

The American artist Rachel Harrison's sculptures are at once autonomous and always part of a larger installational ensemble. Such an ensemble is often based on a specific idea or tendency the various objects pursue in different ways. The sculptures are usually made of a variety of materials—they may consist of bulky parts painted in different colors, amorphously executed pedestals and plinths, or diverse readymade objects taken from the world of consumer and commodity culture. They can be imagined in an infinite number of variations. The surfaces are treated in multifaceted ways; seen from different angles, they sometimes seem to be not even one and the same work. The sculptures often appear to wear masks and costumes; additional media, such as photography and video, both interrupt and accompany them. Harrison's work combines industrially produced and handmade elements, abstract shapes and real objects in precarious sculptural units that present lateral views finished in a variety of ways. All elements she uses, such as the specific treatment of the material, its colors, the combination with other objects, form kaleidoscope-like facets that appear and disappear at different angles, in different perspectives—that are never finished but always in transition, part of the becoming of an ever-mutable intellectual process.

The various artifacts are intertwined in new ways, acquire new dimensions of value, offer comments. They tell of characters and events in recent art and cultural history as well as the popular world of the media. The works suggest combinatorial clues, engender effects; now and then the structures even dissolve into references within a private language, or at least become difficult to understand. Rachel Harrison's strategies are unsettling and provoking, seducing and destabilizing our thinking in patterns of representation, whose internal dynamism she uses in masterful fashion only to induce, without further ado, their collapse in such dialectical reversals. The American author John Kelsey, for instance, writes: "And if Harrison's sculpture is so caught up in this chaos of signs and surface effects it's precisely because it's so serious about space: in a time when space and image lose their distinction, and the old, ideal distance between viewer and object is always already filled up and occupied by a thousand communications, sculpture, too, finds ways of making itself multi-surfaced and schizo-temporal. In order to re-occupy our contemporary no-space, it trades in its timeless pose for a temporary one, or for a manic series of appearances." With these appearances, there will be no real final decoding of a concealed truth or an idea. True, there is between disguise and sculpture a world where people like Jack Smith, Leigh Bowery, Liz Taylor, Al Gore, E.T., the Venus de Milo, Leonardo DiCaprio, or Marilyn Monroe come to life. Yet plenty of tchotchkes, magazine illustrations, canned beans, Slim-Fast in cans, honey bears and such things are also waiting to be seen and to be put in combination. The installations demand the beholder's engagement, for although the relationship between a work and its title in most cases permits possible short-circuit conclusions toward an interpretation of the work, it will ultimately be defined by the viewer alone. On this point, John Kelsey writes further: "(...) [the sculptures] open

troublesome gaps and cause the work to stammer in and dysfunction in the very places where display and communication occur. (...) [like this] Harrison causes an immediate confusion between the space of retail and the space of subjective construction.”

The bandwidth of art-historical references is no less wide; Harrison’s oeuvre contains allusions to works by Donald Judd, David Smith, Helen Frankenthaler, Eva Hesse, Adrian Piper, Gordon Matta-Clark, Paul McCarthy, Cady Noland, Haim Steinbach, and many others. Still, it is the medium of pop and popular culture that defines the fundamental tenor, that lends her work its sometimes biting humorous tone. Accordingly, the works in the exhibition at the Portikus are inspired by an article that appeared in the press, more precisely: the New York Times. The article describes a new trend that might be dubbed HAYCATION, whence also the title of the exhibition. It reports that in the United States it has apparently been “in” for the past few years to spend vacations on a farm. That is perfectly ordinary for us Europeans, but in America it is a rare phenomenon, one that has recently become quite popular. Yet American haycationers must expect to pay up to \$300 per night if, escaping their urban everyday lives, they want to milk cows instead and make hay and finally be able to give their children a hands-on demonstration of how the meat they eat is produced. Rachel Harrison, however, is not interested in illustrating this trend; rather, the phenomenon serves simply as a symbolic frame narrative. The idea of returning to one’s “origins,” the notion that a more complete life can be had by switching between different, even contrary lifestyles, circulates throughout our contemporary Western world. Telling this one particular story, then, is not of decisive importance to Harrison. Instead, she wants to point out to us how every one of us brings our own set of cultural references to bear; accordingly, the challenge the visitor faces is not about understanding what this is about but about reading the signs and interpreting them within a larger—and perhaps also aesthetic—referential framework.

Rachel Harrison is currently showing her first large-scale survey exhibition at the CCS Bard / Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. The exhibition will be on view until December 20 before moving, in a revised version, to the Whitechapel Gallery, London.

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