



A Rotation Coleen Sterritt of Facts

BY KAY WHITNEY

Sexy Beast (detail), 2016. Found furniture parts, palms fronds, sponges, tape, paint, and hardware, 93 x 60 x 75 in.





Fleur du Mal, 2016. Wood, Fix ALL, agave stump, fishing line, bamboo, foam rubber, tape, and paint, 80 x 64 x 32 in.

viewer into her state of mind—an act of self-exposure generally concealed or inaccessible in the work of other sculptors. Sterritt’s sculptures, on the other hand, resemble a three-dimensional journal, each entry/decision following the activity of her mind through a process of accumulation, permutation, layering, and expansion.

These elements generate considerable tension between chance operations and a distinctive system of ordering. Her forms present a mixture of abstraction and its opposite—a metaphorical combination that can be dream-like or evocative of the confusions of memory. Although these objects have a visceral and immediate beauty, what’s most interesting is how Sterritt moves her ideas from point A to a point completely unexpected, which results in works that evince ambiguous or tentative leanings. For Sterritt, fragmentation is both technique and metaphor. Her works look as if they are about to disintegrate, as if they were about to be exposed as fiction despite their tangibility. This proclivity toward the insubstantial, coupled with her non-linear process of development, creates open-ended works, perennially moving toward the never-achieved goal of “finished.”

Sterritt repurposes materials from her daily experiences in Los Angeles and Southern California and combines them to create bricolaged entities suspended between states. Because she employs objects drawn from both manmade and natural sources, her work questions the common understanding of the “real.” Intermingling organic materials with mass-produced items—furniture, plastic goods, hardware, paint—blurs the boundaries defining raw material, natural element, and found object. The fact that these banal substances remain undisguised in no way interferes with their translation into aesthetic objects. Sterritt selects materials for particular reasons, though not according to a defined aesthetic. Her choices are both humble and poetic, a mixture of construction materials, furniture parts, and the kind of organic debris that clutters the Southern California landscape after a high

Coleen Sterritt’s odd and idiosyncratic work prods at the spaces between manufacture and nature, anonymity and authorship, art and craft. Offering an extended meditation on artifice, her objects teeter between variants of reality and their opposites. Her forms are based on an elaborate cryptobotany of her own invention, a rotation of natural and other facts, manifested in crude, yet refined renditions of still-life objects, architecture, and implements. Because of her strange, but consistent interior logic, she retains a hold on the world of concrete things.

Sterritt’s body of work questions interactions between the urban environment and surrounding nature, reinterpreting the distances separating a prosaic and alienating reality from a lyrical and imaginative dimension. Her use of materials, both found and fabricated, lends value to things once invisible and valueless,

granting the power of seduction to objects generally devoid of that quality.

In this way, Sterritt’s work mirrors the themes of China Miéville’s *The City & The City* (2009). In the novel, the action takes place in twin cities that occupy the same geographic space but are perceived by their residents as separate geographical entities. The citizens of each city speak a different language, live in radically different environments, and have been socialized to “unsee” the other population living in their midst. This split resembles the mindset required of viewers facing Sterritt’s work; though “trained” to see her objects as whole and integrated—as sculptures—they can’t quite “unsee” the concrete and disparate origins of the component parts or their tenuous relationships—the brain insists on categories, the eye seeks resolution. Sterritt’s process is unusually transparent, each aspect and step cluing the



wind—palm fronds and assorted, unrecognizable pieces of vegetation.

Sterritt's processes include labor-intensive and obsessive approaches that emphasize craft, the handmade, and the obvious unfolding of fabrication. Conversely, she may also set up various elements so that they find their own balance and, trusting to chance, leave them alone. She says, "I usually attach myself to a particular material, such as cork, scrap lumber, cardboard, or felt, and focus on a single action—gluing, clumping, stacking, joining—and the form creates itself." By ruling out a cohesive appearance, she avoids steering the work in a single direction. Although seemingly spontaneous, her sculptures are the conse-

quence of painstaking editing—an off-the-cuff selection and curation of materials. She is extraordinarily adept at camouflaging the high level of craft she employs, painstakingly masking the intricacies of lamination, casting, and means of connection. Concealed process sustains the illusion that her work is patched together.

A similar predisposition governs the accidental infiltration of color. Sterritt's use of color is rarely premeditated; instead, it comes with the found object and is treated as a readymade, part of the history of the material. This engagement with color emphasizes the bonding of a coolly intellectual strategy to structure, abstraction, and the concrete deployment of specific materials.

Green Rondo à la Turk, 2015. Plastic, wood, foam rubber, and sea sponges, 77 x 16 x 28 in.

Green Rondo à la Turk (a nod to Dave Brubeck's "Blue Rondo à la Turk") owes its bilious greens to several different kinds of plastic. The main section, for instance, consists of green plastic sheet film wrapped around a piece of luggage brought back from Istanbul. These greens recall the marine plant life washed up on every California beach—algae, seaweed, oddly shaped pods, tidal wrack. They can also be associated with the pollution littering the same shorelines—plastic bags, bottles, unidentifiable fragments of junk. Further inland, this green is the green of mold and polluted



Honey Pile, 2011. Wood, Masonite, found furniture, acrylic paint, and adhesive, 42 x 54 x 50 in.

streams, as well as of drought-stricken California's still-lush foliage.

Green Rondo hangs gelatinously from the wall, extruding a tentacle of tape that bears a banana-like bunch of green plastic bottles and sponges. The assortment of elements—sea sponges, tape, plastic bottles, and pieces of wood—is so non-hierarchical and anti-illusionistic that the difference between natural and manufactured is beside the point.

These material-based clashes of meaning arise from Sterritt's compilation of realities, a kind of dual-state solution that creates an environment for the coexistence of the literal and the invented. The juxtapositions are surprising and funny, radiating a sly, sometimes shy humor, which lies at the heart of her enterprise. Titles, which emphasize the humor, both conceal and enhance interpretation: *Tall, Tender, and Extremely Touchy*; *Honey Pile*; and *EAR, near, dear, Hear, Clear*. *Sexy Beast* announces and suppresses the sources of its component parts, now tightly packed into an amalgam of the manufactured and the natural stuck together with tape, paint, and adhesive. The aggressive stance of the piece—with its multitude of stamen-like shoots and sponge anthers pronged onto the ends of rigid, spray-painted palm fronds—is a parody of machismo. The contrast between these florid elements and the Minimalism of the pool-cue holder supporting them creates an atmosphere both serious and totally comic.

Many of Sterritt's sculptures are characterized by a teasing play with the forces of gravity. Her construction methods depend on the acrobatic assembly of materials balanced and counterpoised to imply incipient movement. She exploits illusions of mass and fragility, often precariously placing seemingly weighty materials over lightweight and delicate ones. Her work tilts dangerously, holding itself at awkward angles, while imminent collapse seems



EAR, near, dear, Hear, Clear, 2014. Found furniture and domestic objects, wood, metal, shellac, and paint, 56 x 40 x 51 in.

Sexy Beast, 2016. Found furniture parts, palms fronds, sponges, tape, paint, and hardware, 93 x 60 x 75 in.

bred into the mismatch and rawness of the materials. Every element seems to hang on the moment before deconstruction and total collapse. The tatters of salvage appear all the more tentative because the things that support them—glue, screws, nails—seem fragile in themselves and inadequate to the job.

The sense of animation is particularly evident in *Rond de Jambe*, a mound of disparate circular materials that replicates a juggling act. Object after object is piled on a tilted tabletop—masking tape rolls, furniture parts, leather belts, a chopping block, pieces of plywood—and supported by four awkwardly angled, crudely carved legs of uneven lengths. Everything seems to have shifted itself into place, to have found equilibrium by accident. (The title, “round of leg,” refers to the circular leg movement performed by ballet dancers as part of their barre exercises.)

Sterritt, a 2016 Guggenheim fellow, is exploring boundaries, dependencies, and responses generated by the madness of the Anthropocene era. Her work expands and reinterprets three of the most important artistic inventions of the 20th century—collage, abstraction, and the readymade—combining the notion of the readymade with the assemblage/bricolage tradition of *Arte Povera*, particularly in terms of the materials in play. She also employs the kinds of psychological displacement used by the Surrealists, using chaos and chance to develop logical systems out of happenstance. The formal and highly composed intersect with their antithesis, anti-form, mapping the conflicted and confused state of the world around us. Sterritt uses a perverse form of logical thinking to address the arena of the personal while negotiating the contradictory elements of contemporary life—nature, pollution, sexuality, and the confusion between the real and the ideal.

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Rond de Jambe, 2011. Wood, plaster, found furniture, masking tape, and leather, 42 x 53 x 55 in.

