

The Long Range

According to the dictionary, the word range denotes, first of all, an arrangement: “to set in a row, or in rows, to dispose in the proper order.” In cowboy country, the range is essentially an open stretch of land given over to cattle, and these in turn range upon it. “To rove over and through” is the dictionary definition of range as a verb. But range is also related to the act of viewing, typically at a distance: “To have range, to be capable of projecting; as, the gun ranges three miles.” One spots a faraway object in the rangefinder of a gun or a camera. For the purposes of this show, we may assume that the range is long, that it goes on and on, and not only in space, but also in time, because there is also such a thing as a “long range planning.”

To a greater or lesser degree, a steady focus on a distant goal is a characteristic of all art practice, but in *The Long Range* the goal remains purposefully obscure. In contrast to Sol Lewitt’s often-quoted dictum, “the idea is the machine that makes the art,” one could say that here the idea has no prescriptive function. It is asserted as neither the alpha nor omega, but rather something that can only be glimpsed vaguely, and then pursued through a process of making that allows for continual course correction and deferral. Ideally, one never gets there, but there is nevertheless a certain rigor in the approach. In other words, for both the artist and audience, there is a “proper order” to this experience.

“To set in a row, or in rows” – this could describe the arrangement of marks in Ginny Bishton’s drawings. Every next stroke is placed directly beside a prior one, so that the work unfolds methodically as a surface area is filled in increment by increment. At some point, however, this process is abruptly left off, and it is in the play between the full parts of the page and those left empty, and between its resulting regularity and irregularity, that something like a composition emerges. Bishton has claimed that her “primary interest is the particularity of the various marks and the time required to attend to them individually, even as they are becoming a larger whole.”

To arrange is not necessarily to compose as the work of David Hullfish Bailey also stands to demonstrate, since here as well we are dealing with a step-by-step process of making that is guided less by aesthetic considerations than heuristic ones. The artist relates it to a particular mode of path finding that proceeds via free association from one object, one location, to next in the absence of any map-like overview of the trajectory. What gets produced in this way is inherently partial, and cannot be seized as a singular, delimited and hence composed, form, but neither is it exactly formless or uncomposed. In the at once random and determined structure of the “free library” at Slab City, where the unwritten law stipulates that for every book taken one is to be given back, Bailey locates an already-made figure for his own practice. Rows of books are “set” by his camera only; in actuality, their arrangement is continually changing.

A flood plain abandoned by all former agricultural interests, and devoid of real-estate potential, Slab City is precisely a place for transient bodies “to rove over and through.” Nothing there is built to last, and thereby openly bespeaks its being in time as a provisional form bracketed between a before and an after. A closely related sense of impermanence is a hallmark of John Divola’s work on the whole, and especially his photographs of houses isolated against the expanse of the desert. These are stand-alone dwellings for outsiders, disconnected from the suburban row, spaced as far apart from each other as possible. The drive to “get away from it all” is simultaneously affirmed and denied by these pictures which afford their object a great distance while also capturing it at the very center of the frame. The stand-alone “home on the range” – the desert being one of the few sites where

Western-style homesteading remains a viable option – is isolated as a mark against the undifferentiated field of the landscape; one mark that will in turn be hung next to another.

The house in the desert, the boat on the ocean, the figure in the landscape, all stand out as anomalous incursions into an otherwise natural ground. These are objects that catch the eye across the long range, and only then become caught in the picture. In the built environment of the city whatever stands out must be designed for this purpose, as with the notorious Colby posters that Christopher Michlig works with. These are imprinted with thick black letters across modulated neon fields to be read from across the street, typically in passing. Michlig collects, dissects, and then recomposes these posters from their dispersed parts in a way that fundamentally obstructs their given message while still respecting their structural template. The grid-work matrix of the printing press remains visible throughout, and perhaps even more so as a highly constrained means of aesthetic arranging, or composition, rather than strictly promotion. In the absence of legible content, what we see is precisely what is “capable of projecting.”

A thing projects itself forward as an image, and this image, once captured, reverts to the status of thing, a thing that is “capable of projecting.” Certainly, this capability is essential to the elaborate stage show machinery that Jim Skuldt salvaged from Neil Diamond’s mid-nineties tour. Consisting of a multi-level, circular, rotating platform inlaid with and surrounded by lights, and an overhanging cluster of speakers, it is determined to reach even those seated in the darkest depths of the theater. This portable stage is dubbed a “turn-table” by its operators, the roadies, which obviously recalls the recorded form of music within the live arena, and by extension also perhaps the idea of a movement that holds its viewers spellbound and inert. The performer turns in circles to insure a certain amount of face-time with the surrounding audience held fast in their seats. But what happens when this same gear is presented in a gallery where we are encouraged to move freely about it? Moreover, what happens when something designed to stand out and be experienced at a distance is observed close-up?

Questions of viewing range and sounding range intersect as well in Cindy Bernard’s ongoing aesthetic inquiry into the histories of media. Of particular interest in this regard is a project concerning the ham radio craze of the inter- and post-war years, for here as well isolation is a prerequisite to communication. One has to get away from the city to marshal the bandwidth required to exchange information with other nations; it is to the flattest landscapes that the sleek verticality of the radio antenna is best suited. Bernard surveys a stretch of her deceased grandfather’s lot in the desert over a retaining wall in a series of photographs that occasionally alight on some scattered technological remains from his days as a committed ham radio enthusiast. She walks the line of the wall, documenting the ground covered with each step, as if to reiterate the horizontality of an antenna that has fallen alongside its operator (the overall project is titled Silent Key, which designates a transmission source that has gone dead).

One project begins when the other leaves off, extending its range past its existential end-point, lending it a kind of afterlife. As art, however, the projective capabilities of whatever one starts with will become both more diffuse and more circumscribed, for this now is also an object of reflection. Implicit in our encounter with these things in the space of the gallery is an awareness of the various stages that they have undergone on the way to becoming pictures and sculptures. Here, then, we can speak of “long range planning,” but again in the absence of any definite end. Rather, the point is to sustain some part of one’s interest in the original projecting thing as well as the artistic project that it has engendered, and this involves a continual alternation between looking forward and looking back. In

The Long Range, the imagination of the future must also include its own historical revision. As art, a thing that is “capable of projecting” will invite a mode of reflection that is always in part retrospective. At the extreme, the artwork becomes an artifact, an object of archeological interest, which certainly holds true for Karthik Pandian’s contribution to *The Long Range*, a reconstruction of a work of “performative sculpture,” as he puts it, produced in the Summer of 2010. Unfolding as a repeating sequence of three slides – the first of a broken mirror, the second of a crisscrossing length of mason’s line and the third of a shell, all placed atop the strict grid of a cutting board – it evokes the context of the forensics lab in a way that is aesthetically giving and at the same time withholding, cryptic, as the negative tracing of a “back-story” that can never be reconstructed in full.

The former piece from which the present one is derived could be said to conflate the geological figure of the core-sample with that of an architectural column, as a hollow wooden form 8ft tall by 2ft square was painstakingly filled with craigslist-derived hauls of “free dirt” in successive layers, or “strata,” embedded here and there with the various items represented in the slide-show. The mirror was placed on top, capping off the column in such a way as to allow the sun “to see itself,” in Pandian’s words, and vice-versa. Once complete, the form was opened before a small audience in the parking lot behind his studio, only to have its contents explode outward. This object, as well as the event of its making and viewing, has obviously informed the various rammed earth columns that have been included in subsequent exhibitions mounted at the Whitney Museum and Midway gallery in Minneapolis, but whether or not the artist actually expects his audience to “connect the dots” between them is finally less relevant than the immediate perception of a process that methodically builds on its own fall-out.

For some time, Anton Lieberman has studied the simple growth patterns of the San Pedro cactus, which shoots straight upward as “fluted” column that may be sectioned off at its top for purposes of propagation. The detached segment, once replanted, is described as a “genetic clone” of its source cactus, and thereby provides a model for Lieberman’s own incremental sculptural process that is both functionally apt and metaphorically suggestive. He starts by casting a single representative length of this plant to yield a succession of modular parts that may then be reattached – composed, or again, arranged – in any number of ways. Here, as well, the work invokes an organic eco-system in its mode of construction, calling to mind the elemental relation between the sun that projects its rays downward and the plant that projects its mass upward to meet them. However, the San Pedro cactus can effectively be implanted with itself so as to branch outward, and Lieberman speaks to this “second nature” of human tampering as well in the somewhat monstrous cut and paste form of his sculpture.

“Long range planning” is intrinsic to all art, as mentioned, and not only in regard to a future goal, but also in regard to the history with which artists are always in dialog. The works in *The Long Range* make this condition of backward and forward looking manifest by straddling a point within their own evolution that is evidently intermediate. Whatever gets started is left off before finishing: the parts are arranged in a manner that is decisive but not final, so that one can still envision where they have come from and where they might go. In this sense, the work, like the exhibition overall, marks a moment of temporary stoppage in an always ongoing process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction.

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