

KATY HEINLEIN

UNKNOWN PLEASURES



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

FEBRUARY 21 - MARCH 29, 2008

AUSTIN, TEXAS

KATY HEINLEIN

*Esse Quam Videri:
Being and Seeming in the
Work of Katy Heinlein*

When I first encountered Katy Heinlein's artwork, I thought it like current practices that used largely formal aesthetic poses to construct art objects that privileged their physical qualities over their metaphorical potential. The materials of which these works were made tried to be themselves rather than seem like something else. In Heinlein's work, this emphasis was especially impressive because fabric – the material constant in all of her work – is particularly susceptible to allusion. Heinlein's skillful forestalling of symbolism in prior work is a stage clearing for her latest pieces that are noticeably more assertive. These new works have a voice of their own. In the works included in her solo exhibition *Unknown Pleasures*, Heinlein expands upon the formal qualities she mastered in previous works to make the most assured and confrontational work of her career.

Heinlein and her aesthetic peers work in a straightforward manner. They explore materials' physical properties more than their symbolic potentials. Abstraction, because it is non-representational, was one strategy used throughout. Paintings of this kind, for instance, featured geometric shapes or swathes of color; not faces or landscapes. These paintings were more about *being* paint than *seeming* like pictures. The fabric in Heinlein's pieces is manipulated to showcase what fabric is capable of, and this was no small trick. Fabric, unlike the metal components of Heinlein's anecdotes, is malleable and pedestrian. Steel suggests steel, or possibly a highrise, but fabric recalls the much more close-to-the-skin everydayness of clothing, bedsheets and towels. That Heinlein eschewed these references so successfully in her previous work is impressive.

In her earlier work, for instance, Heinlein made a series of works that emphasized fabric's muscular qualities. This work is made from cantilevered, cloth-covered planks propped up against the wall and buttressed with cloth sandbags. Impossible straps of cloth zing up to the rafters to support the balance beam of an artwork so tautly that the straps were often mistaken for rubber. In others, cloth socks bend stiff limbs into graceful arcs. The cloth used in these works was colored in a range of neutrals punched with bold magentas, limes and blacks. Here, fabric is gymnastic and athletic.

Heinlein next developed a series of pieces that emphasizes fabric's ability to drape, lay and cover. Begun in residency at DiverseWorks, these pieces featured swathes of black and grey cloth draped over turrets of regularly spaced parapets. The tight straps of highlighter bright orange, green and blue fabric contrast with the velvety valleys as they zip mountaintop-to-mountaintop. At each corner of the rectangular, fabric-covered cubes, excess material pools out in a well-planned oval. The regularity of the unseen structure that supports the fabric is so regular and predictable – like a many-legged table overturned and covered – that one is not distracted from the fabric with questions of what is underneath. The focus in these works is on fabric and its



Nuisance, 2007. Cloth, wire and wood. 72" x 18" x 12".

behavior as it lies. These draped works, gymnastic pieces, and other previous works of Heinlein's explore a range of behaviors native to fabric.

One can note a change in the more recent work, however. Unlike before, the work in *Unknown Pleasures* is more symbolically loquacious. Rather than a reductive logic that avoids association, symbolism or illusion, the newest work is more expressive – even playful. This change can be traced in comparison to earlier works by noting the aesthetic tweaks Heinlein employs.

One particularly clear example of Heinlein's new approach is found in the piece, *Nuisance*. It adds a nuanced sense of color within a direct quotation from minimalist sculpture. In this piece, a square of fabric hangs on the wall. A rod leans against it tantalizingly nudging at the fabric square's corner. The piece is reminiscent of Richard Serra's wall props in which an unpainted square of sheet metal is held up against a wall by a steel cylinder. Heinlein's piece, however, is colorful. This piece, like previous ones, is still colored in neutral tones with boldly colored accents, but the palette is more finessed: the wall hanging is a cool, natural ochre; the dowel is a sharp purple, both royal and fantastic. It is certainly different than the Serra (or even the Robert Rauschenberg fabric panel and cylinder props *Nuisance* also evokes), but it is also a distinction within Heinlein's own work.

These changes are more pronounced in Heinlein's recent covered pieces. In one, which like the exhibition is called *Unknown Pleasures*, a milk chocolate topping drapes over four balusters of two different heights that stand up from the floor in a square formation. Like earlier pieces, *Unknown Pleasures* resembles an overturned table, but this time the table has two stumpy legs. The fabric swoops between these two heights suggesting a less-regular object than the earlier covered pieces; and thus suggesting a more symbolic shape. The symbolism is especially strong in *Ceremony*, a central, square column projecting up from a larger rectangular plinth. The piece is memorial in shape, like an obelisk with a truncated point. A triple draping of fabric—dark grey over light grey over a leafy green gives *Ceremony* a particularly ritualistic significance. *Unknown Pleasures*, like *Ceremony*, also features an embellished fabric: a fashionable addition of a two-inch blue trim. Rather than a brightly colored band, *Unknown Pleasures*'s fondant of cool, brown is rimmed by an icing of sharp blue.

The piece, *In and Out*, employs an altogether new element. With *In and Out*, Heinlein returns to the wall, but the piece relies on an unseen armature affixed to the vertical surface rather than balancing itself along the wall. *In and Out* is made of a U-shaped doodad from which hangs a cascade of transparent ochre trimmed with grey. Among the new works, this one seems to have the most mechanics and, therefore, seems the most like clothing. The armature is like the architectural supports in a structured garment, and a burgundy strap is sewn underneath the U-shaped stay gathering up the fabric waterfall like the flourish of a costume. Its height up the wall, conical shape, and its size implies a sleeve, pocket or hat.

The clothing reference in *In and Out* underscores a shift to a more human scale and a reference that is noticeable in all the work included in *Unknown Pleasures*. Heinlein's earlier gymnastic works—even though they were made with relatively little fabric—vaulted about the room implying an architectural tonnage. The earlier draped pieces were smaller, but were human-like only inasmuch as a coffee table or Mini Cooper is: smaller than a house; bigger than a breadbox. The earlier draped pieces are not of a size or shape to represent or suggest us. That changes with the work in *Unknown Pleasures*. The garment-like qualities of *In and Out* are one example; the yet-to-be-interred gesture in *Ceremony* is another. A third example can be found in *Hike*.

Hike is downright figurative. Although not freestanding, *Hike* is human-sized in both its height and verticality. The work features a pool of beige fabric with warm pink undertones—like flesh—that spills out of a dense, kelly green curtain of fabric. A fabric strap, florescent red in color, and an unseen prop suspends the green curtain over the floor perpendicular to the wall. A shift that is most noticeable in *Hike*, but can be seen in the other pieces of *Unknown Pleasures* as well, is that the work addresses you directly.

There is as much elegance in Heinlein's older work as the new, but now each piece seems like more of an active agent in its meaning. Judging from the stylish palette, playful shapes, personable scale and tongue-in-cheek historical art references she has introduced, Heinlein's artwork has a lot of sass in its class. It is like Ginger Rogers: moxie in an evening dress.

This personality in the new work bespeaks the most important innovation in Heinlein's oeuvre. I was originally attracted to her work because I saw it fitting into a genuinely new shift in postminimalism (a tired, catch-all term for those artists who found the aesthetic of 1960s and 1970s minimalism useful even if they thought, quite rightly, that those minimalists who believed they could have materials free of any socio-political meaning were fooling themselves). In my estimation, Heinlein, among others, emphasized the materialness of her artworks, in part, as a rejection of the rampant relativity of postmodern culture. The trick is that objects must develop a sense of agency to be players amongst artworks: just *being* fabric is not enough if you do not *seem* like art. Heinlein's earlier works with their leaning, propping and lying were perhaps in danger of being bullied by context. For all their novel straightforwardness, they are more like instances rather than things. *Unknown Pleasures*, however, marks a becoming for Heinlein's artwork. Now it truly speaks for itself.

Jeff M. Ward is an art critic who lives and works in Chicago, IL.

KATY HEINLEIN

Born December 2, 1973 in Baytown, Texas.

Currently lives and works in Houston, Texas.

EDUCATION

1999 MFA, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas

1995 BFA, University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Belton, Texas

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2008 *Unknown Pleasures, Women & Their Work*, Austin, Texas

2005 *Head Over Heels*, Commerce Street Artists Warehouse, Houston, Texas

2001 *If and When*, Lawndale Art Center (Main Gallery), Houston, Texas

When Push Comes to Shove, Cultural Activities Center, Temple, Texas

1999 *Situation*, Studio Gallery, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006 *P's and Q's*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas

The Real Art World, DiverseWorks Art Space, Houston, Texas

2005 *Trickle Down*, (Curated by Robbie Austin) Firehouse Center for the Arts, Burlington, Vermont

2004 *In Situ: New Work for Allen's Landing*, Houston, Texas

Twang: Contemporary Sculpture From Texas, (Curated by C. Sean Horton), Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont, Texas, McKinney Art Center, Dallas, Texas

Selective Memory, (Curated by Chris Ballou), The Bower Art Space, San Antonio, Texas

2003 *Red*, Artscan/Rudolf Projects, Houston, Texas

Assistance League of Houston Celebrates Texas Art, Williams Tower, Houston, Texas

2002 *Blip* (Curated by Sharon Engelstein and Aaron Parazette), University of South Florida, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tampa, Florida

2001 *New American Talent*, Texas Fine Arts Association, Austin, Texas
The Big Show, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas

2000 *Women in the Visual Arts*, Erector Square Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut
Houston Area Exhibition, Blaffer Gallery, Houston, Texas

1999 *Works Born at the Park*, Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Museum, Shigaraki, Japan

1998 *Materials, Process and Vision*, Texas Women's University, Denton, Texas

LECTURES

2004 Panelist, Texas Sculpture Symposium, Junction, Texas

AWARDS

2007 William and Dorothy Yeck National Young Sculptors Purchase Award, Miami University, 1st Place, Juried by Mary Ceruti, Executive Director of The Sculpture Center, NY

2005 Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County Individual Artist Fellowship Grant

2000 Juror's Award Recipient, Women in the Visual Arts, International Juried Competition, Juried by Lisa Dennison, Chief Curator, Deputy Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

1999 Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award, International Sculpture Center

RESIDENCIES

2006 The Real Art World, DiverseWorks Art Space, Houston, Texas

2005 Edward Albee Foundation, Montauk, NY

1998 Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, Shigaraki, Japan (May-August)



Untitled, 2006. Cloth and Wood. 28" x 36" x 56".



This Panel: *Ceremony*, 2008. Cloth and wood. 36" x 24" x 48".

Cover Panel: *Hike*, 2007. Cloth and wood. 48" x 6" x 52".



Unknown Pleasures, 2007. Cloth and wood. 36" x 60" x 60".

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 30th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,794 artists in 250 visual art exhibitions, 107 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 339 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



Women & Their Work

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