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Ruth Hardinger

Relentless Unfolding: New Plasters and Graphites

By Dominique Nahas

"Any percentage of you is as good as the whole pie ... any fractions thereof brings dividends of interest..." George Clinton [1]



Ruth Hardinger's forms, in three dimensions – her Plasters – and in her large scale multi-panel drawings – the Graphites – seem easily approachable. Their initial quality of freshness and direct simplicity is unmistakable. Slowly, their finer distinctions begin to appear, now more complex and layered than what one might have originally assumed.

Matter-of-factness swings into (im)possibility and doubt, spontaneity seems held in check by a controlling element of self-sufficiency and a whiff of willful irresolution. In a dialectical game of the mind, however, re-ordered perceptions begin to shift and resume their original positions. Hardinger's tottering or toppled totems, her spindly three-legged table shapes or floating graphite forms attain once more an aspect of

inevitable naturalness.

This procedure of relentless unfolding is at the heart of Hardinger's metamorphic play. Her works take their time and caution us not to know them too quickly. The two and three dimensional works are separate, distinct bodies of works yet they can be seen together coherently. Hardinger's recent Plasters and Graphites, while seemingly disparate in look and feel, have several aspects which make them remarkably compatible. On the conceptual level their rigor and tension rely on the artist's use of structured improvisation. The work's capacity to continually surprise the viewer results from the unlikely mix of the geometric and organic, unanticipated textures, and unforeseen relationships to equilibrium.

Hardinger's Plasters have a strong presence as they are poised between authoritative self-containment and a

sense of the fragmentary. Her works also include questions of completion as shown through raw passages such as the seams and vents that come from the parts made in molds while other sections are as smooth as fresco. In the sculptural works the history of the genre of avant-garde assemblage emerges. Having stylistic provenance is essential in good work, but too much of it becomes derivative and overly manneristic. With the Plasters, Hardinger keeps her artistic balance and claims her heritage while staking out her own territory.

It consists of artistic inflows such as: the early gridded

Untitled, studio photograph of Plasters, 2002.

Ruth Hardinger/Relentless Unfolding

pre-Columbian sculpture, artifacts, and architecture. Yet these attributes are not overbearing. If anything they seem casually inserted within the Plasters as Hardinger weaves and dodges, ideologically, between the references that have captivated the interest of her precursors.

Tripod Table and Teeter for Two, for example, demonstrate high refinement in art-making while indicating the artist's commitment to mutability and metamorphosis. She creates a world that is child-like and innocent and takes its energy from a melding of mechanical, industrial, and hand-made processes. Her cobbled-together cast forms (often derived from paper cups, cardboard tubes, corrugated boxes, or hand-made and molded ball-shapes) might be seen as gangly and vitalistic, or fragile and contingent. Through her refined use of plaster, Hardinger exploits the very essence of her medium. The sensation we have is that we are in the presence of a material which embodies the basic mechanism of transition from the liquid to the solid state, that is, of crystallization.

Plaster, a substance used in all cultures from ancient to modern, is elemental both in look and feel. It looks like fine white dust which congeals and hardens when water is added to it. Primordial in character, it fulfills the conditions of both liquidness and hardness nearly simultaneously. Like the substance itself, its application requires both looseness and concentration on the part of the sculptor in order for it to assume desired configurations.

All assemblage is an art of juxtaposition. Yet Hardinger's Plasters are exponentially so. Avoiding the use of armatures, she adds section to section attaching each plane, ring, or sphere to the section that precedes it, connecting it with lamp hardware – that is, threaded rods and nuts – as joint mechanisms. What is of particular interest in the visual chain of events that result are the intermediary passages, the liminal (often hidden) areas which serve as juncture points for the chained segments. This applies to the floor pieces, Chain #1 and Chain #2, as well as the upright Tall Stand #3. These fundamental transitions are sometimes fitted with seamless and fluid grace; at other times the concept of transition-space itself and its viability are left open to question. The connective spatial tissues between sections or volumes are either modeled or molded as components equal to the primary parts themselves.

Hardinger's final forms emerge from a play between the arbitrary and the systematic. A sensitivity lies in the making process, as she chooses what element to add on next to another element and at what moment she decides to stop the accumulative process. The art's disparate parts placed in opposition to one another creates a sustained level of tension,



Installation shot, sculpture from left to right:
Double Reach, 38 x 35 x 11",
Tipping, 18 x 13 x 15",
Teeter for two, 53 x 29 x 9",
Tall Stand #3, 41 3/4 x 5 x 6",
String #1, 6 x 39 x 18".
All works are plasters and hardware, 2002.
Drawings: 030802RH, 2002, 46.5 x 58.5", 012901RH, 2001, 74 x 45",
All works are graphite on papers.

Double Reach, 2002,
38 x 35 x 11", plasters and hardware.

permutations of Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse's syncopated cadences, the use of methodologies to create perceptions about space in the art of Robert Morris, Louise Bourgeois's totemic forms and Cy Twombly's preoccupation with myth in his own plaster sculptures (which problematize the pedestal's commemorative status). One can also find references to ancient Mixtec dating notations using spherical forms,



from left to right:
 012901RH, 2001, 74 x 45",
 graphite on papers.
 Tipping, 18 x 13 x 15",
 plasters and hardware.
 030802RH, 2002,
 46.5 x 58.5",
 graphite on papers



rather than a single jolt of dissociation. The combinatory and re-combinatory energy of “finished” and “raw” components circulates in and throughout each work in an improvisational dynamic. This movement, born out of juxtaposition, is itself at a remove through the nature of plaster. Inherent in the material’s stillness is a frozen-in-time character that recalls ancient formations. What’s happening structurally, physically, and materially is being played out philosophically.

In this exhibition the sculptures are clustered in specific arrangements. This congregating of finished works then becomes part of a larger whole which can be re-arranged, considered singularly or as constellations. Here we have another meta-level of juxtaposition.

Hardinger’s large-scale Graphites are abstract works made across several whole sheets of papers in differing stocks and tones glued end to end, creating geometric structures onto which graphite powder is freely applied, gesturally. The supple yet volumetric drawings are about the making, tracing, and tracking of additive space. The Graphites are quite prepos-

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sessing if not insistent, and their large formats only increase their territorial quality. Yet the delicate x-ray aspect of their evanescent forms make them de-materialize as well as materialize.

In contrast to the size of the small Plasters, the large Graphites hover over the viewer as enigmatic apparitions. Soothing yet powerful, never slick or over-determined, these drawings are viewing devices of a high order; the viewer can be gradually overwhelmed with the variety of associations they conjure up. Among many possibilities, the Graphites’ figural marks easily sustain the suggestions of rock-forms, nucleated energy fields, or the motion of bodies in deep cosmic space with slowly, twisting limbs. The lush mark-making activity recalls the presence of the artist’s intervening hand. Like solving a riddle, the viewer is soon involved in the various levels in the large drawings.

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These works on paper are individual efforts, they are titled according to a date code. They are neither preliminary sketches or supplemental works nor are they drawn as a response to a finished three dimensional work. They refer indirectly to the sculptures relating imagistically and sensorially to them. Asserting the opposite, these softly spectral works can be considered as shape shifting or “shadows” of the sculptures, though they have glowing sections which emphasize the contours of folding forms.

The naturalness of graphite and plaster and their inherent coloration is an essential aspect of this exhibition. It tunes up and unifies it. The individual drawings are essentially monochromatic, after all, while the assemblages are bathed in a field of white, the plaster material is being kept inviolate and free of pigment. This coloristic essentialism allows the eye to glide smoothly over and through each work and its permutations. Purity and single-mindedness descend over the entire project, which is complex without being unfathomable or bewildering. Its sophistication is interwoven through thoughtful consideration of slight variances in tonal shifts and displacements of weights, volumes, and textures.

The artist’s sensuous drawings and sculptures appear to have no definite beginnings and ends. They preempt the need for conclusiveness. In Hardinger’s words, “the work moves around itself . . . there are lots of ways of touching”. Tension between the two distinct medias, between each piece as well as the individual components only sharpens the generative capacity of the entire body of work.

In Ruth Hardinger’s Graphites and Plasters what originally seemed so obstinately certain, now appears less straightforward, more elliptical, more haphazard, joyful, and enigmatic. Here the world is as easily constructed as it is dis-assembled, destroyed and interrupted, as smartly of a whole as it is dumbly fragmentary. The presencing quality lingers and elevates its matter-of-factness. In no small measure it is the reason for the work’s staying-power and impossible beauty.

Dominique Nahas is an independent critic and curator based in Manhattan.

[1] George Clinton & the P-Funk Allstars, T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M., “Mathematics” G. Clinton Jr., D. McKnight, 1996 Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

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Design: Rosann Berry Design



Teeter for two, 53 x 29 x 9",
plasters and hardware.
Against the Wall, 2002,
49 x 25.5 x 5.5", plasters
and hardware.

