

Ruth
Hardinger

e n v o y s



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TAMA
Art Design Interiors
New York

Envoy 3 | 2007 | 41.5 x 13.5 x 14" | concrete

Ruth Hardinger envoys

Essay by Stephen Westfall



During the last decade Ruth Hardinger's art has crossed a variety of media, perhaps most notably evolving a sculptural imagery in cast concrete of animate fragments that are suggestive of linked bones, nautical floats, and pulleys and levers. All her forms address the body and its memory of labor weight. I say "memory" because even though her materials are comprised of a sort of plaster or cement and are sometimes strung and hung on a bulky rope, the ashen grey monochrome of the finished pieces is perceived visually as a kind of lightness, as though they are dehumidified relics from an ancient ceremony. Her works on paper from the same period posit a dynamic imagistic break from the theatrical stillness of her sculpture through their active, gestural pours of dry, powdered graphite that refuse to consolidate into closed figure/ground relationships. And yet, there is the persistent interest in monochrome shared by both bodies of

work. There remains an important material relationship to her sculptural forms in the mineral glitter of the granules of powdered graphite, a memory of stone.

The sense of animation, of life present within the form, pervading Hardinger's newest sculptures is partly a natural outcome of the conditions of their making. The disposable food container, tube and carton moulds for the cast concrete appear to have given out a little bit from the weight of the material, so the constituent parts of each sculpture swell like flesh. At the same time, their basic outline is geometric which imbues them with a tension between the earthly and the ideal, a tension that is never really resolved, but instead remains buoyed on a sustaining spirit of play and contingency. Each set

of sculptures, the *conundrums* (Hardinger's use of the lower case here is intentional), *Extensions/Extrusions*, and *Envoys*, are clearly assembled from parts like marionettes, tin robots, or Frankenstein's monster. Neither the floor-standing *Envoys* or the shelf-scaled *conundrums* have arms or faces, but they are unmistakably figural. The bust-sized *Extrusions*, on the other hand, directly invoke cockeyed Northwest Coast Indian masks. The figure is only the ghost in the machine, however. The mechanical surrogate for the human body has been one of the great subtexts of Modernist imagery in both literature and the visual arts precisely because it speculates on presence or absence of soul, or animus in the face of the technological extension of the body and the withering of religion. Hardinger is deeply concerned with soul, but not in an overly somber way. She is aware of the comedy of assemblage and the irony of the persistence of "liveliness" in the hand-made abstract form. For this reason, I think



Envoys is an apt name for the new body of work as a whole. An “envoy” is a messenger or herald, often used by the state in diplomacy when the message is especially sensitive. Thus, an envoy is a figure, an entity, and a symbol made flesh. The message Hardinger’s *Envoys* carry is embedded in this duality of figural and abstract. Part of the considerable pleasure to be found in this work resides in its evocation of an art that didn’t feel the need to divide these recognitions and which instead found a seemingly endless fertile ground in their shared territory. Thus, one can see the echoes of Picasso and Gonzales in all the *Envoys*, and why not? The fixing of separate cast stone parts together is really not that different from welding. The found containers that serve as moulds are analogous to the scrap

yard components of mid 20th century welded sculpture and Picasso’s use of a cast bronze toy car for the face of his *Baboon and Young* (1951).

Other rich associations with 20th century art attend Hardinger’s work. The tabletop scale of her *conudrums* invokes Morandi’s still-lives of bottles and vases, for instance. Morandi’s forms have become the classic example of empty vessels imbued with the animate through an artist’s touch. They are like little beings put through maneuvers, and individually they seem to breath their life in from and out to their surrounding light. The individual *conudrums* exert much the same presence. Assembled out of separate elements, they tilt or list like small animals just starting to turn to look behind them. Or, they crook like a finger, or they wear their crowning element like a top hat. On the one hand we can see they

are almost obviously simple constructions of a minimum amount of inert parts. On the other hand, their constructed wholes have had a bit of life breathed into them, the life that unifies them into “wholes.” Try deconstructing them with your eye by imagining any single part resting alone on a surface. Nothing could bring it to life. In spite of its interesting color, texture, and material density, it would be just a random thing, abandoned by usefulness and left mute. The inflection of movement is accomplished through the slight variation in color and size of one element from another and the tilt in their alignments at their joining. It’s almost a stupidly simple set of effects, but they are transparent to the point of being intrinsic so they don’t register as “effects” as such. Like card magic seen close up, you know there’s something being done to make it work, but your lying eyes finally have to give up analysis for the pleasure of the performance.

The name of both the *Extensions* and *Extrusions* refer to their process of construction. Like the *conudrums*, the *Extensions* are literally extending links of cast elements. They are similar in size to the



Top - left to right
 con und rum 3 | 2007 | 9.5 X 5 X 5"
 con und rum 4 | 2007 | 14.5 X 5 X 5"
 con und rum 5 | 2007 | 13.5 X 4 X 4"
 con und rum 3 | 2007 | 9 X 4 X 4"

Bottom - left to right
 conundrum 6 | 2007 | 8.75 X 4 X 4"
 con und rum 6 | 2007 | 10 X 4 X 4"
 conundrum 2 | 2007 | 12.5 X 4.5 X 4.5"
 conundrum 4 | 2007 | 17 X 3 X 3"
 con und rum 5 | 2007 | 13.5 X 4 X 4"
 con und rum 7 | 2007 | 12 X 4 X 4"
 con und rum 6 | 2007 | 16.5 X 5.5 X 5.5"
 con und rum 8 | 2007 | 3.5 X 5.5 X 5"



Envoy 2 | 2007 | 39.25 X 14 X 14.5" | concrete



Extrusions, but flipped on their back, as it were, where where they are less figural and more like architectural models of buildings and columns. Hardinger also thinks of their protrusions as analogous to geological upthrusts and even exposed sedimentary core samples. This last reference, of course, ties them to the *Extrusions*, whose “features” appear to “extrude” through holes or fixtures on the front side of the main slab. Beyond their invocation of Northwest Coast Indian masks (as well as Olmec heads a masks from the Oaxaca region of Mexico, where Hardinger has visited and been profoundly moved by the local masks and indigenous cultures), the *Extrusions* also resonate with their share of 20th

century art, specifically the DADA masks of Marcel Janco and others, Paul Klee’s puppets and, inevitably it seems, Picasso. Both the *conundrums* and the *Extrusions* deliver a rich imagistic effect from a transparently simple process. There’s a sense that any observant viewer could be inspired to make their own sculpture from the revealed processes in Hardinger’s work, and this democratization of process, as much as its geometric clarity, situates her art firmly in a late Modernist tradition wherein the fabrication of the artwork is laid open for inspection. In fact, anyone attempting to duplicate Hardinger’s craft would find the process daunting. All the separate pieces are fixed by their own wet slip. Hardinger has more to say on this matter with respect to the *Extrusions*, “I take solids and plant them into liquids, which become solid. To the extent that the wet rises up and makes

waves and bulging shapes, it is an extruded passage. Also, it is a reverse – or a counter-movement – of an extrusion because the solid “instrument form” (used to plant) stays in the work and becomes the work. Also, these pieces take time . . . weeks, months. It takes days to cure each element before they can be put together. And they evolve as I watch them. I let the accidents and surprises of each part play in the work. If there are breaks, cracks, then sometimes that gets configured or re-configured into an important passage.” (1)

We can see the origins of each element in things that are thrown away: boxes and cardboard tubes. Transformed by material and reconfigured, they retain their fragmented and utilitarian pasts even as they become new things, new beings. And with one foot in the low forms, literally the containers of everyday life, they aspire to the genius of historical Modernism.

Of the three groups of sculptures, the eponymous *Envoys* most directly address the human body in its own scale. While reaching only a little over half the average height of a human being, each *Envoy* commands the floor space of a standing figure. Like their smaller brethren they lean and list, but more as mighty fragments of a colossal figure, the golem of Prague, maybe. Unlike the other sculptures, the *Envoys* are made in a single cast. The mix of high and low is again operative, as the telling imprints of the ribs and folds of boxes lend their Pop, street signature to forms that, no matter how fragmented, might otherwise lean (as it were) towards the ethereal and ideal. The result is something like a Nauman wedge or a Whiteread interior volume dragged through Oldenburg’s Ray Gun store.

Footnote (1) From conversation dated 12/29/07



Hardinger's large *Water Color Wobbles* concentrate on the circular socket that is a base for the appendages in her *Extrusions*. But they leave the body behind for atmospheres and far horizons. The circle is set in a blue rectangle these two elements are phased on top of each other so where there is overlap the blue darkens through slate to indigo and the circle is sliced into phases like the moon. Here, Hardinger's monochrome takes on the poetics of the nocturnal and shadowed. The "wobble" could be the wobble of the planet, the life-giving ripple of dissatisfaction running through Brahma's dream of the universe, a porthole bobbing on the ocean. Whatever else it might represent it is, at heart, the tragicomic slip from geometric precision that an artist's hand practices in search of an even more subtle representation, that of life coursing through a form.



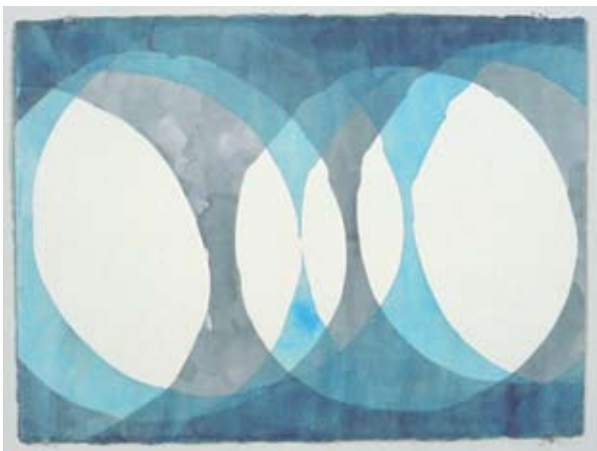
Water Color Wobble 004 | 2007 | 111.5 X 45 " | watercolor on paper



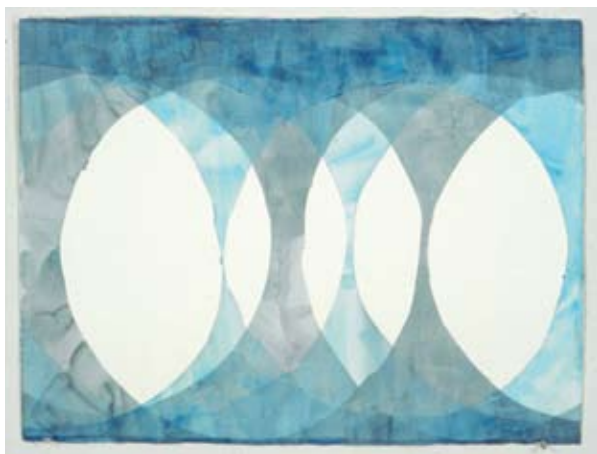
Water Color Wobble 009 | 2008 | 100.5 X 51.5 " | watercolor on paper



Water Color Wobble 106 | 2007 | 22 x 30" | watercolor on paper



Water Color Wobble 105 | 2007 | 22 x 30" | watercolor on paper



Water Color Wobble 103 | 2007 | 22 x 30" | watercolor on paper

Extension 3 | 2008 | 14.5 x 10 x 22" | concrete



Ruth Hardinger, who lives and works in New York City, has had over 20 solo exhibitions and has participated in numerous group exhibitions, both nationally and internationally including such venues as the Brunnier Museum in Ames Iowa and Museo de Arte Contemporanea in Oaxaca, Mexico. She has been a recipient of a Fulbright Grant to Mexico, along with other awards and fellowships. Her work is included in collections including the Museum of Modern Art Library, Artist Book Collection, Chase Manhattan Bank, and the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art. Hardinger studied painting at the Art Student's League of New York under Theodoros Stamos.

Photographers: Nick Ghiz, Michael Groen



Extrusion 3 | 2007 | 16 X 16 X 10" | concrete

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