

Art Review

September 2009

Art Review:

Rachel Harrison
Consider the Lobster

CCS Bard / Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson
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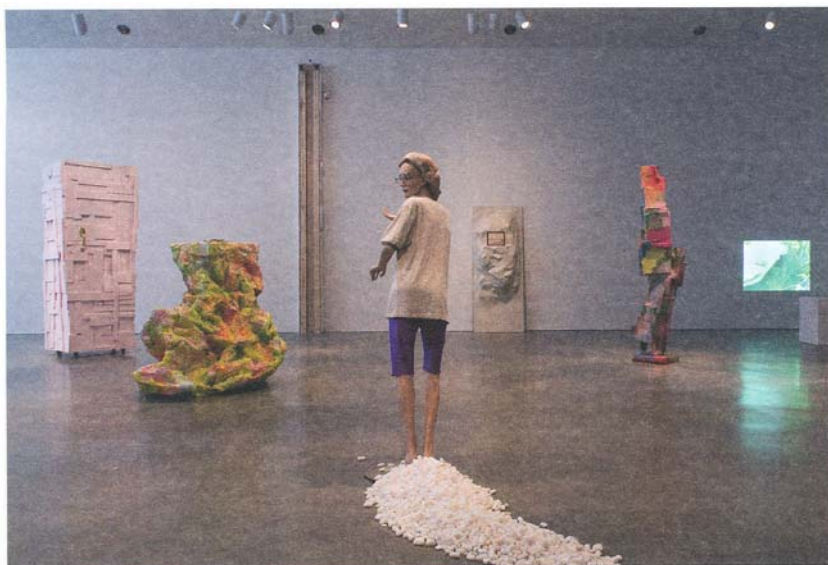
In an instance of exquisite coincidence, this elegant survey of Rachel Harrison's often perplexing work opened the day Michael Jackson's death dominated the headlines. Whereas Jackson subverted the boundaries of race, age and gender demarcating American society, turning the private into showbiz, Harrison's magpie aesthetic levels the popular, the highbrow, the commercial and the handmade, often in statements of quirky yet compelling beauty. She drapes a 'wife beater' over a lumpy grey mass, transforming it into classical drapery. *Fats Domino* (2007), a tall, blocky brown structure topped by a can of Slim-Fast, has the grace of a caryatid. In *The Eagle Has Landed* (2006), a polyester banner of our national bird rests on another lumpy mass – affixed to wheels but turned on its side, it rests immobilised on a table – recalling a flag draped over a coffin.

Other pieces, however, seem clumsy if not wilfully jarring – the roughly painted bust on the side of a crate for example – while Harrison's humour is too often easy, as in *Wigs for West* (2009), in which blonde and auburn hairpieces hang on the turdlike appendages of a large Franz West by the museum's entrance. Nevertheless, at her best, she pushes towards a new canon of the acceptably beautiful, much as Rauschenberg – to whom she is indebted – did by sticking a tire on the neck of an Angora goat, among other transgressions, in the 1950s.

But where Rauschenberg elevated the stuff of daily life to the heroic, Harrison's work plumbs a culture in which unfulfilled need derails into tackiness and desperation, a phenomenon of which Michael Jackson was an exemplar of allegorical portent. The above-mentioned eagle is clearly an elegy for a once grand national vision, its diminished successor now rendered in polyester. Harrison titled her show after a collection of essays by the late David Foster Wallace, exploring similar territory and musing on the morality of aesthetic delight.

But if this reference bespeaks Harrison's concerns, it also shows up her tendency towards kitschy humour, in contrast to Foster Wallace's wide-ranging and deft analyses of American culture. Witness how his book's title becomes a quirky tagline when combined with the image of a metal lobster atop a toy car that circulated as the announcement for this show.

Something more pernicious may be afoot. During the exhibition opening, Harrison was discussing *Perth Amboy* (2001), a gallery-size installation that includes photographs of supplicants at a suburban New Jersey pilgrimage site and vignettes of figures like the wheelchair-bound Barbie Becky and a carved head of an Indian chief 'looking' at pictures. She referred to the doll and Indian as "people who need art". The comment is testament to the transformative potential of art, but it also sounded patronising, an attitude that may well account for the monotone, often insider, quality of her wit. If so, it is, I suspect, the major hindrance to her potential as a mature artist. *Joshua Mack*



Consider the Lobster, 2009
(installation view, Center
for Curatorial Studies
and Hessel Museum of Art,
Bard College, Annandale-on-
Hudson). Photo: Chris Kendall