

ROPE WARR

Using an unlikely material—crocheted rope—Orly Genger creates increasingly ambitious sculptures and installations that shrewdly acknowledge Minimalist and Post-Minimalist predecessors.

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

HAND-KNOTTING MORE THAN 100 miles of rope into long, roughly 15-inch-wide strips painted fiery red, Orly Genger has arranged a dramatic marriage of opposites with her massive installation, *Big Boss*, at MASS MoCA. The strips appear to flow, like a waterfall, through a 12-foot-tall vertical opening in one wall and run amok across the 37-by-32-foot gallery in rolling, riotous, freeform abundance. Behind the wall, in a smaller gallery, viewers encounter a monumental 12-by-11-foot barrier of neatly stacked strips tightly packed to the ceiling. With its two components, *Big Boss* plays with ideas of left brain versus right, minimalist geometry versus the expressive gesture, and viewing sculpture frontally versus being immersed in an environment. It also tweaks the gender divide through the very process of its fabrication, essentially a crochet stitch blown up to muscular proportions. Genger uses a technique associated with women's work to parody and challenge the "important" art traditionally associated with men. Even the tongue-in-cheek title simultaneously conjures images of a cigar-smoking Mafia capo and a strong-willed mother who is the "real" boss of the family.

Sitting in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio shortly after completing the installation last spring, Genger described her work as the love child of Richard Serra and Anni Albers. The petite 30-year-old artist seems intent on defying expectations. Genger, who was born and raised in Manhattan, recalls feeling invisible as a child because she was so small and shy. On some level, the sheer scale of her work and the stamina it requires seem to be an empowering response to feelings of being overwhelmed. She explores related themes in performances that have accompanied her sculptural pieces throughout her young career.

Genger has applied her accumulative method of creating mass from flaccid materials to ever more ambitious and labor-

ANGLER



Orly Genger's *Big Boss*, 2009-10, rope with latex paint; at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Mass. Photo Arthur Evans. All photos this article courtesy Larissa Goldston Gallery, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Orly Genger's *Big Boss* in "Material World: Sculpture to Environment," at MASS MoCA, North Adams, through February 2011, and *Lee and Lyn* at Gavlak Gallery, Palm Beach, Oct. 9-Nov. 20.



Above, *Mr. Softy*, 2005, nylon rope with latex paint; at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Conn. Photo Tom Powel Imaging.

Opposite, stills from *Mr. Softy*, 2005, DVD, approx. 4 minutes.

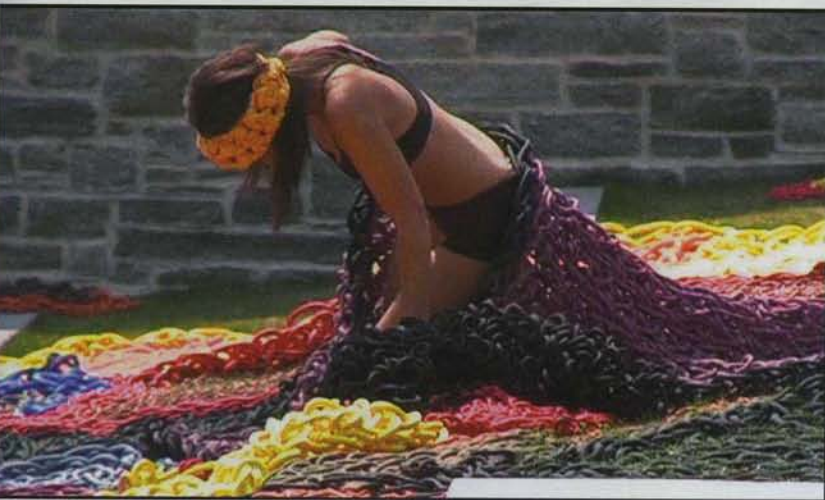
INSTALLED AT THE ALDRICH MUSEUM, *MR. SOFTY* WAS AN ALMOST PAINTERLY COMPOSITION OF BRIGHTLY COLORED, OVERSIZED SHAPES. VISITORS WERE FREE TO WALK AND SIT ON THE PLAYFUL TERRAIN.

intensive installations. Her process of working with huge quantities of rope is an endurance test, never more so than in preparation for her MASS MoCA installation. Genger typically knots smooth, thick, nylon climbing rope. But because of the prohibitive cost of the quantity required for *Big Boss*, the museum staff found a source in Maine that offered tons (literally) of old lobster trap rope for free if they picked it up. Two truckloads of coarse rope, saltwater-infused and shedding fish bones, arrived at Genger's studio. With several assistants, she began the nine-month-long job of processing the tangle into manageable knotted strips that extended as long as 200 feet and were roughly scaled to the width of the artist's lap. Genger's fingers were cut by the rough rope, since she eschews gloves out of a need to feel the material. The finished pieces were spray-painted an aggressive red and, when viewed en masse, create an intense retinal buzz. At MASS MoCA, Genger stacked the strips like tidy blocks to build the 12-foot wall on one side of the space. She had intended to pull the lengths through a clean, vertical cut in the drywall to make the vast organic-looking terrain on the other side. But the heavy rope tore a jagged gash through the drywall in a performative gesture of its own.

PERFORMANCE AND PROCESS are central to Genger's works, which ask the viewer to consider what went into their making. As with Eva Hesse, who rewrote the language of Minimalism in tactile and personal terms, Genger directly takes on her male predecessors, including Serra, whom she begrudgingly reveres. Genger also shares an affinity with artists such as Sheila Pepe, Tom Friedman and Tim Hawkinson, who likewise, use humble materials to surprising effect. The additive, obsessive process of accumulating these knots row by row, like

lines of text filling page after page, appeals to her as the most direct way to build mass and scale.

After studying sculpture at Brown University, where she graduated in 2001, Genger completed a post-baccalaureate year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work at the time involved using plaster either to connect found objects or to continue and exaggerate their forms. Inspired by an image of Maurizio Cattelan duct-taping his Milan dealer, Massimo De Carlo, to the wall, Genger undertook her first performance. Standing on a small stool, she had friends affix her to the wall by slathering gobs of plaster over her body. After the material hardened and the stool was removed, they helped her break out by using hammers to loosen the plaster. Feeling uncertain about the direction of her work at the time, Genger took up crocheting as a calming distraction, using her fingers instead of a hook. She found it addictive. After months of making little pieces—almost like doodles—that piled up in the corner of her room, she connected them all. Pleased with



the unexpected coherence of the large, Polly Apfelbaum-like puddle of different colored swatches, Genger continued exploring the possibilities of crocheted yarn.

For her first New York show, at Stefan Stux in 2003, she created a 6-foot-tall stack of floppy yarn rectangles, a precursor of the more rigid and rectilinear pieces to come. The next year, at Elizabeth Dee, she increased the scale with a 10-foot-wide, irregular floor-bound spiral that dominated the gallery. With her first large museum installation, in 2005 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, Genger shifted from yarn to nylon climbing rope. Titled *Mr. Softy*, the almost

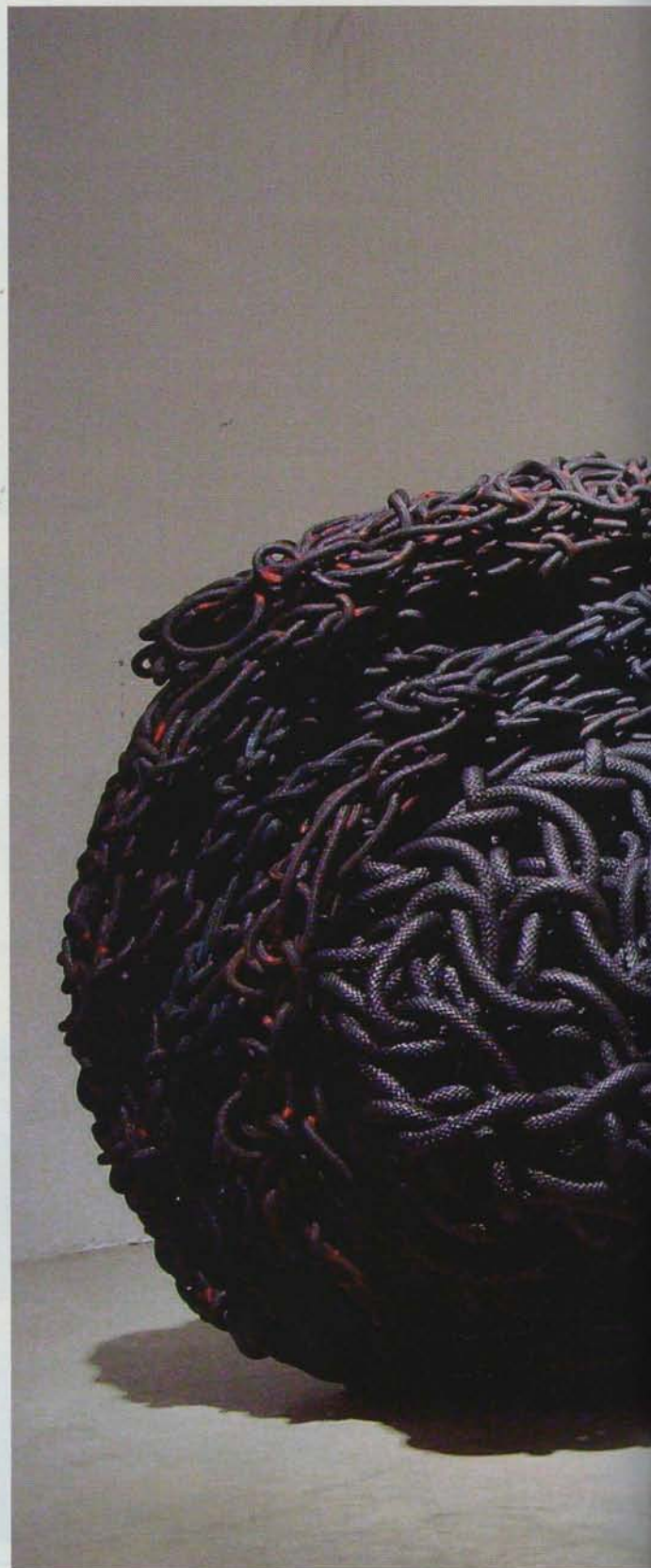
“POSEDOWN” HUMOROUSLY DREW A CONNECTION BETWEEN BODYBUILDERS FLEXING ON STAGE DURING COMPETITION AND ARTISTS VYING FOR ATTENTION IN GROUP SHOWS.

painterly composition of brightly colored, oversized shapes—loosely suggestive of knitted mittens, genitalia, internal organs—was reminiscent of pour pieces by Lynda Benglis. It used the museum’s tiered outdoor terrace as a support, and visitors were free to walk and sit on the playful terrain. In a video that was shown in tandem with the open-air piece, Genger is seen crawling underneath the expanse of rope before emerging and absconding with one of the testicular forms. This flouting of man as creator calls to mind Robert Mapplethorpe’s photograph of Louise Bourgeois devilishly toting a sculpted phallus. In another outdoor installation, *Puzzlejuice* (2006), a durable rope coverlet pieced together from Day-Glo-colored shapes transformed a rocky area in New York’s Riverside Park into a fantastical topography for climbing and lounging.

While her early single-layer works relied on an underlying support to create bulk, Genger began making freestanding pieces that achieved mass through knotting and layering. In 2007 at New York’s Larissa Goldston Gallery, she amassed an enormous quantity of black-painted rope, shot through with undertones of color, into two imposing mountains that swelled to the ceiling. Recalling earthworks by Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson as well as the organic-looking installations of Tara Donovan, *MASSPEAK* compelled visitors through its dark canyon, suggesting an ominous landscape both natural and psychological.

Genger has also found unlikely inspiration in the exaggerated poses of bodybuilders (and has collaged photographic examples on the walls of her studio bathroom). She installed a roomful of large hulking bundles of black rope in her 2007 show, “Posedown,” at Lemberg Gallery near Detroit. It humorously drew a connection between bodybuilders flexing on stage during competition and artists vying for attention in group shows. Genger refined the bodybuilder-artist idea in a group of more formally and conceptually resolved sculptures shown in the soaring atrium at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2008. Individually titled after Mr. Universe champions from the 1960s and 1970s, the chunky black monoliths of vertiginously stacked knotted rope—including a massive 6-by-9-by-9-foot block, a 12-foot-tall wall and a 17-foot-tall column—directly ape the hard-edge Minimalist sculpture of those decades’ art stars, like Serra, Tony Smith and Donald Judd, while plainly expressing Genger’s process.

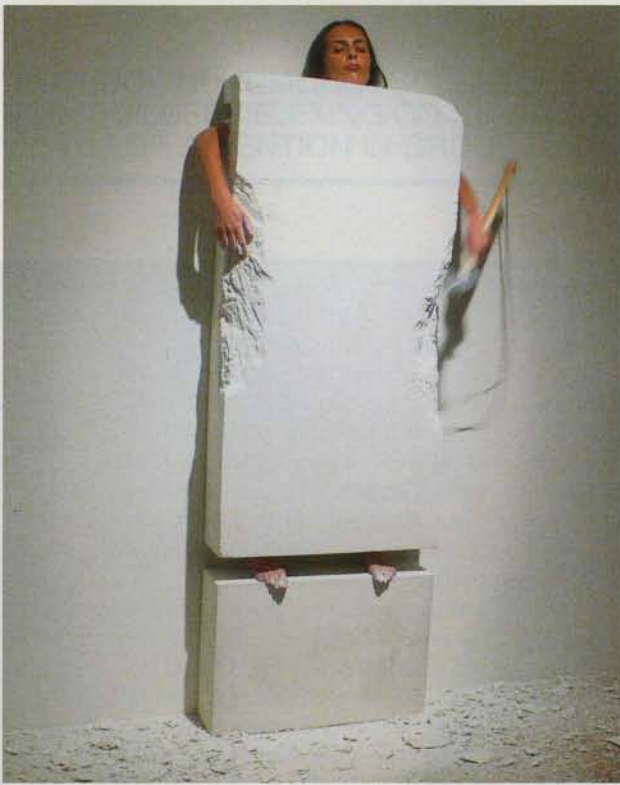
Similar, though smaller, monolithic pieces are currently on view in Genger’s show at Gavlak Gallery in Palm Beach. For that gallery, domestic in scale



View of “Posedown,”
2007, nylon rope with latex
paint; at Lemberg Gallery,
Ferndale, Mich.

AT THE DIANAPARK MUSEUM OF ART, WORKS
CHAMPIONS FROM THE 1970S TO THE 1990S, PERFECTLY
THOSE DECADES. BY STEVE





Above, *I'll Never Lie to You Again, I Promise*, 2009, live performance, 116 minutes; at Larissa Goldston.

Right, view of "Whole," 2008, nylon rope with latex paint; at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

compared to MASS MoCA and Indianapolis, she built two 6-foot-tall columns, each roughly 2 by 4 feet, one black (*Lyn*) and the other white (*Lee*). Having used black in association with weight and strength, Genger is incorporating its chromatic opposite to create an impression of lightness with the otherwise equally heavy stack.

In one way or another, Genger's performances often involve escape. Last year at Goldston, together with an exhibition of a large black monolith, Genger encased herself in a prefabricated plaster block affixed to the wall, leaving only her head, arms and feet exposed. In an action reminiscent of her student performance with plaster, she attempted for more than an hour to hack her own way out of the slab with an axe. Eventually two men freed Genger with a sledgehammer, foiling a symbolic reading of female self-liberation (although they were employed by her). As evident in her performances and, more abstractly, the dichotomous *Big Boss*, Genger is interested in order and constraint—the limits others put on us, the ones we put on ourselves—and in breaking free. ○

"Material World: Sculpture to Environment," featuring Genger's *Big Boss* along with works by Michael Beutler, Tobias Putrih, Alyson Shotz, Dan Steinhilber, and the team of Wade Kavanaugh and Stephen B. Nguyen, is on view at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Mass., through February 2011. A show of new work is at Gavlak Gallery, Palm Beach, Oct. 9–Nov. 20.

HILARIE M. SHEETS is a New York-based art writer.



AT THE INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART, WORKS TITLED AFTER MR. UNIVERSE CHAMPIONS FROM THE '60S AND '70S DIRECTLY APE THE HARD-EDGE MINIMALISM OF THOSE DECADES' ART STARS.

