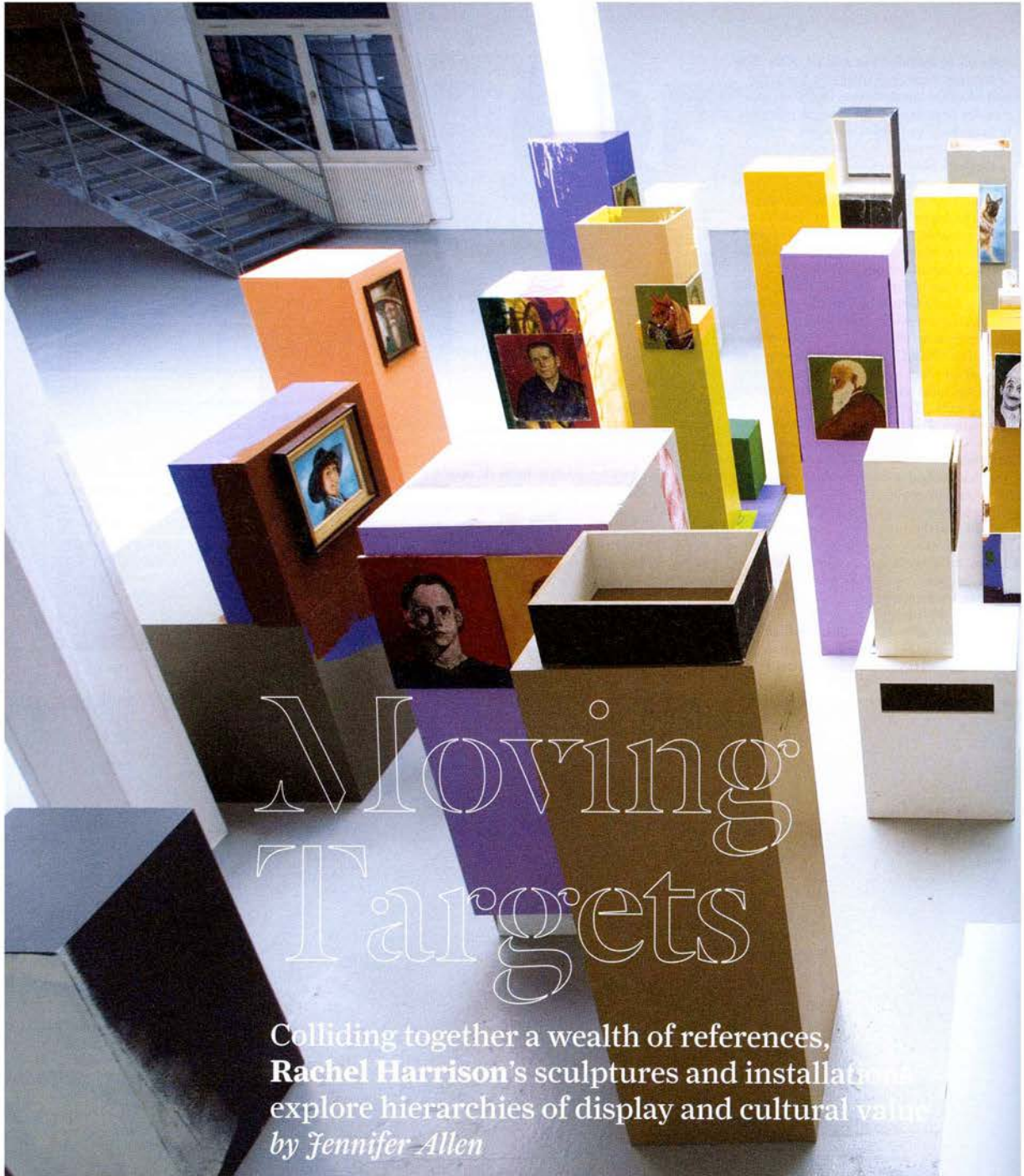


REGEN PROJECTS

Allen, Jennifer. "Moving Targets." *frieze* (October 2007) [ill.]





Trees for the Forest
2007
Mixed media
Installation view at
Migros Museum, Zurich

Could a sculpture be about time? Not just the date of its creation, or its art-historical references, but also the kind of time that play tricks on us? Not a time machine but a ticking trap – a set-up that gives us a nasty surprise, only to release a round of laughter as we wipe the proverbial cream pie off our faces? On contact, the cream pie – like Marcel Proust's madeleine – has an overwhelming effect, yet instead of sinking into a warm *mémoire involontaire* of the past, we feel stripped bare and pushed awkwardly into the future, like a newborn slapped on the ass to begin breathing, much to the delight of those around him.

Such possibilities for sculpture didn't cross my mind at first as I wandered through Rachel Harrison's solo show 'Voyage of the Beagle' last summer at Migros Museum, Zurich. Inspired by Charles Darwin's expedition on the *HMS Beagle*, which eventually led to him writing *The Origin of the Species* (1859), the exhibition evoked the traditional sculptural tropes of space, albeit the wider-ranging displacements of discovery and conquest. 'Voyage of the Beagle' (2007) also named Harrison's own exploration for the origins of sculpture in a photo-documentary series, including images of a wig mannequin, a smiling cook, a

included *Alexander the Great* (2007), who expanded Macedonia, and *Johnny Depp* (2007), who commands a global audience. These illustrious – and exclusively male – heroes were followed by the anonymous faces in *Trees for the Forest* (2007), a thicket of differently coloured plinths decked out with amateur painted portraits, whose titles – if they had any – would probably be something like: Old Fisherman, Sad Clown, Grandpa, Susan's New Hat, Our German Shepherd Lucky.

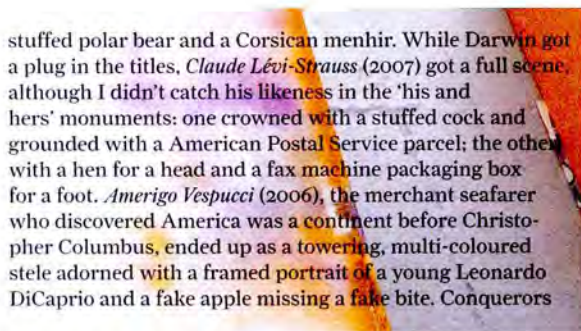
But one work managed to make me the butt of its joke. An unmarked detour on the official exhibition itinerary, the modest, box-like structure had no label and was tucked away under the museum staircase like a discarded container. Inside were a few old periodicals: an issue of fanzine *TWIST* adorned with pretty boys for adoring teenage girls, a fat French *Vogue* and a Swiss weekly. Spoilt (some might say corrupted) by years of relational aesthetics, I took the sculpture for a reading rack, sat down and flipped through the *Vogue*, eulogizing a bygone season. Later that day, when I met up with Harrison and asked her to identify the mystery work (it turned out to be a part of *Trees for the Forest*), she was unsettled. 'Somebody played around with the magazines in that piece and

Although a sculptor, Harrison has a sharp sense of timing; each work is governed by a precise order.

stuffed polar bear and a Corsican menhir. While Darwin got a plug in the titles, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (2007) got a full scene, although I didn't catch his likeness in the 'his and hers' monuments: one crowned with a stuffed cock and grounded with a American Postal Service parcel; the other with a hen for a head and a fax machine packaging box for a foot. *Amerigo Vespucci* (2006), the merchant seafarer who discovered America was a continent before Christopher Columbus, ended up as a towering, multi-coloured stele adorned with a framed portrait of a young Leonardo DiCaprio and a fake apple missing a fake bite. Conquerors

put the *Vogue* on top of the pile – can you believe that?' I had no choice but to admit that I myself had done the damage. 'I put the boy back on top,' she explained graciously. 'That's what people should see first.'

Messing up the magazines, I had become the hapless fall guy, tumbling from critic to vandal, from someone who knows how to handle art to someone who doesn't know enough not to wreck it. Defacing an art work – or putting the cover-girl's face over the cover-boy's – is probably not the best way to start an exchange with an artist. Yet my misdeed was instructive for understanding her gestures. Although a sculptor, Harrison has an incredibly sharp sense of timing, not without its comic effects. However chaotic her combinations may seem at first, each work is governed by a precise order, which is as much spatial as temporal: both filling the cream pie and hitting your moving target smack in the face. Indeed, the boy should be on top and be seen first, but all the better to be consumed as eye candy; worrying about what to wear should appear as an afterthought, left unexamined. By placing the *Vogue* at the summit, I had spoilt not one joke but two. In contrast to the slim teen magazine, the *Vogue* could retain its visibility in any magazine pile thanks to its fat spine, force-fed by ads. In Harrison's pile the boys would be bodies, while the women would merely be evoked by a Minimalist/Conceptual reduction of fashion to typography: 'VOGUE. No. 872. NOVEMBRE 2006' in black lettering on a white background, like an On Kawara take on Sylvie Fleury.



Above left:
Trees for the Forest
(detail)
2007
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Harrison's sculptures are choreographed with the contemporary viewer in mind, but she also has a knack for making a broad range of cultural-historical references resonate to the fullest, and cacophonously. In 'Voyage of the Beagle', her pantheon spans a good 25 centuries; the forms she sculpts might recall a Franz West neon blob as easily as the crumbled surface of an Yves Klein monochrome; and her found objects evoke both permanence (stuffed birds, a painted portrait, a polystyrene apple) and rapid obsolescence (a postal box, a can of Slim Fast, a plastic bag). As Johanna Burton has noted, Harrison's artefacts can project you into a past that you are all too happy to have left behind for the future¹ – they evoke *mémoires involontaires* that are more cream pie than madeleine. Who wants to be reminded of their first DiCaprio crush? Who has even had the chance to forget Depp's pirate film from last summer? The wilting magazines in the sculpted box – like many of the found objects used in the pieces – appear as batteries of life², depleted of their full *Zeitgeist* charge (and often their contents) and yet still emanating the uncanny warmth of recent human touch. Harrison's sense of timing is not about confusing histories but about knowing just how much future is left in each past. No wonder the double-headed figure of Janus – who could see in both directions – is a regular in her exhibitions.

But the found objects – not worth stealing and not quite detritus – seem to belong to the curious category of rubbish³, which can eventually land in the junk shop just as easily as in the museum. In fact, before the 'Voyage of the Beagle' got under way, the old magazines used in the piece had been sitting in the recycling bin of the museum storage. Our delight lies not so much in watching refuse become art, but in the drastic reversals of fortune, the unending rise and fall of values as thrift is elevated to art and the critic is demoted to a vandal. Antiquity's hero and last season's fashions, the mute, Modernist, hand-sculpted form and the chatty, mass-produced commodity, treasured recollections and trashed souvenirs – high and low – exaggerate each other's characteristics while cancelling out each other's claims. Forced to co-habit one sculpture, they become unlikely yet inseparable pairs. Since the hand-sculpted form supports the found objects – acting as both sculpture and base – it's hard to tell which element has the spotlight. Depending on each other for display, yet competing over it at the same time,

Below:
Frank Stella 2
 (detail)
 2006
 Mixed media
 211×53×51 cm





The Eagle Has Landed

2006

Mixed media
110 x 81 x 124 cm



Above and below right:
Amerigo Vespucci
 2006
 Mixed media
 220×79×74 cm

Harrison's odd couples are always tripping over each other, like Laurel and Hardy fighting for a crown, only to break it. 'Now look what you've done ...'

The 'trick' that runs through Harrison's *oeuvre* is a knowing confusion of the figurative with the literal. The Slim Fast can crowns *Fats Domino* (2007), a slimmed-down brown abstract sculptural homage to the musician whose first big success was the 1949 hit 'The Fat Man'. In *The Eagle Has Landed* (2006), a pillow case bearing the image of a bald eagle seems to have landed, like a flag on a coffin, on a sculptural form, outfitted with wheels and lying on a table. Along with word plays – like Fast and Fats – Harrison's pieces shift from the cultural reference to the artefact, from the metaphorical to the prosaic, the evoked to the concrete and vice versa. Like J.J. Grandville, the great 19th-century French caricaturist, Harrison always exposes the process of animism, anthropomorphism and metamorphosis. The periodical spines become

a literal backbone (albeit horizontal) for the base of a sculpture: there are the brawny cover-boys of a muscle magazine that holds up one end of the staircase in *Silent Account* (2003). A copy of *Christie's International* from 1997 – just before the auction house began to put art works under ten years old on the block – is a telling support, tucked under the edge of a plinth in *Trees for the Forest*. In *Our Friend in Malta* (2006) the protective function of a velveteen rope barrier is exaggerated and personified: the rope – flung over a white abstract mass sitting on an inverted bucket of the plaster-like material it was sculpted from – seems to take its protective role all too seriously, like an over-caring parent shielding its offspring from a fast-approaching menace.

Harrison's comedy of mistaken identity is underpinned not least by her take on gender: the way she directed her all-male cast of explorers, discoverers and conquerors, blown up into mute sculptural hulks,



sparingly decorated with junk – or, as with Lévi-Strauss, turned into stuffed rooster and hen – recalls the theatrics of drag and camp, with a feminist bite. But by choosing the medium of sculpture, Harrison circumvents both the stage's frontal plane and the screen's flatness. Videos and photographs – whether found or home-made – are always integrated, often framed, into multi-dimensional sculptural forms. It's easy to miss the photograph of the man gazing at Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World, 1866) in the depths of *Black Painting* (2006), a squarish form protruding from the wall. Harrison also challenges performance's monopoly on movement, which leaves spectators immobilized in their seats. However stationary, her works are peripatetic and proprioceptive with respect to the viewer, who is set in motion beyond the walkaround required to see a classic sculpture. You have to look down to find the picture of Marlon Brando in a drawer in *Marlon and Indian* (2002), look up to catch the Campbell's box – not soup but beans – in *Blazing Saddles* (2003), bend way down to see (but not touch) that tempting *Vogue*. And like *Trees for the Forest*, the installation *Perth Amboy* (2001) sets out a maze-like itinerary, if not an exercise plan, with stations and surprises. Amongst them, for example, are a series of photographs documenting the traces of pilgrims' hands pressed against the window of a suburban home in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, where people were thought to have seen an apparition of an image of the Virgin Mary.

Some critics have evoked the violence of a chaotic accumulative force, such as a lava flow or a riot barricade, to explain the coalescence of disparate things into 'anti-monuments'.⁴ Yet unlike a natural disaster and a politicized crowd, Harrison doesn't leave much to chance; her sense of pace is reminiscent of a television scheduler, albeit working in 3D. The sculptures – while meticulously constructed from and for kaleidoscopically changing perspectives – have the profound levelling effect of television, where Venus can appear on The History Channel or in an advert for an 'authentic copy'. Television eradicates cultural hierarchies by reducing all artefacts to display. Harrison confronts television's logic of presentation with that of the museum, which also reduces all artefacts to display while maintaining their physical presence. In the realm of physical objects, Harrison unsettles what the philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian identified as the strict division between mere 'things', which are used, and 'semiophores', which are only seen, usually in the museum where they are stripped of their use-value and endowed with some cultural or symbolic value instead.⁵ This division collapses in the aporia of display. After all, the use of display is none other than to display. In this inherently tautological system, all elements show themselves and each other, moving from semiophore to thing and back again: whether it's packaging for a fax machine, a can of peas, a rack for greeting cards, wood panelling, sculpting mass or the bucket it comes from, a blonde wig, the feathers of a stuffed bird, a supposed apparition of the Virgin Mary in a window, a Hollywood star, a plinth or the sculpture on top of it. As once autonomous sculptures incorporate mass cultural artefacts, once invisible pedestals unveil their insides or carry a few artefacts themselves, indeed things such as pedestals and velvet ropes – which make semiophores visible – become semiophores in their own right while on the job.

There's one part of the *Vogue* story I left out: Harrison also didn't want me to look *inside* the magazine, or rather to use it. Her 'Do Not Touch' should not be understood as an attempt to restore bygone standards of art-work aura, established by the museum. Rather, her wish recognizes that everything is made to be displayed – to the extent that use has almost become an afterthought. In a 'regime of visibility'⁶, especially a totalitarian one, what isn't meant to be 'seen first': from an actor to an art work, from a political candidate to a soft drink, from a perfume to a military invasion? It seems appropriate, if not inevitable, that Harrison could transform a critic into a vandal, confound the work's symbolic evaluation with

its physical damage. In more general terms, Harrison's pieces let varying extremes of reception collapse into one: the gallerist's pitch, the auctioneer's call, the cleaner wondering how to dust the plinths, the fan gushing at the sight of DiCaprio, the reliable cat sitter who calls a lawyer friend to find out if she has any claim to her hand-made flyer advertising her services (and to the price of the sculpture from which it is now hanging, *The Honey Collector*, 2002), or the parent claiming that their kid could do all that.

Consequently it's impossible to position Harrison's work as the high critical interrogation of mass culture's lows, since her work makes that division as phoney as a rubber chicken. Her works give rise to a wealth of interpretations; however clever, they remind me of the voyeuristic, paranoid narrator in Witold Gombrowicz' novel *Cosmos* (1966), where everything is visually linked to everything else. If there is a Utopian element in Harrison's works (beyond the radically democratic equation of all objects and subjects), it's in the possibility that dead batteries – charged to be seen and then forgotten in consumer society – might be recharged and get a second life. The polystyrene apple, the stuffed hen or even Simon Le Bon (ouch!) all get to come back for another guest appearance as part of an art work in the gallery or museum – but on one condition: they will be used to display others, like ageing Hollywood stars demoted to the role of servants in made-for-television movies. After Harrison's slap of resuscitation, there's always the chance that a hapless passer-by will get a shock of recognition.

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1 Johanna Burton, 'Just Past: Rachel Harrison's *Lagerstätten*,' *Parkett*, 76, 2006, pp. 152-3

2 The expression – used to describe commodities – comes from Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Reneau, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993. Burton evokes this temporality with the term '*Lagerstätten*' (both 'fossil deposits' and 'resting places for people'). See Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 153

3 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979

4 Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 152, and John Kelsey, 'Sculpture in the Abandoned Field', *Rachel Harrison. If I Did It*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (forthcoming)

5 Krzysztof Pomian, 'Entre le visible et l'invisible: la collection', *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux*, ('Between the visible and the invisible: The collection'), Gallimard, Paris, 1987, pp. 42-3. Kelsey, *op. cit.*, describes a fusion between design and display, product and package.

6 Camiel van Winkel, *The Regime of Visibility*, NAI, Rotterdam, 2005

Black Painting
2006
Mixed media
84x66x64 cm

