

Virginia Overton in conversation with Fabrice Stroun

Fabrice Stroun: Your show at Kunsthalle Bern is constructed as a series of echoes. In the center room, you've constructed a floor piece that mirrors the pattern of the glass ceiling; downstairs, you've hung wall pieces that reverberate the pattern of the building's parquet.

Virginia Overton: It's a protracted process: I've visited Kunsthalle Bern numerous times in the last year and a half to prepare for this show. Once I arrived for the installation, I began to try things out. It's a process of trial and error. The work is conceived as a reaction to the space and the materials I found here and around Bern. At times the work can be a literal reflection of the space.

FS: I'm interested in the fact that this game of mirrors is experienced as much optically as it is conceptually. Your work has barely any illusionistic qualities.

VO: Yeah, I don't think of them as tricks in any way; it's not a funhouse. My hope is that the experience of the work is physical, but also objective. The pieces are what they are: Planks of wood wedged between the floor and a wall. Pieces of real parquet hung on walls. I feel like the work I make can exist in a museum or on a driveway or in a barn or whatever, and still function as real things in the world, not as some extraneous objects to be placed on a pedestal.

FS: But a piece of wood looked at in a space consecrated for art is no longer the same piece of wood found on the side of the road.

VO: Actually, I think they are the same thing.

FS: Ha! So how much of the cultural or social makeup of these objects and materials carries over from their point of origin to the Kunsthalle? You've recently made a work in New York using cedar lumber from Tennessee, where you grew up, which you trucked half across the country. This wood had a particular color and, most importantly, a particular smell, which led a number of commentators to describe your work as a kind of abstract representation of the rural South. Similarly, many of the materials you use to make your sculptures are associated with a D.I.Y, quotidian working-class culture.

VO: That's definitely all in there, but I'm not that interested in mapping out an American vernacular aesthetic. I like to work with materials I am familiar with and the rural South is simply where I come from. But I can adapt to other contexts, as most of my work is made with materials and ideas found

on site. When I travel for shows, I like working with local materials. It keeps me from having to ship so much stuff around the world.

FS: Materials as well as images. For your show in Bern, you've decided to include in the exhibition both a light box sign advertising the name of our institution as well as an old photograph of it's façade.

VO: The light box sign is the same format as one I made for The Kitchen in New York when I showed there last year. I liked the idea of making a sign for the place and then putting it inside the building. I found the photograph of Kunsthalle in the basement. In this case, I'm still working with a material that is familiar to me. It's the ubiquitous image of Kunsthalle Bern I have known for years, long before I ever traveled to Switzerland.

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Virginia Overton was born in Tennessee and currently lives and works in New York. She has had solo exhibitions at the Power House, Memphis; SculptureCenter, Long Island City; the Power Station, Dallas and The Kitchen, New York.

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