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In View Sarah Sze

Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

12 MAY – 1 JULY

Few commentators have failed to mention how Sarah Sze's installations appear 'artificial' and yet 'organic', 'ordered' and yet 'chaotic'. Her vast accretions of intricately placed consumer materials – stacks of sliced Styrofoam cups and elaborately cut chipboard, agglomerations of push-pins and shipping boxes, webs of extension cords and light bulbs, all on view in the three works, *Proportioned to the Groove* (2005), *Still Life with Fish* (2005) and *Unravel* (2005), presented at the Marianne Boesky Gallery – have even tempted critics to marshal the more scientific language of 'self-organization' and 'emergent systems'. Sze herself is no doubt amenable to such descriptions, given that she has chased after the imagery of complexity since she began working in the 1990s, even going so far as to adopt terminology from fields such as chaos theory and fractal geometry – cf. *Strange Attractor* (2000).

Yet, lurking underneath the surface of Sze's apparently living systems lies a politics of origins. In two of the recent works, these origins continue to appear overtly biological and organic: in *Unravel*, a funnel of materials grows from the light of an everyday table lamp perched atop a stool. And with *Still Life*, the gallery's storage space has been opened and portions of the gallery's walls removed to reveal a standard Sze environment which, we are given to believe, has been propagating out of sight like some exotic mould. But with *Proportioned to the Groove*, by far the most expansive of the three

works in the show, such biological or ecological imagery carries a certain theological undertone.

Although *Proportioned* bears all the trappings of Sze's standard 'hybrid' logic – consumer materials; organic arrangements – our physical experience of the piece is structured according to a narrative that feels almost devotional in spirit.

The work appears to emanate from a massing of materials gathered on the ground at one corner of the gallery's main space. A grid of strings stretches from that spot in a diagonal trajectory that intersects the upper reaches of the room's opposite wall, cutting the space into an above and a below. Where one enters the space, the grid is overhead,

implicitly separating the viewer from the room's upper reaches. In the middle of the room, where the grid encounters a concrete column, Sze has constructed an elaborate and meandering latticework, giving the impression that the grid's radiating lines are meant to be more than simply markers of an imagined boundary. But as the work drops into the space shared with our bodies, physical access becomes restricted. If we attempt to follow the grid-lines' descent towards their point of origin in the room's corner, their convergence renders any further forward movement impossible – unless, that is, we drop to our knees, but even then we can only approach so close. Like a sacred relic replete with its own 60-watt illumination, our access to this privileged point in the work is barred.

Proportioned does not figure any kind of religious pilgrimage, but then neither does it picture some terrestrial microcosm. Ultimately, both readings are understandably lacking. Yet, beyond superficial appearances, the works exhibit none of the dynamic flow and emergent order that the new sciences of complexity have been given to model. No number of references to 'phase spaces', 'basins of attraction', or 'singularities' will reveal anything other than what Elizabeth A.T. Smith has called Sze's simple marriage of 'rational conception' and 'intuitive execution'. But this marriage is problematic as well, not simply because the artist operates from within an otherwise private language of forms which draw upon the precincts of science; rather, it is problematic because that language is presented as having been guided by principles

Facing page
Sarah Sze *Proportioned to the Groove*, 2005, mixed media, dimensions variable
COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY, NEW YORK

In View Dorothy Cross

IMMA, Dublin

3 JUNE – 11 SEPTEMBER

which eschew the very possibility of a private language at all: such is the logic of self-organizing systems.

So if Sze's work does engage a politics of origins, then perhaps it does so on the model of Intelligent Design. The philosophy – or again, the theology – behind Intelligent Design puts restrictions on the kinds of questions one may ask about the world. Instead of leaving open the epistemological gaps that drive inquiry forward, such as the mystery of how living systems emerge from inorganic materials, a question which the sciences of emergence and complexity have taken it upon themselves to address, Intelligent Design fills those gaps with the anthropic image of some guiding consciousness working behind the scenes: a portrait of the artist as the Creator, or the Creator as an artist. Instead of 'How?' we are left only with 'Why?' – which in the end is a question of intentions, a matter more for belief than verification. JTDN

'Jellyfish on linen' states the description for one of the more recent works on show in Dorothy Cross's tidy, 'mid-career' retrospective. The linen referred to is a pillowcase encrusted with the dried body of the creature, which now describes in delicate pink tracery an alien form snuggling where a head should rest. It is an item typical of Cross's best-known work, reconfiguring the corpse of a once-familiar creature to create an image that resonates in multiple planes, here evoking a night of wispy, terrified dreams, the story of the Turin Shroud and a nameless submarine violence.

When working sculpturally (which the former jewellery-maker now seems to do less frequently) Cross is apt to produce such hybrid forms; and like the unlovely little character of Sid in *Toy Story*, when she gets to creating her mule-beings, heads and tails, insides and outsides, skins and skeletons are likely to get switched to deeply unsettling effect.

Cross famously first came upon the notion of enlisting cows' udders in her art when she saw a rustic sieve in Norway made from exactly that material. From that encounter came a group of works created over several years in which she has used taxidermilogically prepared cowhides in conjunction with other elements – shoes, sports equipment, bottles, an ironing board – all retrieved from that inexhaustible reservoir of found objects, everyday life.

Among this group of works dwell Cross's most celebrated sculptures, in which long teats serve to stoke up a phallic resemblance: *Virgin Shroud* (1993), a giantess of a figure, clothed in a wedding dress and a long veil of speckled cowhide, complete with an udder crown; or *Amazon* (1992), a dressmaker's dummy with a chest that rises into a single, breast-like form complete with long, lone nipple. This strand of work seems to have something significant in common with the work of Mathew Barney, something that her 1992 *Vaulting Horse* – a piece of gym equipment pimped-

Above
Dorothy Cross *Jellyfish Lake*, 2002, DVD, 6 minutes, edition of 4
CAMERA: LORING MCALPIN
COURTESY KERLIN GALLERY, DUBLIN

up with a cowhide and phallic udder, which is not included in this show – would make explicit. Although Cross apparently finds Robert Gober more interesting, much of the business of discovering male sexual organs hidden in female ones calls to mind Barney's prolonged, spooky exploration of post-gender biology.

But via repetition arrives a problem: there is a tendency for these works to soften into visual puns. Worse still, the world takes up the joke, and what was an artwork when Cross attached a cow's teat to the sharply tapered top of a woman's shoe (*Stiletto*, 1994) suddenly becomes a fashion item. The fashion item does not come advertised, of course: Marina Warner's catalogue essay describes all these very pointy pieces as a 'spirited and ingenious series of challenges to the phallogocentric regime'.

As it happens, Cross's work seems to have broader, and more

