

Practice makes perfect - a world of sweet nothings

Hearts and diamonds lie about. The smell of beeswax and solvent permeates the air. Cookie cutters of differing shapes and sizes cover the tables. A pile of pressboard flowers has been freshly cut from the band saw. Turkey basters and cake decorating devices are filled with paint. In the midst of such paraphernalia, Robbin Deyo's studio is a transposed space of feminine domestic production where the qualities of good home-making take effect in the space of art creation. A large pot steams in the corner atop a burner. The wax medium is ready to have more wooden flowers dipped in and then be set aside to settle and cool. The scraps of wax chips littering the floor have been scraped from objects that did not live up to the expectation to achieve a flawless surface.

When surrounded by works whose materiality dominates our physiological and psychological space, we cannot help but 'listen' to their resonance. The visual exterior that we are permitted to encounter as a viewer is, in many instances, an artwork's first line of offense--and simultaneously its last line of defense. Dipped, poured or decorated, the surfaces of Deyo's wall works are sealed in an immaculate translucent layer of chromatically tinted wax. We are transfixed by the oscillation between the works' obvious materiality and the refraction of light within it. Light and matter seem to become one and the same, resulting in a dissolved reality. The material does not assume the rough and raw qualities that characterize traditional encaustic painting, but rather attempts to possess a flawless finish. The surfaces (with the exception of the *NO PAINTINGS* which will be discussed later) possess no trace of touch or tool or method — they are virtually uninterrupted. Their purity is enforced by the playful generic shapes we would associate with youthful innocence — palm-sized mint-green clovers, baby blue stars, tiny pink hearts.... Ironically, Deyo's concern with a sublime optical finish (using a material whose inherent qualities seem to refuse this) establishes works that beg to be physically touched. It is the wax's organic presence and welcoming 'daycare' colour palette that propagate this urge. We would not experience this compulsion if the works were of seamless grey plastic, or polished glass. The wax generates a seductive mystery and hence a curiosity.

The long sheet-metal wall of *Sweetness and Light* reflects light while the thousands of magnetically attached waxen charms seem to pull the light in, like a dancing galaxy in reverse. Each little moon and sun begs to be plucked, held and rubbed. The inner glow of each surface is too inviting. It's as if we are being set up to make the first move. So many offerings; how can one resist?

The attempt at seduction by Deyo is obvious. It is meant to be obvious--we are charmed by the romantic honesty of it all. Deliberately coy in temperament due to a palette of pastel colours, this unapologetic display of hopeful enchantment does not overplay its hand; quite the opposite. What uniquely characterizes Robbin Deyo's work is that she literally wears her heart on her sleeve, romancing us to suspend our disbelief in the light of not-so-hidden charms. It dares us because her shapes are in one respect so emotionally/culturally sterile (the simple red valentine heart) while their material delicacy and sense of hand-crafted care imbue them with a revitalized sense of sincerity. This sincerity is compounded by the

work's overwhelming number of components. The sheer multitude of diaphanous clouds, marshmallow teardrops, hearts and flowers swallows us up in its own vast spaciousness.

Any relation to pop irony is diffused by a beguiling sense of innocence that compels the viewer to somehow push aside grown-up cynicism and be swept into a fleeting world of sweet nothings. Ironically, if the work does beg for various levels of intimate contact, any slight physical touch on our behalf will leave an indelible mark. The allure of the pristine and delicate becomes stained and tainted, as traces of human contact break the charmed spell. Though it may seem odd to spend time discussing the act of touch with work that is resoundingly visual, Deyo's installations are as much physical as they are optical. Physical in their objecthood, physical in their generation of an architectural space, and physical in their presence as the artifact of methodical manual labour. Though her works contain no figurative references, the wax material itself inevitably implicates a corporeal engagement. It is as though in lieu of the artist's presence, the works serve as replacement offerings, their display of domestic sensuality requiring us to ask how much seduction we can tolerate before the experience becomes a saccharine tease? This question hints at a consciously subversive melancholy prevalent in the work--a felt absence that poignantly haunts the spaces between the sweetness and the light.

Turning from the playful firmament of *Sweetness and Light*, the viewer encounters a more earth-bound pastoral experience. Eight thousand miniature wax flowers geometrically adorn a 300-square-foot wall. Soft bulbous petals of pastel yellows, oranges and greens quietly grip the wall and create shifting fields of chromatic patterns. The title is *Forget-me-not*, an obsessive attempt to combat the fear of not being remembered. Within the abundance on display, there is also a melancholic absence. This functions in stark contrast to the aura of youthful naiveté that coats Deyo's work, and it is here that a sophisticated subversion and commentary occurs. Our sense of this is not only predicated upon the superficialities of colour, form and subject matter, but emerges from an assumed belief (we project upon the artist) that the sheer numbers and toilsome repetitive act will somehow erode the pejorative underpinnings of the term naive. Perhaps all that which is normally dismissed as trite or childish must be given its due if it can reach a scale grand enough to swallow our field of vision by grafting itself exponentially across entire walls.

The overwhelming presence of Deyo's practice tempers any sense of idyllic naiveté with an acute sense of noble futility. Through the determination of amassing numbers, Deyo challenges our cynicism. She challenges all that would prevent us from believing self worth can be established through these multiple offerings. Ultimately these works address how identity may be constructed through faith in labour. They speak of the unflinching belief that by obsessively repeating an act (like a physical mantra) the naive will no longer be simply that and instead become the real. There is a longing for a sense of fixed identity that can be satiated by producing for others. It is as though the artist has placed faith in the multitudes of sweet nothings that must finally add up to the sweetest of something.

It is remarkable in Robbin Deyo's work that it consciously risks finalizing its viewer engagement with a sunshine embrace of whispered sweet nothings — a sentimental visual fling. Having spent time with the work we realize this is untrue. The trite tickle and wink flirtations that emanate from the clichéd forms of cookie-cut flowers, and girly colours acquire a level of gravitas based on their insistent num-

bers and the obsessive labour involved. A gravitas founded in her practice and conditioned by the pervasive cultural dictum that practice makes perfect. This is the works' crucial centre. Whether they are hundreds of blue monochromes that eventually become clouds, or sugar-charged cereal box shapes that playfully create a gigantic Saturday morning constellation, these forms come to us in repetitive obsessive abundance. An abundance of sky, an abundance of flora, an abundance of that which has been individually hand-made on an intimate scale--that which has been 'practiced' ad infinitum with a material that seems to yearn for perfection. Eight thousand wax-dipped pre-cut flowers reside geometrically across the wall. We see the time; we see the practice.

Deyo has constructed the forms from scratch, polished them, and coated them in wax by dipping or pouring. At a distance the perfection of Deyo's wall works seems to rely on a superficial sense of seamless execution — a societal cliché of perfection in the form of feminine beauty — perfectly soft, perfectly delicate, perfectly innocent. Upon close inspection, they are not perfect. Made by hand with an unpredictable medium, her forms maintain the intimate charm of the slightly flawed, slightly irregular, slightly individual and vulnerable. At nose length the perfection lies not on the surface, but in the acknowledgement that her practice will never permit perfection and therefore allow her to pursue it forever. Not as a sentenced act of hard labour, but as the ritualistic pursuit of an ideal. An ideal that the self can be made and offered to us by a practice that should make perfect in an obsessively fabricated perfect world. But this is not the real world. It is this uncooperative reality that conditions Deyo's studio practice: a reality where wax will never perfectly pour and settle, just as the self will never be finished. It is forever in the process of 'being made perfect' -- the self, being re-cut and coated over and over.

Deyo's labourious process presents a compelling foil to the works' seemingly superficial flights of youthful fancy. A repetitious act in other instances could be deemed habitual. In Robbin Deyo's case, the process plunges far deeper than that and is nothing short of ritualistic. The basis of ritualistic behavior is founded upon the premise that the act is in service of personal transformation. Perhaps this is most obvious in the *NO PAINTINGS*. This work is comprised of some seventy square tableaux of varying scale and depth that adorn the wall. They resemble immaculate cakes whose painted wax surfaces and sides look like icing sugar applied by a baker's touch. Each is of a muted pastel colour. It is a delicate field of fastidious seduction. However, as we gaze at the works for an extended period, the dialogue changes--the word NO optically reveals itself in the surface of each ornate piece. Deyo has literally embedded a quiet voice within the work. A word whose declarative authority seems whispered from within the romantic trappings of a consumable offering. To have found the strength to say no. To have to have said it so many times.

Robbin Deyo's practice knowingly questions yet embraces the belief that hope/identity must be crafted from physical labour and endless repetitive means. From here, the work can earn its cathartic weight by challenging the strategies of feminine identity construction. The obsessive/compulsive act of making operates in contrast to the finished veneer of perfection, and is the bitter that mediates the sweet. It is this subversive aftertaste that permeates the lustre of her not-so-innocent, not-so-childish world. When surrounded by the frosted light of Deyo's pearlescent confections, we sense that they beg for attention. They beg us to buy into a seemingly naïve, larger-than-life dream- world conjured by an obsessive determination. And when given time to contemplate, the wall works ultimately beg us to rec-

ognize how the repetitive act of producing sentimentalized offerings by the thousands is an attempt to explore the manufacturing of self. The acknowledgment of this process sets up an emotional double-cross; a subversion enacted upon the superficiality of its own sensual appeal. The material specificity of an artwork speaks not only of its physical constitution but also importantly of its process-based origins — it speaks the artist's practice. Deyo's work confirms this, but as much as these works offer, they ask for as much in return.

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