

REGEN PROJECTS

Halle, Howard, "Rachel Harrison 'The Help,'" *Time Out* (May 24 – 30, 2012)



Art

Edited by Howard Halle • art@timeoutny.com

Rachel Harrison, "The Help"

Objects and Amy Winehouse collide in Rachel Harrison's latest show. By **Howard Halle**



Greene Naftall, through June 16 (see Chelsea)

The first week in May was a big one for the art world, starting with Sotheby's record sale of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, and ending with Frieze New York, a veritable Charlie's chocolate factory of eye candy snaking around Randalls Island in a huge, sinuous tent. In between, there were murmurs of dismay over Sotheby's continuing lockout of art handlers attempting to organize, and Frieze's calculating decision to set up where it did in order to avoid the unions at the West Side Piers. Talk that Frieze would prompt an Occupy moment for the art world briefly flared, before everyone concluded that enjoyment was the better part of valor. Some 45,000 visitors came to the fair, and sales were "excellent," according to organizers.

Impressive as it is, the cash sloshing around galleries, art fairs and auction houses represents little more than tip money to the plutocracy who have made art history an asset class. In this respect, the title of Rachel Harrison's latest show, "The Help," seems like an apt description for what the art world is now: a place in which stroking the vanity of the super-rich trumps originality, and *occupy* means taking up the downstairs of a global Downton Abbey.

Harrison appears to understand this, though her work certainly sells well. She combines a consummate formalism with a knack for imbuing

seemingly abstract elements with multiple meanings, including political ones. Some may mistake Harrison's views for feminism, but it's fairer to say that she's an artist who happens to be a woman with eyes in her head.

Her efforts include painting, drawing, video and photography. But above all she is a sculptor who fiercely questions monumentality and the masculine prerogative that goes with it. Still, Harrison acknowledges the allure of her targets, and the truth that, historically, women have helped to sustain them. She kicks ass in all directions, including, sometimes, her own.

The gallery is filled with a marvelous array of totems, mostly tall and narrow, lathered in color and sprouting curious found objects that are often related to housekeeping. The walls are hung with a suite of colored pencil drawings that picture the late singer Amy Winehouse, alongside shots at some of art's biggest swinging dicks, including Picasso and Picasso manqué Martin Kippenberger. Winehouse is Harrison's surrogate, her bad cop for interrogating the aforementioned, as well as Marcel Duchamp, whose *Étant Donnés* serves as the absent touchstone for the show. A drawing focused on a door lock offers a clue: It's the entrance to the maintenance room at the Philadelphia Museum, next to Duchamp's late masterwork.

Harrison creates the bulk of her sculptures by stacking and arranging blocks or slabs of Styrofoam, before covering them in a combination of cement and painterly flourishes. This gives the pieces a strange geologic

aspect; some of the examples recall David Smiths transformed into spooky wind-shaped hoodoos, the kind that dot the Western desert. The cherry on top in each is the found objects that activate the larger forms, and vice versa.

For instance, in *Hoarders*, a boulder that seems to have broken free from the orbit of an old *Star Trek* set crash-lands in the gallery as an allegory of the 1 percent crushing the 99, thanks to the addition of a garbage can and a video playing on a small flatscreen. In the latter, shot from the backseat of a taxi, the driver speaks to a passenger, both unseen, about the corporate dictatorship sure to come if Obama loses the election. It's the usual powerless rant, and as the dustbin suggests, easily disposable. But the totality of Harrison's treatment gives the cabbie's words the heft of truth, however inconvenient.

Similarly, the monolithic *Valid Like Salad* features a framed charcoal rendering of Al Pacino as Scarface slapped onto its side, one of those celebrity portraits sketch artists display to show their skills. The drawing nicely complements *Valid's* drab color scheme; more pointedly, the sculpture's harlequin pattern of muted grays, a nod to the recurring circus clowns in Picasso's paintings, yokes one sacred monster to another. *Valid* evokes the testosterone that is the elixir of criminality and creativity, and the mythologizing of both as outlaw behavior. The final touch is a bright-red canine collar, dangling unfastened beneath Pacino's image. Who let the dogs out, indeed.

Underscoring these object lessons, though, is Harrison's beef with art history, especially Duchamp's readymade—which remains, a century after its creation,

contemporary art's sine qua non: the fountainhead for most of the major developments of the past 50 years, and the prism through which some continue to judge other work. Insofar as the readymade privileges idea over the messiness of making stuff, it has been misconstrued as representing the endgame for creating art as a subjective act. This is both nonsense and not. Artists, of course, still employ traditional mediums; Harrison's own work is a dialectical dance between the made and readymade. And as she basically notes, Duchamp compromised his own radicality by creating *Étant Donnés* mostly by hand. But it is still the case that thanks largely to Duchamp, artistic agency has become an ever more mediated affair.

As for the collectors who move the market, the readymade paradigm retains its appeal precisely because it represents something pristine, inviolate and leveragable. Contemporary art has become one big recycling project (of which, for example, Kippenberger was a mordant pioneer), and this is arguably true of the larger culture as well: Winehouse's self-immolation was a kind of readymade, a tragic pop star conforming to the tragic-pop-star template.

Ultimately I think Harrison's own recycling points to this deeper reality. The years following the Duchampian revival begun in the 1960s correspond to the period in which the elites have divorced themselves from the economic compact of political modernism. It shouldn't be a surprise, then, that the chickens have come home to roost. The art world used to be the place where people came to be themselves, become themselves, work for themselves. Now they're just the help.



Installation view