

## Tara Donovan

*Pace, New York 10 May – 15 August*

Tara Donovan's recent work does not hold up to the promise of what she was making a decade ago. The two large sculptures (both untitled, both 2014) occupying one of Pace's 25th Street galleries are impressive feats of labour, and like much of Donovan's sculpture, they are remarkably mimetic evocations of organic forms, in these cases a monumental profusion of quartz or salt crystals and a series of towering stalagmites. And that's the problem: these sculptures have been made largely to look like the outcomes of certain kinds of physical processes or conditions, while the process or condition that is actually on display – and which the sculptures in some sense must be about because they broadcast it through their accumulation of identical (in the case of the stalagmites) or similar (in the case of the crystals) units of construction (styrene index cards in the case of the stalagmites; acrylic rods in the case of the crystals) – is the repetitive labour expended in producing them.

Anyone familiar with Donovan's work of the last 15 years will recognise the signature

decision-making: find a mass-produced unit, one with little, if any, cultural specificity – no plastic water bottles or Coke cans here – and then find a way to combine that unit with itself to achieve an unexpected yet familiar form. In the best cases, what was unexpected were the capacities of the units to combine of their own accord, as with Donovan's *Untitled (Toothpicks)* and *Untitled (Pins)* (both 2004), where static friction between the units themselves when massed into a cubic form was enough to hold them in place. And then there were effects that the combined units sometimes produced, as with *Haze* (2003), an ineffable surface built from translucent plastic drinking straws stacked perpendicular to the wall. What these works demonstrated was that, with a deep sensitivity to material potentials, quantitative changes can produce qualitative transformations, that differences in degree can become differences in kind, that, in short, more is different.

Not so with the new work, where the equation is nothing more than quantity

is quality. The more labour on display (and the bigger the thing gets) the more valuable the thing becomes. The striking mimesis of natural forms is presumably what then qualifies it as 'art', but it also interrupts our recognition of the material potential that is actually at work in the work: all of that repetitive, unskilled labour. That stacks of index cards can be made to look like stalagmites is a testament to Donovan's feeling for novelty. That this is the only feeling issuing from her new work, though, is unfortunate, especially at a time when questions of work and labour are more pressing than ever.

One doesn't want to say that labour is what Donovan more self-consciously needs to make her work about; in its present state, and on the evidence of these two new works, it cannot but be about it, and how Donovan chooses to address this labour and the ends that it serves must be accounted for. Making it look natural, and so somehow neutral, is no accounting at all. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*



*Untitled*, 2014, styrene index cards, metal, wood, paint and glue, 380 × 681 × 700 cm.  
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