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Rachel Harrison at Bard--Plus, Francis Bacon's Strange Scraps

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All dolled up at Bard: Harrison's *Perth Amboy*, detail.

Details:

'Consider the Lobster'/'And Other Essays'

Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College
Annandale-on-Hudson, 845-758-7598
Through December 20

I reviewed David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* in 2005, and have remained vaguely bummed since the brilliant author's suicide last year. Recently, an

exhibit that cribbed his title caught my eye—a survey at Bard of Rachel Harrison's unruly installations paired with curatorial endeavors by six other artists.

I made a reservation on the chartered bus to the school's Center for Curatorial Studies, and when the day of the opening arrived, I found myself wondering if there'd be refreshments beyond the usual cups of wine and coagulated brie. Starting to feel like one of those mooching junketeers from Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*, I decided the chances were slim and bought a quick breakfast before embarking.

The bus rumbled out of Chelsea, under the Hudson, and up the Lincoln Tunnel helix, revealing that flash of silvery skyline reminiscent of an establishing shot from a classic film noir. Next came scruffy strip malls, then an increasingly verdant ruff, followed—after about two hours—by a bridge offering views that had inspired the Hudson River School painters. A few minutes later, we arrived at the smoothly austere CCS building. Inside, half the center's spacious galleries are given over to Harrison's oeuvre, which jabs at the pretensions of how art is made, presented, and viewed. In *Perth Amboy* (2001), the viewer enters a labyrinth of unevenly cut and folded cardboard slabs and may literally stumble over a life-size plaster bust of Marilyn Monroe jutting from a storage box. Raised up on a nearby pedestal, Barbie's wheelchair-bound friend, Becky, gazes at a photo of a green-screen wall, the kind used for special effects the likes of which Marilyn didn't live to see. Harrison's photographs of pilgrims visiting a nondescript house in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, where the Virgin Mary was once sighted, line the surrounding walls, documenting a particular spectacle that never seems to go out of style.

In the photo series *Contact Sheet* (1996), the first nine frames focus on green trash bags along a London curb; as vehicles blur past on one side, pedestrians are frozen in mid-step on the other. This scenario is interrupted by individual shots of a bucolic field, soaring cathedral arches, and museum mummies as lumpy and anonymous as the garbage bags, followed by more pictures of the trash. It's obvious from the frame numbers that other images have been edited out, a cheeky manipulation that offers a short holiday excursion in the midst of a blandly serious conceptual exercise.

Across the gallery, Harrison delves into recent art history with a shot of her own hand lifting the vellum sheet that protects Andy Warhol's original Marilyn Monroe reference photo. The translucent paper partially obscures the star's face (recalling Bert Stern's famous nude shots of the actress twirling a filmy veil around her body just weeks before her fatal overdose). Harrison has mounted her documentary shot on a ragged chunk of wallboard, conflating a wall of fame with ephemeral ruins. Like Wallace's essay on the ethics of boiling sentient beings alive (which upset many readers and some editors at *Gourmet* magazine, where it first ran)—and his erudite observations on porn and the evils of academic jargon—Harrison's rambunctious installations pull lofty affectations down to ground level.

The other galleries are given over to selections from the Hessel Collection, on which the Center was founded. The artworks are all from the past half-century and include such sardonic pieces as Paul McCarthy's photo of a pink baby-lotion bottle soiled by fecal-brown smears, and Nam June Paik's profoundly beautiful tableau of a featureless stone effigy contemplating a gnarled television set, *Burned-Out TV Buddha*.

CCS director Tom Eccles, Harrison, and other artists, including Andrea Zittel and Nayland Blake, have all followed their own muses to curate shows within the show. Video artist Harry Dodge's exuberant, salon-style hanging of works ranging from an

April Gornik painting of erupting flames to Christopher Wool's black enamel splatters is annotated with such cryptic observations as, "There are really only two rooms anyway (fuel and fire) when you add it all up at night, before bed."

If you're in search of a summer jaunt, this bifurcated hurly-burly might be just the ticket; perhaps take along a copy of Wallace's short-story collection *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* for the ride.

The painter Francis Bacon once remarked, "If I go into a butcher's shop I always think it's surprising I wasn't there instead of the animal." Mechanical-reproduction techniques and the cinema came of age right along with Bacon (1909–92), and the handsome book *Incunabula* documents a small sample of the newspaper clippings, film stills, and magazine photos that he used as source materials for his scabrous portraits. At the time of his death, this detritus, along with abandoned paintings, was piled so deep in Bacon's studio that scholars sorted through the layers using archaeological techniques.

Bacon revered such masters as Michelangelo and Velazquez, but needed photos to freeze the frenzy of human motion that for him characterized the modern age. *Incunabula* includes pages from medical reference guides, examples of Eadweard Muybridge's photographic figure studies (Bacon used these 19th-century images for depictions of men loving and/or fighting), and scenes of political violence (those shattered eyeglasses from *The Battleship Potemkin*). The authors achieve a visual poetry in their juxtaposition of rediscovered scraps, such as photos of a red car's bulbous grill beside gaping mouths from a dental brochure, pairings that emphasize Bacon's drive to meld imagery and texture. These paint-smudged, yellowed, creased ephemera provided the fleeting glimpses that Bacon made flesh.