Welcome to Episode 87: Tara Donovan: "From the Mundane becomes the Beautiful"

I want to open this episode with a powerful quote from the installation artist and sculptor celebrated in today's episode, Tara Donovan. She said, “There is a sense I get of wanting to choreograph someone’s experience of my work because the surfaces of my work do often shift and follow the perspective of the viewer, there is a perceptual movement that coincides with a person’s physical movement within the gallery space” I just get goose bumps when I read this because she is looking at her physical work, in which we will explore in a moment, through the perspective of the spectator or viewer. We are actively engaged. So follow me now into a space of one of her emblematic works, and as you listen, I want you to think about what unique perspective will you bring to this interactive dance with the surfaces of the materials from everyday objects she employs in her large scale sculptures?

Untitled (2014/2015): are ten towers that emulate mountains constructed by stacking and gluing hundreds of thousands of index cards on top of each other. They range from 8 to 13 feet tall and can be expanded or contracted to fit a space. In my readings, the Smithsonian likened Untitled(2014/2015) to "looming spires reminiscent of the hoodo rock formations found in Utah's Bryce Canyon." I made the same connection when I first looked at-I hiked the Picaboo trail at Bryce a few years ago. Both Donovan's sculptures and the formations at Bryce have the same interesting ridges, craggy peaks and elevated crests; Where they are dissimilar is color. Donovan's palette, true to the material , the index card, consists of whites and grays --Bryce's natural formations range in colors from red to orange to whites.

In works like those mountain-like formations in Untitled (2014/2015), Donovan's artistic practice uses one type of building block and then exploits this one material, in this specific example, index cards. Donovan gathers up the things, everyday objects we think we know, transforms the familiar into the unrecognizable through overwhelming accumulation.

Donovan says, "I first started working with ordinary materials because they were cheap and accessible and mass produced because I could afford them--a limitation forced on me by my economics. It proved to be a rewarding place for me to look for materials."

Donovan is so committed in the process though there is no formula; it depends on the material itself. Working very much like a scientist or architect in the studio, she isolates the material and plays with it, she looks for fleeting moments. "The process of making informs the final outcome, says Donovan. Underpinning all of it is her capacity for absorption; looking for the "inherent physical properties of the material and how the material could transcend itself.--I look for a point of transcendence and when does the material transcend itself and become something else." When I look at the massiveness, the monumentality of those formations, I don't see the humble, individual or even a stack of index cards. I see myself scaling those ridges. I see the wonderment in nature.

I have a personal history with index cards. I have stacks of them throughout my home, some lined, some unlined, 4x6 inch ones and 3x5 ones, some are colored, but most of them are the standard white. I use them as aids to books and scholarly articles I read, writing out one idea or passage, an artist quote, always in pencil. I have a box of categorized index cards, research for my book. I use them to organize my day too. I carry them everywhere. Donovan's exploration with the ordinary, mass-produced, utilitarian index card--I see them in a whole new light.

My first experience with a Donovan sculpture is the work Untitled, Toothpicks, 2009, a 6 foot cube made out of wooden toothpicks glued together, hundreds of thousands of toothpicks, it is a solid cube of toothpicks. One can only imagine the painstaking process of assembling the cube--her methods in all her works have long remained consistent. She spends hours experimenting with the material until she happens on something that works. As a viewer you can't help but slow down as you approach the object, an organized mesh of layered toothpicks, walk around it, crouch by it and wonder, at the sheer amount of those individual toothpicks she compiled, it is sturdy yet, there is a delicateness to her work. You can't help but be in awe that there is no adhesive holding the materials together, it is held by friction and gravity. It is indicative of her commitment to process, her ability to discover the inherent physical characteristics of an object and transform it into art. She spends more hours devising a system for creating and assembling the individual elements that will make up the overall piece, so that others can help her fabricate it.

In this particular work she is thinking about Minimalism. First a little bit of background, an historical perspective about this movement: Minimalism emerged in the 1960s. Its goal is to reduce painting and sculpture to essentials, it eliminates representational imagery and favors a "single unified image often composed of smaller parts arranged according to a grid--there is a tendency toward mathematically regular compositions. Materials tend to be industrial like bricks, steel, tubular lighting. One of the key artists in this movement are Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, In Judd's sculpture, Untitled, 1969, galvanized iron and plexiglass boxes are arranged like a tower, one atop of another. He employs impersonal shapes that do not have the nuances of classical sculpture. Dan Flavin, one of my favorite of the Minimalists uses commercial GE tubular fluorescent bulbs, he orients these fixtures according to the room's architecture, the medium of light emphasizes a dynamic presence. Like Donovan, his work creates a wide range of emotional reactions which is entirely up to the viewer. For a moment let's , Connect back to the quote I read to you at the beginning of this episode from Donovan, the viewer's reaction like a choreographed dance in and around her objects.

Nicholas Baume, the Institute of Contemporary Art's chief curator, described her work in the context of Minimalism. "Tara's work isn't ironic. It actually takes up the discourse of Minimalism. It's about creating a system, using a structure, for the Toothpicks piece it is the cube, and repeating incremental units that can go from the finite to the seemingly infinite." Her work expands well beyond many of the "classical" Minimalists that adhered to a strictly rectilinear grid.

Eileen Doyle, Curatorial Fellow for Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth Athenueum, did a short audio tour of the Untitled (toothpicks). She said, Tara Donovan was having a little fun when she was referring to Minimalism with this work. Minimalism is typically associated with industrial materials like steel, also plywood, and they had a very aggressive look to them - you might even call it a masculine kind of art, and typically Minimalist artists were men. And Tara Donovan typically chooses more commonplace materials associated with the home, and yet she makes them transcend that domesticity when she makes the cube. It’s a little tongue-in-cheek."

Like the male Minimalist who exploit industrial materials, female artists like Donovan are able to transform huge quantities of prosaic manufactured materials -- plastic-foam cups, pencils, tar paper and toothpicks -- into sculptural installations that evoke a feminine delicacy compared to the solidity of Minimalist works.

The element of light also plays an important role in Donovan's artworks, as her materials take light in and reflect it different ways. Materials have a low profile in the sense that they don't have a very identifying color, or marking on them. Donovan says, I am drawn to translucent, or light reflective material--the light is what activates the sculpture. They are all very activated by the movement of your body. “My sculptures become activated by the movement of the observer” She goes on to explain how the magic happens within the sculptures, underlining that her sculptures are artworks rather than critical comments. “I feel like my work is mimicking the ways of nature, not necessarily mimicking nature per ce.” Donovan states.

"So much about the art-making process is about paying attention," Ms. Donovan said. "It's about looking and noticing things." Are you getting excited about visiting a gallery space and experience her installations for yourself? As museums and galleries reopen, I urge you to walk into the space of Donovan sculpture, experience the wonderment of ordinary individual objects on a massive scale. You will experience the transcendence of the object in its amplified accumulation and through close inspection, the ordinary, some may describe as mundane individual object.

Thank you for listening. In the podcast notes, I added a link to the Wadsworth Atheneum and Pace gallery. I encourage you to explore Minimalist artists and their works--a great site to check out is the Dia Art Foundation, specifically their Dia Beacon location in New York. If you are curious about another female artist who transforms the traditional the kitchen, "the drudgery of domesticity into a glamorous wonderland, through individual, colorful beads please listen to Episode 69 celebrating the artist Lisa Lou and her full scale work Kitchen. Other resources include Smithsonian Museum, interviews by Marc-Christoph Wagner at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, curator Nora Burnett Abrams.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form