

Art in America
July 31, 2009

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INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

Rachel Harrison: Consider the Lobster & Other Essays

7/31/09

CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art

Jul 27 – Dec 20, 2009

By T.J. Carlin

Annandale-on-Hudson: Rachel Harrison's survey show at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College in upstate New York consists of two parts: "Consider the Lobster," several rooms of sculpture, video, and photography, which are titled both individually and in groups as installations; "And Other Essays," wherein Harrison has invited fellow artists Nayland Blake, Tom Burr, Harry Dodge, Alix Lambert, Allen Ruppersburg and Andrea Zittel to cull from and curate the Hessel permanent collection. All of the artists in Harrison's lineup are known for commenting on or subverting social structures: the artist's choice of collaborators for "And Other Essays" helps to lend strength to the threads of critical discourse that weave unevenly throughout the other half of the show.

Harrison is best known for assemblage that casually throws together discordant, apparently unrelated elements. The show is titled for David Foster Wallace's collection of essays (2005), a must-read at the time of publication; the titular essay was about cooking a live animal, which should tell you something about the artist's taste for "boiled down" information. Typically a found object or a photograph is grouped with a coarse handmade element: a crudely-built pedestal, a blob of mottled papier-mâché or a roughly painted board. The

handmade elements are often visually banal: the overall kneaded effect on the surface of *The Eagle Has Landed* (2006)'s papier-mâché base resembles the vague, worked surface of a child's pinchpot; though in the case of *Green Beans* (2009), a small pile of said vegetables placed on top another blotchy platform complements the paint job so well the color combination vibrates. It's safe to assume Harrison intends these pieces to function at least in part as metaphors, so that presenting an oppositional visual discourse highlights the absurdity of cultural symbols. But in pieces like *Frank Stella II*, in which a mirror emblazoned with the very passé teen phenom Hanson, irony is a large part of the punch factor, to such a degree that one feels held at emotional arm's length. *Perth Amboy*, (2001), which occupies its own room and comprises a series of wall-hung color photos taken by the artist of anonymous arms reaching out of the window of a house, isn't predicated on cultural nudges. These are snaps of pilgrims touching the exterior of a window in a New Jersey home where the Madonna was sighted; here, the background story adds a layer of dimensionality, but isn't essential to appreciate the work.



PERTH AMBOY, 2001. PHOTO BY CHRIS KENDALL

Indigenous Parts (1995, Crosby Street; 1995, Arlington Museum; 2003, Venice Biennale) (1995-2003), which has been installed three times before in the eponymous locations, fills most of a room with pedestals that have been

clustered at random, often so close together that the effect is of moving between pieces in a storage room. Beside the largest group a set of chairs is gathered in front of a documentary video of a rural New York community auction. The silent dramas inherent to a lineup of human possessions are touching, and watching the values of these personal objects fluctuate wildly throughout the course of the bidding brings to mind the art's and artists' often tenuous relationship with the market.

Harry Dodge's room in "And Other Essays" is another example of visually stunning contrasts; she presents a salon-style grouping of work by other artists that stretches all the way to the ceiling, well beyond eye-level, and allows formal play between the chaos of such disparate pieces as Kenny Scharf's *Deluxo Master Mix* (1984) and Judy Pfaff's exuberant, foil-dappled print *Untitled (Quartet for Quintana Roo)* (1980). Unorthodox installation lends room for experimentation that allows for fluid visual connections and the type of conceptual leaps that make Harrison's postmodern sensibility possible.