

THE UNCERTAINTY OF OBJECTS AND IDEAS

WASHINGTON

When Edgar Degas applied a wig of real hair and a cloth skirt to his wax sculpture of a young ballet dancer, he suddenly disrupted sculpture's monochrome tradition. Introducing a new sense of realism and suggesting avenues for the expression of ideas in three dimensions, his use of non-traditional materials also jarred viewers by instilling a profound uncertainty with regard to the fundamental nature of sculpture. In *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; October 26, 2006—January 7, 2007], an engrossing survey of recent sculpture, viewers face a similar quandary. If color and energy make the initial impact, an impression of discomposure soon follows as the work seems both strange and familiar simultaneously.

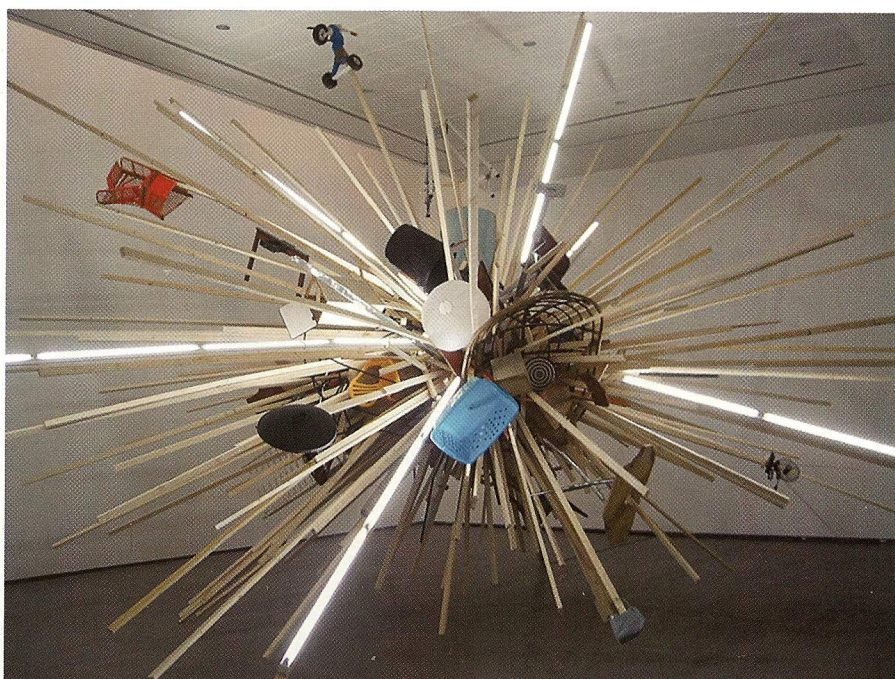
Many works make references to the history of modern sculpture, producing a sense of familiarity. In *Agnes Martin Kippenberger*, 2005, Charles Long figuratively unites antipodal figures by welding wavy metal rods surmounted with cast concrete blobs onto a screen of parallel metal bars. Franz West's papier-mâché forms recall both Henry Moore's plaster casts

and the paint handling of the Viennese Actionists or German Neo-Expressionists. In a surprising coincidence, Mark Handforth's three works *I-Beam*, 2002, *Mobile (Green, Yellow and White)*, 2002, and *Northern Star*, 2005, sequentially suggest the material, suspension, and triangular structure of Mark di Suvero's *Are Years What? (For Marianne Moore)*, 1967—standing in the Hirshhorn Museum's sculpture garden. Offhand derivation also pervades Rachel Harrison's contributions. *Cindy*, 2004, and *Two Bathers*, 2005, are essentially vertical abstract constructions whose scale clearly refers to the body. They also cheekily reprise Degas' revolutionary breakthrough, by way of the addition of such fashion items as *Cindy's* blonde wig and Calvin Klein briefs for *Two Bathers*. Here, the artist revives the incongruity of this sculptural milestone.

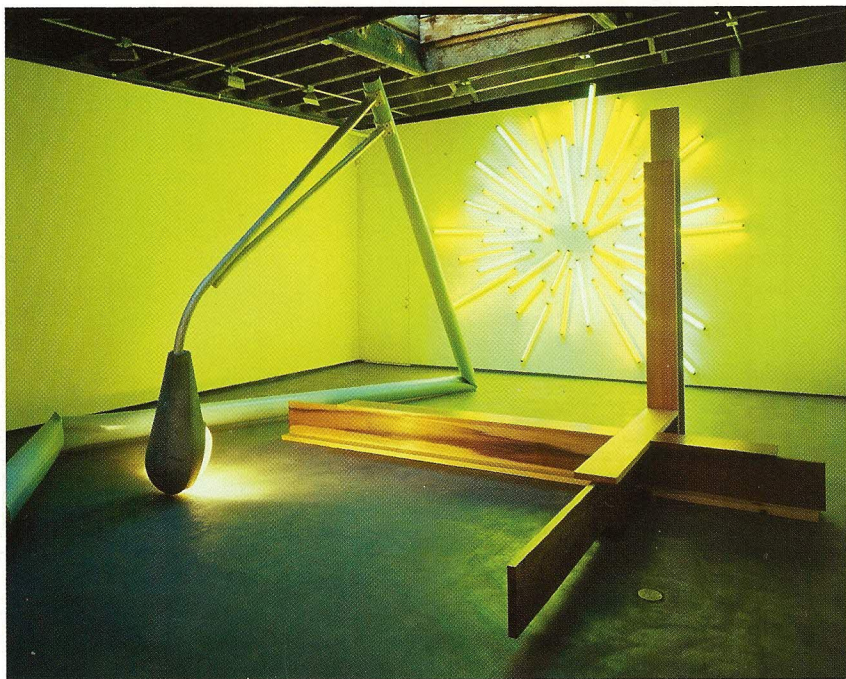
The exhibition's inescapable strangeness derives from the works' stark obliquity, which makes many of them a challenge to decipher. What is the exact nature of the relationship between the subjects of Long's lively three-dimensional drawing? Is the work

a product of happenstance, revealing the artist's wry humor? Or does he somehow see himself—artistically or temperamentally—positioned between the two? Handforth's *I-Beam* irreverently nods toward pop art and minimalism. Crafted out of planks of cherry, mahogany, purpleheart, and other woods, his colorful replica loses its industrial qualities, upending the references to di Suvero's big steel sculpture.

The strength of Harrison's work also lies in her ability to take ideas and twist them, pushing them to see where they will go. *Cindy*, a slab of sheetrock leaning against a higgledy-piggledy iridescent lime green wig-wearing tower, addresses the viewer. Resembling a full-length mirror, this partial barrier suggests that the work may be about the opacity of disguises, the chasm between appearances and reality, and our inability to see beyond our assumptions. *Two Bathers* operates in a similar fashion. In this exercise of bifurmy, a black and white stack of planar and rounded forms supports fashion briefs and a reproduction of a Cézanne painting featuring male bathers. This curious combination of mass



PAGE 1: Björn Dahlem, *Coma Sculptor*, 2003, mixed media with carpet, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York] / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mindy Shapero, *Distorted Circletrap Monsterheads*, [black and white] these are the empty shells of the heads of the circletrap monsters that were never able to discover the silence and slowness in order to escape. They now become the ways out of the circletrap for those that do find the peace, where everything slows so that you can actually see what is happening around you. The floating monsterheads are now the first key, when you see one that faces you, if you are able to, simply slide your head inside the hollowed monsterhead, 2005-2006, foam, epoxy, wood, duralar, and acrylic, approx. 47 x 25 x 25 inches [collection of Stephanie and John Rubeli, Los Angeles]; Björn Dahlem, *Schwarzes Loch (Black Hole)*, 1998-2006, mixed media, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York]



market, high art, and abstract imagery yields an exploration of male musculature in two and three dimensions and, as is typical of Harrison, adds up to a complex bundle of ideas.

The exhibition also delivers a multitude of concepts without offering any quick visual fixes. Isa Genzken's unsettling images mesh the saturated color of Plexiglas furnishings with dolls, toy soldiers, silver paint, plastic garlands, and photographs. In *Geschwister (Brothers and Sisters)*, 2004, and works from the *Empire Vampire* series, 2006, she uses playful materials to depict nightmarish scenes of destruction. In Evan Holloway's *10-19*, 2006, each standing metal number carries an equal number of rods fitted with haunting tiny faces on one end and lead weights on the other. Somewhat forest-like in its arrangement, this work's illogical logic stands as puzzle. By contrast, Björn Dahlem's *Schwarzes Loch (Black Hole)*, 1998-2006, brings a distinct sense of wonder and humor to the exhibition. Looking like an exploding wooden star more than anything else, this very earthly interpretation of the famed astronomical phenomenon bears all manner of merchandise

impaled on its knotted rays. A seeming indictment of consumer society, it also encourages further scrutiny.

Another engaging aspect of this survey is its focus on studio-based practice. The works give evidence of a one-to-one relationship, of artists confronting their materials, enlisting their observations, thoughts, and feelings to create static, physical entities that can be clearly identified as sculpture. Moreover, some of the artists play with the very idea of sculpture. What *can* it be? Isa Genzken and Franz West both incorporate the pedestal into their work. Various kinds of armatures hold Charles Long's interest. Andrea Cohen and Mindy Shapero deploy colorful, fragile elements in works that decri the sense of solidity we typically associate with sculpture. The exhibition focuses on the concurrence of object and idea. In this, it represents artists' engagement with materials as an ongoing process, speaking to assembly and reassembly.

Interspersed within *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* was *Collection in Context*, an exhibition selected by artists Rachel Harrison, Evan Holloway, Charles Long, and Associate Curator Anne Ellegood from the Hirshhorn Museum's extensive holdings.

This illuminating exercise extended *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* by providing a historical context while provocatively revealing some of these three artists' interests, influences, and inspiration.

Ultimately, *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* celebrates contemporary sculpture. Clearly operating within the medium's traditional parameters, the selected works show that we are on the threshold between past and future. In concept and content, the exhibition reflects contemporary life—a world of multiplicity, the abundance of endless streams of disposable goods, and the co-existence of contrasting values. It also features particular, even peculiar, reprisals of the past, which make it confounding despite its expected familiarity. The show's abundance of materials, processes, and ideas asserts sculpture's unexhausted potential for intellectual engagement and visual excitement.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mark Handforth, *I-Beam*, 2002, cherry, pine, purple heart, cedar, teak, spruce, maple, walnut, and mahogany, 118 x 158 x 142 inches [courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York]; Franz West, *Caiphas & Kepler*, 2005, papier mâché, steel, acrylic, and lacquer, red sculpture: 59 x 31 7/8 x 22 inches, yellow-and-blue sculpture: 45 5/8 x 29 1/8 x 24 3/8 inches [courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York]