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*If I were a sonata by Bach, or a song by Courtney Love or Ray Charles, an antique hourglass or a home page on the Web, a china figurine, or a painting by Caravaggio, who decides what I mean? What makes me valuable or lets me be thrown out in the garbage? My projection isn't yours even when you and I go to the same movie.*

--Lynne Tillman<sup>1</sup>

Rachel Harrison examines the fundamental nature of sculpture, questioning how it is like and unlike other things in the world. Her work presents dense, heterogeneous combinations of matter and form: Rough, handmade constructions collide with slick, mass-produced goods while blobby, organic masses take on synthetic color. Photography and video are conjoined with sculpture and an assortment of pop-culture artifacts, which sit alongside references to past "high art" movements.

This array of objects and allusions may be initially disorienting. Yet it is in the very confrontation of these incongruous materials and modes of representation that their unique properties are revealed. An irregular, handcrafted form, for instance, sheds light on the strange perfection of an industrial object. A photograph hung on a sculpture calls to mind the placement and circulation of everyday images such as billboards on the sides of buildings or advertisements in bus stops. In this way, Harrison's work highlights the overlooked meanings embedded in structures around us, both inside and outside the museum.

*Blazing Saddles* (2003) is a four-sided pillar covered in clusters of blocks and painted a dark, muddy bronze. A black-and-white photograph of Lucille Ball hangs on one side, and a box of Campbell's beans sits on top. References multiply: The pillar may be a riff on the geometric monoliths characteristic of Minimalism, while the Campbell's carton unavoidably alludes to Andy Warhol's famous copies of grocery packaging. Warhol emphasized the status of the commodity brand name as an image or free-floating sign, but in Harrison's sculpture the Campbell's box no longer signifies "commodity" so much as Warhol's signature



appropriation of that form. We might also read it as an art-historical allegory: Pop art “shelved” by the minimalist practices that followed.

The presence of the photograph throws narrative uncertainty into this already jumbled mix. Although Lucy is instantly recognizable, wearing a familiar look of wide-eyed alarm induced by some screwball plot, the scenario depicted (Lucy held at gunpoint by two young cowboys) is obscure. The picture, as it turns out, is a production still from the 1950 film *The Fuller Brush Girl*, but Harrison did not know this when she purchased the photograph on the street in New York. It is another cultural artifact whose shelf life has expired.

*Blazing Saddles* is named after Mel Brooks’s parodic western of 1974. In the film, the citizens of Rock Ridge build a replica of their town as a decoy to divert a crooked politician who plans to steal their land. At the end, the camera pulls away to show that the movie is being shot on an (equally fictitious) Hollywood set. Harrison’s own production—her tongue-in-cheek relationship to art history and the ways in which her sculptures reveal their own constructedness—is not unlike the movie’s layering of fictions. The blocks aren’t functional, but they gesture toward the construction process.

*Hail to Reason* (2004), named for a winning racehorse, similarly shows signs of its own making—a beam juts out and cement is slathered unevenly. A tall, craggy thing painted iridescent blue, it is covered in lumps and protrusions and holds a package of doilies, which are also shiny and blue (as if, against all odds, this strange art form has given birth to a perfect commodity). A portable DVD player is embedded in an alcove on the opposite side. Like many of Harrison’s sculptures, this one cannot be seen all at once.

*Hail to Reason* is clearly a sculpture, but it also looks suspiciously like a stand-in, or a decoy, like Rock Ridge in *Blazing Saddles*. Vertically oriented, vaguely anthropomorphic, bulky, and roughly worked, it approximates certain traits of traditional sculpture, in particular Auguste Rodin’s *Monument to Honoré de Balzac* (1897). *Balzac*’s emphatically manipulated surface

was the mark of its modernity, and a furor erupted when Rodin first exhibited the plaster cast. It was declared “a shapeless mass, a nameless thing, a colossal fetus,” which is also a fairly apt description of *Hail to Reason*.

Harrison did not have *Balzac* in mind when she was making *Hail to Reason*, though she has since joked that the work could have been titled *Balzac in a Prom Dress*. (It’s worth noting that Rodin made several versions of *Balzac* variously garbed, including *Balzac in a Frock Coat* and *Balzac in a Dominican Robe*.) The comparison points to the ways in which her work tends to invoke specific histories lurking within modes of representation. *Balzac* has been interpreted as representing a shift in sculptural practice from the creation of site-specific monuments to nomadic, autonomous artworks.<sup>2</sup> It paved the way for the birth of modernist abstract sculpture, which by the 1960s was itself seen to be played out, supplanted by new site-specific and installation practices. *Hail to Reason* gestures toward the past even as it invents a new sculptural vocabulary of its own.



*Marilyn with Wall*, 2004

*Hail to Reason* also refers to a world outside the realm of avant-garde art by including video footage of a small-town auction in upstate New York. Among the array of barn lanterns, kerosene lamps, post diggers, and mirrors up for bidding are a few artworks: a painted saw, a charcoal drawing of the Beatles, a hand-carved wooden mask, and even a “nice signed nude,” painted in profile and surrounded by a hazy glow. For some this may be the ultimate in lowbrow art, the very definition of kitsch. Much recent contemporary art, however, draws elements from similar sources. Harrison’s video points to the ways in which context (class, for example, or geography) determines an artwork’s value, and the extent to which value is not inherent but projected. The rural auction—indeed, the entire piece—provides a cogent counterpoint to modernist sculpture’s claims for autonomy and transcendence.

*Cindy* (2004) develops the tension in Harrison’s practice between the handcrafted and the manufactured. Approaching from one side, we see the top of a blond head behind a white rectangular wall. Moving around the sculpture, we discover not a person but a startling chartreuse structure coated in stucco. Vertical and horizontal slats seem to balance precariously, like a cumbersome house of cards. The white rectangle—a piece of Sheetrock—leans against the awkward tower, and a wig hangs casually up top, as if placed on a coatrack. Closer inspection reveals that a coffee table is embedded in the sculpture, serving as its base. *Cindy* seems to distill domestic architecture down to its basics: a wall, some furniture, a stucco exterior—and a woman. But if architecture is typically associated with solidity, symmetry, and support, this structure seems unsteady and decrepit, its texture and green hue suggesting decay.

In contrast to this handcrafted construction stands the pristine artifice of the platinum wig. Its price tags dangling, the wig suggests the remaking of the body into a commodity, and it is also a kind of fetish—an erotically charged object that is imagined to fill a lack or void in the person who uses it. More generally, the wig speaks to the desire to be other than



what one is: to have hair when one does not, to be a woman instead of a man, to be blond instead of brunette, to disguise oneself, to transform oneself into an image—an image that is better (sexier, more powerful, more feminine) than reality.

Desires of this nature are frequently projected onto movie stars, who serve as objects of our collective identification and fantasy. *Cindy*’s blond wig recalls Marilyn Monroe—that most famous (unnatural) blond—who appears in another of Harrison’s sculptures, *Marilyn with Wall* (2004). This work is comprised of pieces of drywall excised from SFMOMA’s own architecture and leaned against the gallery wall.<sup>3</sup> The topmost fragment retains its status as a display surface: It holds a framed photograph of Monroe, the source image Warhol used to create his iconic paintings of the actress. Against Warhol’s depiction of Monroe as glamorous facade, Harrison would seem to give us access to the original behind his copy. But her face is partially obscured by a piece of archival vellum, a veil that renders her inaccessible and relegates her to the archives of art history.

If Monroe’s image is veiled, the sculpture itself stages an architectural unveiling. Paradoxically, the act of tearing away a museum wall, canceling

its functionality, calls attention to its function as a neutral surface that displays, but also disappears behind, works of art. *Marilyn with Wall* literally deconstructs the Museum, revealing it not only as a stage set for art objects, but also as an active participant in the physical and metaphorical "construction" of art.

Jill Dawsey

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- 1 Lynne Tillman, "Madame Realism Looks for Relief," in *This Is Not It* (New York: Distributed Arts Publishers, 2002), 203.
- 2 See Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
- 3 The wall fragment was removed from the galleries at a recent exhibition displaying work by Martin Kipperberger.



Rachel Harrison was born in 1966 in New York and presently lives and works in Brooklyn. She received a bachelor's degree in fine art from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1989. Most recently, Harrison has had solo exhibitions at Greene Naftali Gallery, New York; Camden Arts Centre, London; Bergen Kunsthalle, Norway; the Milwaukee Art Museum; Arndt & Partner, Berlin; and the Oakville Galleries, Toronto. Her work was included in the 2004 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh; *Open House: Working in Brooklyn* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art; *The Structure of Survival* at the 2003 Venice Biennale; the 2002 Whitney Biennial, New York; and group presentations at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

#### Works in the Exhibition

##### *Blazing Saddles*, 2003

Wood, polystyrene, Parex, Portland cement, acrylic, chromogenic print, and cardboard box

72 x 22 x 19 1/2 in. (182.9 x 55.9 x 49.5 cm)

Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

##### *Cindy*, 2004

Wood, polystyrene, Parex, Portland cement, acrylic, sheetrock, and wig

72 x 37 x 31 in. (182.9 x 94 x 78.7 cm)

Collection of Rebecca and Martin Eisenberg

##### *Hail to Reason*, 2004

Wood, wire, polystyrene, Parex, Portland cement, acrylic, DVD player, and dollies

100 x 39 x 36 in. (254 x 99 x 91.4 cm)

Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

##### *Marilyn with Wall*, 2004

Sheetrock and chromogenic print

Dimensions variable

Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

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Auguste Rodin's *Monument to Honoré de Balzac* was first modeled in 1897 and cast in 1967. Photo: © 2004 Museum Associates/LACMA, courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the B. Gerald Cantor Art Foundation

Reverse, left to right:

*Blazing Saddles* (detail), 2003

*Cindy* (detail), 2004

*Marilyn with Wall* (detail), 2004

*Hail to Reason* (detail), 2004

new work

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