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Art Review

## The Museum as Stage Set, Filled With Glamorous Mess

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ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — The Hessel Museum of Art at [Bard College](#) has the healthy habit of letting artists loose on its premises each summer to do whatever they want. Three years ago Martin Creed turned the museum’s lobby into a blue lagoon of festive balloons. Then Keith Edmier recreated the entire interior of his suburban childhood home.



Karl Rabe/Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College

This year the New York artist Rachel Harrison has taken charge, smashing gallery walls and blocking up doorways to present “Consider the Lobster,” a piquant survey of her art of the last 15 years or so. In addition she has recruited six fellow artists to assemble mini-shows from the Hessel’s holdings for “And Other Essays,” each show being to some degree a reflection of her style.

That style is not easy to define. Ms. Harrison, born in 1966, is often called a sculptor, which is accurate. But she is also, and simultaneously, a painter, photographer, video maker, collagist and installation artist. She has the databank brain of a historian, the magpie instincts of a collector and a curator’s exacting eye. Her work is figurative and abstract, casually piled on and highly deliberated, zany and chilly.

***Consider the Lobster*** An exhibition of works by Rachel Harrison, including “Wigs for West,” left, at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College.

“Glamorize your messes” was a command issued by the great filmmaker, playwright and junk- master Jack Smith, whom Ms. Harrison clearly admires. She does, and in the process glamorizes some of our messes too.

The opening piece in the Bard show, a 1997 installation called “Snake in the Grass,” is a good introduction to her method, combining as it does cheap materials, found objects and a national myth. The first thing you notice is that one of the seemingly solid gallery walls is fake, a row of plasterboard panels secured by metal braces. Individual panels hang in midair, supported by cords anchored with brick-filled garbage bags.

Forget any idea of the museum as a pristine, timeless place. Here it’s a stage set, and a tacky one. We, the audience, are part of a production in progress, though whether it’s a comedy or a tragedy, and how we should think and feel about anything in it, we don’t know.

The walls are hung with photographs, some of which look vaguely menacing: people stand frozen on a sidewalk near a patch of lawn; a policeman runs down a grassy hill, arms akimbo. Isn’t that a still from the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas? It is. Tragedy.

But the Zapruder in the show is Ms. Harrison’s photo of a photo, a shot of a print for sale, along with some conspiracy-theory literature, at a souvenir stand near the assassination site. On another wall is a framed snapshot of a grinning street vendor hawking a map of the Kennedy motorcade route. Carefully placed on top of the frame is a cigar labeled “La Gloria Cubana,” Ms. Harrison’s coy reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis. So, comedy.



A view of Rachel Harrison’s *Consider the Lobster* at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College.  
Karl Rabe/Center for Curatorial Studies



Ms Harrison's 2007 *Rainer Werner Fassbinder* features a mannequin wearing a Dick Cheney mask on the back of her head. Chris Kendall/Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College

And then there's the snake, or at least a snakeskin, anaconda-size, rolled up like a parchment scroll and sitting on a shovel as if it had just been dug up or was about to be buried. It may symbolize evil or wisdom or dried-up and left-behind history. Whatever, it's one more baffling element in a script that has neither stage directions nor a final act.

Inconclusiveness is one of the motors that make Ms. Harrison's art run, even in individual sculptures that carry obvious topical references. In "[Rainer Werner Fassbinder](#)" from 2007, a female mannequin wears a [Dick Cheney](#) mask on the back of her head like a helmet or a snood or a second face. Depending on your politics, you might take this as a beauty-and-the-beast image. But that's too pat. It's a portrait of a marriage, some kind of mutant union of the willing.

In "The Eagle Has Landed," a lumpish abstract sculpture with little wheels is laid on its side and shrouded by a pillowcase printed with a picture of an American eagle's head. When I saw it, I thought Iraq, death, long-gone [John Ashcroft](#), Humpty Dumpty, sleep. I have no idea what Ms. Harrison might have been thinking, but it seems not to matter. All her work encourages such free association, demands it really, and subtly directs it.

The installation "Marilyn With Wall" (2004) has two basic components: a photograph of Monroe and an upright stack of sheet-rock fragments on which it is hung. Visually, it's a contest of fragile versus strong, and fragile apparently wins. But there's more. The sheetrock fragments are pieces of a Hessel gallery wall demolished specifically to make the work. The image in the picture is Ms. Harrison's photograph of the original studio head shot that [Andy Warhol](#) used as a model for his "Marilyn" paintings and is now preserved, a holy Pop relic, in the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

Pop Art, with its leveling of cultural values, theoretically threatened the ruin of the temple-of-art museum. Except the ruin didn't happen. Pop ended up supporting traditional institutions by feeding them fresh, marketable material. Warhol, at least, left that material un-cleaned up and unexplained. Ms. Harrison, with her scrounger impulses and icy wit, is his heir.

The range of her art-historical reference is wide: [Donald Judd](#) and David Smith, [Helen Frankenthaler](#) and Eva Hesse, Adrian Piper and Gordon Matta-Clark, Paul McCarthy, Cady Noland, Haim Steinbach, Mr. Smith and on and on. But Pop, and an unembarrassed appetite for popular culture, is its foundation.

Popular culture is, of course, just a tiptoe away from popular religion, and that's the subject, or one subject, of Ms. Harrison's brilliant 2001 installation "Perth Amboy," the Hessel show's high point. It originated in a news article about a reported apparition of the Virgin Mary in an upper window of a house in New Jersey. Pilgrims gathered. Ms. Harrison photographed the window, the hands of believers touching it and the traces of fingerprints they left.

For the installation, she has hung the photographs on all four walls of the gallery and filled the center with a labyrinth made from brown cardboard. Tucked away inside are a few objects: a life-size bust of [Marilyn Monroe](#) in a packing box; a ceramic figure of a Chinese scholar eyeing a blobby-looking “scholar’s rock.” A small carved head of an American Indian stares at a snapshot of a sunset set on a little easel. A Becky doll, Barbie’s wheelchair-bound pal, stares at a photo of what could be an abstract painting but is actually of a blank movie “green screen.”

Illusion, delusion and faith meet. Religion in art, and art as religion. Believing as seeing, rather than the other way around. Such ideas circulate through a piece that, for this artist, has unusual closure and gravity, but is still as light as a play of puns.

Play is a dominant mode in the shows organized by the six artists — Nayland Blake, Tom Burr, Harry Dodge, Alix Lambert, Allen Ruppersberg and Andrea Zittel — elsewhere in the Hessel. Ms. Harrison, collaborating with Tom Eccles, director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard, sets the tone by supplying two big, wormlike Franz West sculptures on the museum’s lawn with all-weather fright wigs.

Of all the other artists, Mr. Dodge, a filmmaker and writer, most closely follows suit, with a salon-style mash-up of 60 pieces grouped in thematic categories like “Extrude: Caves, Tunnels and Testicles” and “Transubstantiation/Into Light,” by artists ranging from the hard-to-avoid ([Richard Serra](#), Christopher Wool) to the where-have-they-been (Louisa Chase, Ronnie Cutrone) to the under-seen (Jitka Hanzlova, Alessandra Sanguinetti).

Only artists can make chaos look so cool, or at least they’re really good at it. More museums — and I’m taking about Manhattan here — should loosen up and let them.

*“Rachel Harrison: Consider the Lobster” and “And Other Essays” remain through Dec. 20 at the Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N. Y.; [bard.edu/ccs](http://bard.edu/ccs).*