

REVIEWS

Sarah Oppenheimer

P.P.O.W

A thoroughly serious and accomplished maker, and unmaker, of both space and structure, Sarah Oppenheimer intervenes in architectural environments in ways that not only destabilize and reorganize the physical facts of those given sites, but also start to provoke realignments of viewers' own native sensoriums. Encounters with Oppenheimer's disorienting structural build-outs or trademark cuts, slots, or oculi—here, in her first solo New York show in over five years, represented by a pair of slyly intricate incisions that managed to simultaneously unite, separate, and alter conditions in the six adjacent rooms they connected—typically induce a certain kind of vaguely vertiginous, almost giddy uncertainty. Is that space open or closed? Is it inside or outside? Is this surface transparent or reflective? Is that light coming from here or from there? Yet for all the substantial pleasure given by the perceptual aspects of the artist's work, its deeper impact lies in the way in which it begins over time to quietly sink in with the viewer, turning indeterminacies of apprehension into epistemological uncertainties, epistemic puzzlement into ontological perplexity.

Oppenheimer gives all her works unfussily classificatory numeric or alphanumeric titles—in the case of this characteristically site-specific piece, *D-33*, 2012—that suit the technically seamless integrative modes of sensory distortion that they engineer. This linguistic framing may seem to gesture more toward the deadpan métier of the laboratory than the poetical vibe of the atelier, but rather than align themselves with one or the other, her interventions ultimately want to work toward collapsing the distinctions between the two. As is typical with Oppenheimer's projects, attempts to describe what exactly was done to the existing space at P.P.O.W, and how that modification “worked” physically and perceptually, seem doomed to shortchange the experience, but the baseline configuration of *D-33* was, roughly speaking, a pair of superficially identical cuts with outlines delineated with black metal cladding, made in the back corners of P.P.O.W's first, rectangular gallery space. The

slice on the right opened a skewed, Dr. Caligari-esque passage of sorts into the next gallery, as well as a corresponding notch on the adjacent wall that afforded an awkwardly knee-height triangular view into a storage space otherwise inaccessible to visitors. The cut on the left was meanwhile staged not as door but window, filled with an expanse of thick glass set at an oblique angle to the rest of the flat run of the wall. Viewers were thus necessarily funneled into a counterclockwise circuit through the rooms, the character of each of which was variously affected by Oppenheimer's punctures, most vividly in terms of the intensity and temperature of the light filtering into them from artificial and natural sources. Meanwhile, the shifting facets of the cuts—each of whose front and back silhouettes were plotted in intricate formal counterposition to each other, confounding even the most spatially

attentive of viewers—made them change in appearance as viewers altered their position, and they seemed almost like completely different apertures when seen from the opposite side. (When I got home from seeing the show and noticed the image on the gallery's press release, I had the momentary sinking sense that I had somehow missed an entire room, until I realized that the photograph simply depicted those same two cuts viewed from an angle I somehow hadn't fully taken in during my visit.)

A conceptual descendant of celebrated hole-makers with tendencies both secular (Gordon Matta-Clark) and spiritual (James Turrell), Oppenheimer is interested not only in actions that transform existing architecture from mute functionality into expressive thingness, but also in producing memorable atmospheric effects and perceptual surprises. Her practice is a psychospatially subversive one, right down to the way her high finishes (in many cases, fine woods; here, dark aluminum punctuated in places with an unusual exaggerated tongue-and-groove motif that was as practical as it was decorative) propose the infiltrations she makes not as guerilla tactics destined for erasure, but as inside jobs, designed to last. Her disruptions are not in the end always physically permanent, but their disorienting—and reorienting—effects on the viewer are remarkably durable.

—Jeffrey Kastner

Sarah Oppenheimer,
D-33 (detail), 2012,
aluminum, glass.
Installation view.

