004. Cotton batting and paper, 95 x 24 x 70.5 in.**

language, which parallels ideas of containment and dispersion. California reflects the constant negotiation between two realities: the agrarian lifestyle envisioned by Thomas Jefferson and the industrial and technological development tied to property values and corporate control. Belonging is thus fused to ownership, as well as to the ambiguities of one’s perception of having and letting go.





**Left: 100 Ft. of the Sweet Everyday, 2001. Cyanotype on paper, helium balloons, and polyethylene bags, 5 x 100 ft. Right: Blue Lines, 1995. Plaster, pigment, and oil stick on wax paper, dimensions variable.**

Hill is attached to the potentiality of materials, whether they are found, purchased, or inherited. She describes her scavenging in the streets and factories of New York as if the sought-after objects were “on the verge of extinction.” Coveting “the found” in rural California involves a sense of distance and contingency in relation to the objects or situations at hand, sometimes forcing the artist to negotiate beyond what she has bargained for. In imagining an intervention with a visually stunning, uprooted walnut orchard seen from her car window, Hill had to consider photography for the first time.

For Hill, chance phenomena are always connected to hands-on creative production. She says, “I’d like to think that the work I am making was already here and that I have just facilitated its visibility.” Her work is concerned with the idea of economy and resourcefulness, and the will to “embrace small as big, simple as complex, low-end as high-end, accidental as purposeful, and incidental as noteworthy.”

Hill often refers to an important writer on the subject of chance, Lewis Hyde, who observes that “what a lucky find reveals first is neither cosmos nor chaos, but the mind of the finder.” *Bushwick Wheel* (1998), Hill’s first foray into the territory of chance, is a bed of orange peels resulting from just such an encounter. Her process con-

sisted of collecting the peels on a daily basis from a person who sold bags of peeled oranges in the streets of Brooklyn. The spontaneous collaboration between the two individuals, one needing to acquire a material that the other needed to dispose of, yields yet another layer of meaning.

“Multiplying the Variations” takes its title from Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*. The exhibition consisted of six large-scale works, all of which explore the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the invented and the found. In *Concretion* (2004), a horizontal column made of 100 Hydrocal castings from a companion wax piece lies on the floor and invades the path of the viewer. *Against the Wall* (2004) is a 10-foot-square grid of nine-inch plywood disks that support approximately 70 hand-formed balls of wax. Obsession in art can mean many things. For Hill, it means making similar forms over and over again, but never actually repeating them. Repetition without replication situates her work in complete and ironic opposition to mass production. Each unit is essential—fragment and whole simultaneously. The resulting composition reflects the anonymous potentialities of every act and thought in the artist’s studio. *Dissipation* (2004) is a large grid of shredded cotton batting on which hundreds of two-inch hand-formed disks rise from an accumulation on the floor. Made from the leftover off-cuttings from a shoulder pad factory near Hill’s former Brooklyn studio, it resembles a cascade of water or a mantle of lace. The interest in an industrial process on

the verge of obsolescence connects *Dissipation* with earlier works such as *Pressed Azaleas* (1973), in which Hill employed the diazo blueprint process to reveal dimensions of found objects not visible with the naked eye.

Hill is engaged in a dialogue between drawing and sculpture. In many of her works, three-dimensional form and line are interdependent. Objects distinct in their volume, weight, and color are elegantly united with their two-dimensional counterparts. She is fascinated with circular, arabesque-like, and spiral shapes displayed as objects or inscriptions, symmetrically or asymmetrically, as if they represented thresholds between physical and invisible spaces. *100 Ft. of the Sweet Everyday* (2001), made with cyanotype on paper, plastic bags, and helium balloons, occupies all four walls and the ceiling of the space in which it is installed. The elements of this installation organize the space with photogram images of ordinary plastic bags in a linear chain-like formation that flows continuously from wall to wall, capturing the feeling of permanence in architecture and “the word” as raw form. The idea is to break the boundaries of containment and permanence, bringing art to a situation of play, of openness and change, somewhere between the poetics of language and physical phenomena. Hill observes, “In a way, I feel that my work is approaching a desire, a longing for being on the edge between the physical and the invisible.”

*Denise Carvalho is a lecturer, art critic, and independent curator.*