

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS
JULY/AUGUST 2009 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU €8



ARCHAEOLOGY?
IRIS HÄUSSLER
EXPERIMENTS

SCUM
JERSZY SEYMOUR +
SOFT CORE DESIGN

CONVERSATIONS
ROAD TRIP WITH
JEREMY DELLER

AFTERLIFE
JOEP VAN LIEFLAND'S
VIDEO REDUX





SARAH LINDLEY
RALEIGH, NC

The five skeletal structures that fill Sarah Lindley's installation *Housing Petronella* are both conceptually suggestive and emotionally haunting [Artspace; May 1—June 27, 2009].

They are suggestive in that the empty rooms in these small edifices, each something over three feet high, comment on and deconstruct the stuffed, extraordinarily detailed Dutch *poppenhuizen* or doll houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—miniaturized multi-roomed houses encased in richly adorned cabinets. These were commissioned and lovingly assembled by some of the wealthiest women of Holland's Golden Age, when Dutch seaports gathered and redistributed the world's manifold riches.

The show is emotionally haunting because of its use of Artspace's Gallery 1. The staring spaces created by Lindley's dark gray trestles, scaled to half the size of the Dutch originals, stand on white supports and are outlined against white walls, themselves empty but for bright spots of reflected light. Webs of gray shadows cast by the trestles cross the tops of the gleaming white stands. Despite the whiteness of the three walls and the windows of a fourth, Lindley's dark structures, evenly spaced around the gallery, seem to exist in an eerie perescule.

Lindley's five half-scale structures are inspired by the cabinets created by four women—Petronella de la Court, Petronella Dunois, Petronella Oortman, and Sara Ploos van Amstel—who ordered and placed exquisitely crafted miniatures of everything they might have in their own luxurious homes, down to miniature paintings and elaborately fashioned gilded frames. One cabinet even contains a tiny version of itself among its array of collectibles.

According to Sarah Archer in *Structuring Absence: Sculpture of Sarah Lindley*, some of the Dutch cabinets cost almost as much as a real townhouse in Amsterdam. Petronella de la Court's cabinet required an entrance hall, office, reception room, bedroom, lying-in room, nursery, kitchen, storage room, and a backyard garden.

In examining photographs taken at a slight distance from some of these rooms, one might be hard put to perceive them as anything but the real thing. The only obviously false notes are the dolls themselves.

Lindley's work, of course, lies squarely in the *vanitas* tradition. In place of the rich woods and veneers of the Dutch cabinets, she builds her houses of slabs of stoneclay that, when fired, take on a dark gray gunmetal appearance. The uprights seem quite solid, but the horizontals, both slabs for flooring supports and strips running across the front and sides of each cabinet, tend to curve and buckle so that they seem slightly askew. Curlicues on the more elaborate pieces break here and there. One assumes a certain number of accidentals, but much thought seems to have gone into the production, demonstrated by drawings and small models created both before and after the larger structures.

As for her source, Lindley feels that *poppenhuizen* contain something of a mystery: "At a time when the act of collecting was considered a masculine intellectual pursuit, these women painstakingly commissioned and collected the contents for their miniature interiors and placed them behind closed doors. Is their obsession an act of indulgence, an expression of power, or a quest for perfection?"

It is intriguing to think of the cabinets as the result of obsession, an effort by women to stop time and contain their worlds in small spaces they could control. But if Lindley were directing a movie of her own work, winds might howl through the original *poppenhuizen*, taking their worlds with them, leaving empty air in the empty rooms of *Housing Petronella*.

—Max Halperen

JEREMY DRUMMOND + ROD NORTHCUIT
RICHMOND, VA

The exhibitions of Canadian artist and curator Jeremy Drummond and American artist Rod Northcutt explore relationships between humans and their environment through play [1708 Gallery; April 17—May 30, 2009]. Drummond's two works employ graphic visual language borrowed from the delineations of maps and satellite photographs. His approach to play owes much to post-modern theories of representation and power. It banks on the tacit authority of appropriated imagery that, manipulated, provides an effective means for reimagining our world. Northcutt's exhibition includes sculpture, drawing, and installations. His sense of play is instinctual rather than theory-oriented. It is also more animated—humorous and, at times, intentionally goofy. Whereas Drummond explores humans' relationship to the environment through the politics of boundaries, Northcutt probes the human-nature dichotomy. Within fictional narratives and three-dimensional tableaux, he levels the conventional hierarchy isolating humans at the "top" of Earth's span of species.

Drummond's most ambitious work is *65-Point Plan for Sustainable Living*, 2008, sixty-five satellite images, each seven-by-ten inches, of small sectors of each U.S. state and Canadian province. Installed on the gallery wall to reflect their actual coordinate positions, they insinuate the entire landmasses of both countries. The focus of each image is a single subdivision, digitally recreated by Drummond as an enclosed geographic/constructed space where, as the artist says, "[there are] no roads leading in or out."

The lack of outwardly extending roads is not mere absence but barrier, and these reconfigurations convert subdivided neighborhoods into prison-like compounds. Inhabitants of these acutely gated communities might retain virtual access to the world and others, but they are effectively isolated. Such structures evoke disturbingly twisted scenarios of a utopian vision gone awry: the desire for unity, homogenization, and protection suffocating a populace and giving way to dangerous social fundamentalism.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Sarah Lindley, view of exhibition *Housing Petronella*; left to right: *Cabinet House of Petronella Oortman*, 2006, black clay, steel support, 42 x 35 x 11.5 inches; *First Cabinet House of Sara Ploos Van Amstel*, 2006, black clay, 42.5 x 37 x 13 inches (courtesy of the artist and Artspace, Raleigh, NC); Rod Northcutt, *Luddite*, 2009, mixed media (courtesy of the artist and 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA)



Drummond's images are metaphors for Disney's Celebration or, perhaps, for the neighborhoods in which some of us grew up. They also signify the presence of an overwhelming state power. The extreme synchronization and split symmetry in the panel *Arizona*, for example, connote absolute control—a merging of French theorist Louis Althusser's "ideological State apparatuses"—"private domain" institutions already active in the subdivisions, such as churches, schools, and newspapers—with the "repressive State apparatus"—public manifestations of control such as prison, police force, and so on. Additionally, the satellite perspective suggests an outer space-based panopticon, erasing privacy by watching and filing citizens' movements. Drummond's eerily redolent images reveal the minefields that lie between public and private, the state and the individual, and social architecture and the environment.

In *Maps of the World*, 2009, Drummond probes the semiotic nature of geography and prompts us to imagine new possibilities for world relations, politics, and culture. Conceptually, this work is somewhat reminiscent of Maura Sheehan's map paintings from the early 1990s, which functioned as a kind of ethnocentricity test, challenging our worldviews. But visually and aesthetically, Drummond's map is very different. Appropriating the graphic visual language of conventional maps, his pigment print on rag paper represents a new planet. Nation states and continents have been repositioned across the globe to establish new political, cultural, and, not least, climate-based contexts. Drummond's simple but profound idea of shifting geographic locations and shuffling borders prompts the contemplation of new influences and lifestyles. Fresh possibilities exponentially appear in our mind; yet, reality hovers, maintaining a residual presence. This contrast, a deconstructionist play, produces an oscillation between what is and what could be, and becomes a new intellectual context for broadening perceptions and/or potential solutions for global problems.

Rod Northcutt is an artist, craftsperson, lay-scientist,

collector of natural and artificial artifacts, and writer, at home in the borders and in-between spaces of disciplines and aesthetic attitudes and practices. This flexibility permeates his exhibition *Indigenous Genius*, which is most interesting for its emphasis on the nature-culture dialectic, a relation described by Kate Soper in her crucial book *What is Nature?* as "...axiomatic to Western thought,...a presupposition of all its philosophical, scientific, moral, and aesthetic discourse...." Soper asks the central question: "...is there a rigid and theoretically unbridgeable divide between the 'cultural' and the 'natural,' or is the distinction between humanity and animality...a matter of degree rather than a difference of kind?" Northcutt sides with the latter and expresses his position through fictionalized, animal-centric scenarios, proposing views of human hegemony from the nature side of the dichotomy. The beaver-as-maker is his case in point. The sculptures, drawings, and installations that present this perspective are masterfully executed, and often funny through cartoonish shenanigans. Yet, despite Northcutt's impressive research about the biology and culture of beavers, the work takes us nowhere in the human-nature dialogue. The animals' perspective and actions are largely anthropomorphic; and, Northcutt's binary inversion leaves us where it found us: at the hub of a human-centered outlook.

—Paul Ryan

DEVORAH SPERBER ROANOKE, VA

In her catalog essay for the exhibition *Devorah Sperber: A Strange Sense of Déjà Vu*, Stephanie Cash makes the observation that Sperber's work "...embraces the dematerialization of the art object in the age of digital reproduction" [Taubman Museum of Art; March 20—May 31, 2009]. Coupling Lucy Lippard's concept from the late 1960s with a slight alteration of Walter Benjamin's well-known phrase provides a concise description of Sperber's interest in both the science and art of seeing. Here, science entails the biological functions of the eye and brain and their interconnectedness. The art of seeing lies in attention and the subjectivity of sight. That is, as the mechanism of the eye presents information to the brain, the tasks of recognition, construction, recreation, and interpretation are accomplished within the context of myriad mental and emotional factors. Quoting Jonah Lehrer's book *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, Cash points out in her essay that "...to look is to create what you see.... Reality is not out there waiting to be witnessed; reality is made by the mind." Similarly, Sperber's project reveals that the artwork is "made" by the viewer, whether experiencing an object firsthand or through photographic reproduction—a remarkable though challenging truth about sight and subjectivity that supports Duchamp's ideas about the essential creativity and collaborative role of the viewer and the spirit of Barthes' appeal for the "birth of the reader."

For hundreds of years, artists have explored and speculated about the process of seeing. Among them are Leonardo, Holbein, Vermeer, Cézanne, Seurat, Albers, Hofmann, Dalí, Hockney, Close, and more recently Finch and Kentridge. Their inquiries along scientific and intuitive paths have contributed to our understanding of sight and prompted advances in artistic styles, media, and treatment of subject matter—that is, play towards ambiguity, investigation of abstraction, dissolution of form. Sperber's approach is unique in its conceptual, formal, and experiential multi-dimensionality. It addresses issues of sight in general, though there is an emphasis on the process of looking at art, espe-

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Jeremy Drummond, *65-Point Plan for Sustainable Living: Arizona, USA*, 2008, lambda print and Plexiglas, 10 x 7 inches [courtesy of the artist and 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA]; Devorah Sperber, installation view of *A Strange Case of Déjà Vu* [courtesy of the artist and the Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA]