

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Beyond size and
medium, the definition
of sculpture keeps
expanding

BY BARBARA A. MacADAM

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CULPTURE HAS OFTEN BEEN CON- sidered a hard sell. Too big to fit in a home or small museum, too difficult to install, too hard for viewers to wrap their gazes and minds around. And coming as it often does in editions, it can be seen to lack the uniqueness of a painting or drawing.

Today, however, these challenges seem to matter increasingly less. Times are changing. So are approaches, mediums, perceptions . . . and, yes, pocketbooks.

Some people, not to say institutions, have bigger spaces to accommodate large works; others are eager to embrace anything that looks new and/or cutting-edge. And then the question arises: What is sculpture anyway?

While conceptual work, architecture, performance, assemblage, installation, and virtual constructions, as well as science and even alchemy, have always been linked with sculpture to varying degrees, they seem to have become so intimately connected with it of late that they call into question the very boundaries of the genre. How does a photograph documenting an artwork differ from the work itself? Does it change our perception if we see a photograph of one of Erwin Wurm's foam-coated fat houses or of a man with pickles between his toes rather than the real thing? As confounding as this can be, it is also liberating.

Attesting to the continuing attraction of more-traditional sculpture is the fact that many museums are being designed specifically to accommodate it—even conceived with one sculptor in mind: Richard Serra at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and Dia:Beacon; and Tony Smith in the atrium of the newly renovated Ahmanson Building at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

But besides such site-challenging museum and public-art sculptures, there is an incredible variety of other work that solidly—or loosely—falls into the realm of sculpture today. This includes the ever more pervasive scruffy, open-ended, recycled, compressed-junk creations seen in the "Unmonumental" show, which inaugurated the New Museum of Contemporary Art's reopening last winter in New York (see "Object Overruled," December 2007), but also meticulously conceived and crafted work like Tara Donovan's obsessively composed installations, including her landscape of plastic cups. These fall into a category of what Aimee Chang, director of academic and residency programs at UCLA's Hammer Museum, sees as "a return to making work in a scale at which the artist could be the fabricator." She points out, "Tara Donovan's work is large and sprawling, but it's about this return to the hand and the studio practice—a return to the artist as a maker and not a conceiver."

On another track are the highly conceptual, barely-there pieces, like Rochelle Feinstein's wall-label and podcast description of a physically nonexistent work from her series "I Made a Terrible Mistake," in which she proposes to place 30 paintings, 30 disco balls, and 5 videos inside the White House to inspire President Bush to acknowledge his errors.

OPPOSITE Sudarshan Shetty marries the organic and the man-made. In *Untitled, 2008*, a fragile clay pot spins on metal gears.

History continues to be everywhere. Carol Bove uses it as primary material in her installations, which feature drawings, magazine pictures, books, sculptures, and furnishings relating to the 1960s and '70s. She links personal items, found objects, and crafted pieces. British artist Jane Simpson, by contrast, evokes art history and memory by making such surreal contraptions as a fur-coated sewing machine.

Many artists are also concerned with politics and social engagement today, often making use of forms related to architecture and communal happenings. The sharing of food was the message behind the fun for Brazilian artist Marepe, who installed a gigantic merry-go-round with a long tableful of candy-coated apples for the taking in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern last spring. Shelter is the main concern of Marjetica Potrč, who focuses on housing and portable structures, such as a solar canopy, a wind turbine, and an electronic suit. Her works bridge architecture and art, but also written communication and technology.

More concretely, there are the confounding mechanical productions of Sudarshan Shetty, who sets a delicate pot spinning on a motorized metal contraption, and who invented a moth-making machine. Like many of his other pieces, these marry the organic and the man-made. Such allusions to alchemy abound today, but so does real science, whose high-profile and complicated relationship to art is explored in the show "Design and the Elastic Mind," currently at MoMA.

We've singled out four contemporary artists who deal with sculpture in very distinctive ways, although they might demur at being called sculptors. Tobias Putrih, from Slovenia, won't quite define himself as anything in particular, because he sees himself pursuing many approaches, almost like an industrial designer. Austrian-born Erwin Redl, who considers himself an installation artist, shapes rooms and environments with strings of LED lights, his imagination illuminated by the late conceptual string sculptor Fred Sandback. Japanese artist Noriko Ambe regards her dense, compulsively layered and carved sheets of paper more as drawings than sculpture. Orly Genger does consider herself a sculptor, working as she does in a mode both in sync with and counter to Serra's, knotting rope into massive muscle-bound figures and landscapelike environments that play with our perceptions of size and power, all the while doing what so many artists are doing today—inviting participation.

Crochet on Steroids

Orly Genger hand-loops rope into pieces that are large, serious—and soft

BY LAMAR CLARKSON

"Large, important sculpture like Richard Serra's is almost cartoonish. Like bodybuilding," says Brooklyn-based sculptor Orly Genger, 29. "Bodybuilders look comical trying to inflate themselves. The psychology behind it is all about overpowering the viewer." Genger, too, works large, but she plays against the effect of monumentality with a technique based on a craft—crocheting—traditionally associated with refinement and deli-



LAMAR CLARKSON COURTESY / JAMES COLE GALLERY, NEW YORK



cacy. She makes sculptures with hundreds of separate sections of nylon climbing rope that she wrestles into knots, paints in her studio, and then assembles on-site into massive structures. The results range from the nearly representational *Posedown* (2007), whose components are shaped like the muscles of the body, to the abstract black terrain of *Masspeak*, the sculptural environment that took over New York's Larissa Goldston Gallery last spring. The effect of such a dainty-seeming process blown up is overwhelming—like Eva Hesse on steroids.

"My work has a similarity to bodybuilding in trying to be large, important, serious, but at the same time it's soft," explains

LEFT Orly Genger in her New York studio treads amid the mountains of paint-coated crocheted ropes that form her sculptural environments.

Genger, who counts Claes Oldenburg among her influences. Indeed, the lumpy masses of *Posedown*—named for the last round in bodybuilding competitions, when the performers try to out-flex one another—have the same sort of pathos as Oldenburg's outsized pie slices and lipsticks.

In the posedown that is large-scale sculpture, Genger's choice of medium takes on a competitive as much as a critical edge. "Who says the permanence, and the seriousness,

can't be there with something considered to be so feminine as weaving?" Genger asks.

It's the physicality of sculpture that first drew her to the form, the artist notes. "My work comes out of the most primitive desire to just build something," she says. "There's something appealing about having a full day's work. You feel your body, you are alive, and when you're done with your day, you see something that you've made." Her viewers get a little bit of a workout, too—with *Masspeak*, gallerygoers had to clamber over giant mounds of knotted rope piled up throughout the gallery, heaped against walls like some dark jungle growth. "The idea of looking at something from a distance, just seeing it from one angle, was not appealing to me," says the artist. "I wanted people to have a physical relationship to the work."

On the Cutting Edge

Noriko Ambe takes her knife to books,

magazines, and stacks of paper,

excavating mysterious landscapes in the

process **BY ERIC BRYANT**

Noriko Ambe has devoted nearly a decade to carving stacks of paper into lyrical abstractions, yet she talks about her work as a sort of Action Painting—inspired form of drawing that just happens to be in the shape of sculpture. "Everything is process," she says. "Although my works resemble topographical maps, they are just traces of my action." Indeed, the pristine white paper stacks seem as if they could have been created by some computer modeling apparatus that meticulously carved out the forms of climbing hillsides and plunging valleys. "It looks like nature, but it is a record of my movement and my habit."