THE SOLID MATTER OF A CELESTIAL BODY

Jillian Conrad

2007 october 19 through december 5
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn
The seven pieces in Jillian Conrad’s exhibition at Clough-Hanson Gallery are a continuation of her ongoing practice of using sculpture to find the connections between the simple stuff of everyday life and the extraordinary moments of the human experience. Conrad’s studio practice draws as much from “the wonderful mess of a construction site” as it does from “the quiet spread of morning light.” Conrad uses her work to delicately bridge the real and the unreal in ways that are at once both unassuming and elegant. While Conrad’s oeuvre shows her accomplishing this in a number of ways using a broad variety of means, *The Solid Matter of a Celestial Body* presents a more tightly focused approach.

Here the artist uses the forms and images of rocks as a solid way of representing the daily accumulation of emotions and chance experiences that shape our lives. The choice of stones as stand-ins for the figure is drawn in part from 10th century Chinese scholars’ rocks. Scholars would use these prized found or sculpted stones as tools of contemplation. By substituting the natural rock with pitted and broken concrete, Conrad is updating the metaphor, connecting it with the more common contemporary urban experience. By removing these bits from their environment and placing them in the clean gallery space, Conrad...
coaxes us into a quieter space in which we are able to see more clearly what is laid before us. Through this potentially meditative experience the viewer is able to examine these carefully chosen objects in order to find wonder in an unlikely source. (It is, after all, just a rock.)

The use of rocks goes beyond their figurative metaphor. Conrad's title *As Above So Below* references the Hermetic notion of the microcosm and the macrocosm: understanding the macrocosm (the universe) is linked to the understanding of the microcosm (oneself). In *Horizon Line*, the rock has been lightly dusted with pastel pink chalk and placed upon a thin, smooth wooden shelf. Its backdrop is a clean, white piece of Plexiglas with a delicately engraved, black ink contour. The enlarged rendering is at once ornamentation and serves to echo the stone's ragged shape. One clearly sees the artist's quiet delight in this simple, meandering line.

An extension of the meditative experience is the presence or absence of light in the works. We see this in the reflective marble dust mixed in with the Venetian plaster in *As Above So Below*, the white Plexiglas surface in *Horizon Line*, as well as the pale, fresco-like side of *Oz*. Likewise, the paper shape covered with black chalkboard paint in *Sunrise Sunset*, the graphite-rubbed wooden surface of *How the Unseen World Works*, and the irregular dark side of *Oz* all seem to suck light
from the room. Here we find Conrad using black not as a color, but rather she is “using blackness to describe a state of being.”

While the other pieces use light in a figurative way to get to the idea of enlightenment or realization, *Flat Earth Projections* uses light literally. The artist's simple, homemade, opaque projectors cast images of stones on the wall of the darkened gallery. The dim projections of the orbs floating in a black void at once conjure the feeling of looking through a telescope at a heavenly body and looking through a microscope at some basic, elemental form.

Conrad's deceptively simple work may not be easily accessible to the casual viewer, but their undeniable elegance and quirky pairings of materials are sure to warrant a second glance. Like a haiku poet, Conrad pare's her vocabulary down to use only what is essential. With each piece, the artist uses a different combination of traditional art tools and unlikely materials to create a particular world. Marble dust and Venetian plaster contrast with the gallery's rolled, white walls. A delicately drawn graphite line creates a horizon on a common piece of plywood. A simple cardboard box is cut away to allow an irregularly shaped piece of concrete to be both inside
and outside at once. The pairing of these disparate materials blurs the boundaries and disrupts the hierarchies between them.

It is important to note that Conrad uses the work to present bridges between the common and the extraordinary, between solid matter and the celestial body. In this way, the exhibition works like a series of long, contemplative strolls. The kind where you find yourself drawn to the thing you’ve walked by a hundred times before. Nothing has changed in the world but for whatever reason, this time what is bright and beautiful about an object or place is brilliantly revealed to you. The pieces do not provide all the answers; rather they strive to accomplish the even more difficult task of creating a space where the artist and the viewer can meet halfway.

Hamlett Dobbins, Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

---

1 Jillian Conrad, private correspondence.
2 Conrad used this phrase in her lecture at Rhodes College to reference Renee Magritte’s letter to Andre Bosmans dated December 29, 1962 regarding finding a way of using color without relating it to specific objects. In the letter Magritte wrote: “what one sees through the open window is ‘blackness’ and not the ‘colour black.’”
How the Unseen World Works, mixed media, 24" x 60" x 60"

Cover Image: Flat Earth Projections, wood, rock, light, lens, & paint (detail). All work courtesy the artist. Dimensions variable unless otherwise noted.