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Wall Text

Renée Levi

The Swiss Institute  New York

One of the most interesting sculptors to come out of Switzerland in the last few years, Renée Levi proposes what she calls "thought models," large-scale paper presences that are concepts of how paper can be used, what painting can look like, what sculpture might be. The works assembled here all imply temporary situations: The wall pieces might just as well be extended by another length or two; the freestanding pieces, curled into themselves, have neither beginning nor end.

Not unlike Bruce Nauman with his negative spaces beneath chairs, or Robert Smithson with his "non-sites"—yet visually very different—Levi sets up situations that potentially and inherently extend beyond themselves. While each element is marked by utmost economy of means and structural clarity, it does not constitute a finite form, but rather a hypothesis, a provisional proposal. Depending on the situation, the identical paper bands either hang from the top of the wall or rise from the floor, at once suggesting weight and weightlessness. In their exploration of boundaries or the lack thereof, her tiny accumulations of shredded paper strips are connected to the large wall pieces: Most simple in their—very!—temporary structure, they offer neither shape nor limit but refer mainly to the space around them.

Renée Levi has for many years played with the question of materiality versus surface. In 1996, she showed her "Red Cubes" at New York's Crosby Street Project. The industrial leftovers from the manufacture of foam mattresses, the cubes had never been cut into mattresses. Filling most of the Crosby Street space, the cubes implied a mass that had little to do with their actual airy foam structure. The artist had carefully painted them an artificial pink, laying a disguising film of paint over every crease and hole.

In an earlier series, Levi deflated the volumes of cardboard boxes or shopping bags, flattening them completely. She then stuck the boxes or bags together with industrial masking tape, creating large

sheets of paper or cardboard that covered segments of the gallery walls. Strangely emptied, their original shape was suggested through the creases that remained recognizable underneath the layers of monochrome acrylic paint. De-contextualized, transmuted into the almost abstract, these new objects still evoked familiar and sentimental, even domestic associations.

The wall pieces here consist of ordinary printing paper, painted with several layers of acrylic on both sides. In addition, the visible side has been varnished. The varnish highlights the pocked surface at the same time as it denies the objects' physical materiality through a reflecting shine. The free-standing pieces in the middle of the gallery are made of roofing felt, painted on one side and curled into themselves. At once hollow and impenetrable, half open yet too narrow to enter, they tease the viewer with ideas about inside and outside, interior space that is suggested but cannot be experienced, denying physical verification of the theoretical construct.

In 1983, American artist Jackie Winsor created "Open Cube," a large wall piece consisting of what looked like the six sides of a cube, broken open and displayed flat on the wall. The parallels of this work and others by a postminimal American generation and Renée Levi's work are striking. Sol LeWitt's white cubes—the physical manifestations of mathematical configurations—evoke Levi's flattened boxes as well as her potentially endless series of paper bands. And Carl Andre's metal floor pieces—presented for the viewer/participant to walk on—delineate strange ambiguous areas, at once inviting and forbidding, that are distinct from the gallery spaces in which they are exhibited.

In an almost dadaistic spirit, the artist accepts the references to everyday life. Her paper is ordinary and the paint is applied with a standard roller. But Levi has also gone further and created large surfaces of paper out of small sheets of gift-wrap that weren't painted at all. In these works, the patterns of the gift-wrap meet at each seam, creating nebulous almost-fields of dots or other simple patterns. Levi's position is not metaphysical, but rather tongue-in-cheek and humorous. That said, the artist's pieces are glorious, sensuous and exuberant, funny and in a very subversive way monumental.

Renée Levi will give a gallery talk on Saturday, March 1, at 3 PM.

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