



Coleen Sterritt

Between

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University Art Gallery
Department of Art
College of the Arts
California State University, Stanislaus

Director's Foreword

This exhibition, Coleen Sterritt - *Between*, represents Coleen Sterritt's most recent work. One of Los Angeles' most gifted artists, Coleen Sterritt has always created some of the most engaging work being created on the West Coast. The influence of her work and teaching in the Los Angeles area has been immense. I am very excited to be able to exhibit the work for others to enjoy.

Many colleagues have been instrumental in presenting this exhibition. I would like to thank Coleen Sterritt for the privilege of exhibiting her incredible work, Constance Mallison for her insightful essay, College of the Arts, California State University, Stanislaus for the wonderful catalog design and Claremont Print and Copy for their expertise in printing this catalog.

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Dean De Cocker, Director
University Art Gallery
California State University, Stanislaus

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Recent Sculpture of Coleen Sterritt

By Constance Mallinson

Coming of artistic age in the 1970's when Jackie Windsor and Eva Hesse were dipping, hanging and wrapping mundane materials and the large formal assemblages of found lumber by Louise Nevelson made her the reigning doyenne of monumental sculpture, Coleen Sterritt has both maintained and transcended her artistic roots. Along with other influential post-minimalists like Nancy Graves whose eccentric, polychromed "plant-animals" defied the norm, female sculptors broke the hold of Minimalism/Reductivism, emphasizing process, organic and biomorphic forms, and an eccentric, mostly handworked, use of materials like rubber, rope, latex, and wax rather than the clean technology of plastics and shiny metals. The formal and the referential now existed simultaneously: body allusions, previously repressed, rebounded and the primitive, magical, personal and compulsive reentered the sculptural lexicon. The legacy for Sterritt has been an abiding interest in those qualities as well as in the potential of diverse materials and formal inventiveness to inspire meaningful and relevant contemporary narratives.

Initiated in part by the female sculptors above, the postmodern era, has seen hierarchies and orthodoxies obsolesce in favor of heterogeneity, contingency, hybridity, the interdisciplinary and material excess. Sterritt's footed overturned pyramidal works from the 1980's combining natural and industrial materials such as straw, tar, plaster, wood, wiremesh and resin participated in the emergent anti-classical or anti-Greenbergian strain of sculptural practice that challenged formal purity and closed systems to embrace dualities. Craig Owens aptly characterized much of the art at that time as, having sprung from Feminist concerns and involving "the dissolution of once fundamental distinctions - original/copy, authentic/inauthentic, function/ornament... each term now seems to contain its opposite." (1)

By the 1990's Sterritt turned to even more ephemeral and cast-off materials: studio waste, felt, paper, cardboard, carpet scraps, plastic and plywood discards, cannibalized bits of dismantled sculptures. While she remains undiminished in her search for unconventional sculptural matter and presentation of the kind seen in *Squeezebox* (2002) - a gargantuan necklace constructed of colorful dog collars, plaster, plywood, plastic fencing, bamboo, and foam rubber suspended between two walls - the work in *BETWEEN* moves closer to what Nicholas Bourriaud has termed "*Altermodernism*". Suggesting that we may have reached a pivotal point similar to the shift of the early 1970's, contemporary art, in addition to taking into its stride postmodern pluralities and an overriding discomfort with unexposed fictions, now approaches reality as filtered through globalization, the instantaneity of mass media, the need for an ecological worldview, and the post-consumer ethos. Increasingly, as in the work of Jessica Stockholder who unabashedly celebrates and critiques our consumer and consumable world simultaneously, the *altermodern* artist is comfortable with the instabilities and contradictions in this scheme of things. Moreover, the natural, as Sterritt so dramatically suggests, remains poised not so much in opposition to but is inextricably intertwined with civilization. She describes this as an "investigation into the uneasy balance between nature and the constructed environment."

As much as Sterritt embodies these current tendencies, art historically speaking, there is much here that parallels the early 20th century *Merzbau* of Kurt Schwitters in which collage was seen as affording a combination of any and all possible materials from the new urban spaces under the unifying principles of capitalism. Schwitters' theatrical, cubistic accumulations of discarded objects combined with hand fabricated forms became a dynamic exchange or collaboration that re-imagined the existing order of the modern city. Sterritt's particular use of three dimensional collage renews *Merzbau* aesthetics and attitudes to produce an equally compelling interrogation of today's consumerist culture, one that seems to anticipate a transformation of our current system to another that seeks a more acutely examined intersection between commerce and nature.

Several works from 2005-2006 shown in her 2006 exhibition at the Riverside Art Museum and d.e.n. contemporary typified this sort of convergence. Despite the range of work in these exhibitions, Sterritt's attention to "physical balance and contrapposto of form.... whether the "tittering, tippy-toed or the sure-footed four-legged stance," as she describes it, remains consistent throughout. A "push/pull" between the industrially manufactured and the individually crafted as well as a humorous and provocative juxtaposition and multi-layering of shapes, volumes, and solids drives and defines much of her practice. Most notably, the Dada-esque nine foot tall *Domestic Fairytale* (2005) interweaves and grafts natural birch logs with an overturned mass produced blonde wood dining table and five modern looking Ikea style stools. Bolted atop another log perched on a homemade stool, this acrobatic balancing act seems to mimic a tree as it grows and branches upward. Playfully but purposefully, the furniture and tree sections interchangeably support one another, the rugged and raw symbiotically paired with its sleek and fabricated offspring. As in the current work here, wood becomes not just an artist's material to carve, but a substance charged with social, ecological and cultural significance. Additionally, crossing the handmade and the readymade creates a sophisticated formal and conceptual gaming, in which the personal and the cultural are enmeshed in a complicated dance. While they construct, they also dismantle visual hierarchies of design and high art to challenge and disrupt the expectations and requirements for both. Put to a different use, the elements are now engaged in a dialogue about the role and place of each in our constantly changing cultural climate. *Diagramme de Navigation de Mon Coeur* (2005), also first shown in that exhibition, deposits a Vladimir Tatlinesque tower of woodshop scraps culminating in a tangle of wooden rectangles at the top on a battered rococo style end table. Absurd, slightly perverse with its phallus mounted upon a curvy, decorative feminine shape, *Diagramme* seems both a meditation on male/female relationships as well as a reference to modernist utopian projects that challenged bourgeois values but also eventually co-existed cosily with those values as in the present. The witty *Daddy-O* (2006) from the same period likewise uses such a jagged, spikey agglomeration of studio detritus and a small four legged stool to construct a prehistoric looking creature with a thorny outsized horn or, as suggestively, an exotic bristly cactus/coral. But the plant-animal hybrid could just as easily conjure an upscale toy made from recycled materials to satisfy "green" conscious parents in overly consumptive times. Like all Sterritt's work, it walks a line between charm and threat, the natural, the industrial and the hand fabricated, rejecting easy associations for complex reads into the current nature /culture debate.

Aeolin Tilt (2007), the largest in the exhibition, consists of an upended wooden bench balanced on turned legs from pieces of pillaged furniture. Sprouting from the bottom and top at one side, heads from several dozen wooden spoons pull thick red wire taut like the strings of a harp tied to its keys. Unfinished simple pine frames jut sideways from the slats of the bench like windows, shelves or architectural appendages. Characteristically, the work is a subversion of "form follows function", as the once useful seat becomes an

imaginative transformation of the utilitarian into the distinctly non-utilitarian--the poetic. The rectangles and squares, modules and boxes, once the mainstay of pure modernist form, now no longer serve as transcendent vehicles, but rather as they cling parodically like barnacles or ghostly spirits to a domestic object, seem to be just abstract sculptural elements in concert with the variety of forms experienced in daily life. Similarly, in the whimsical, totemic *Floaters and Flashers* (2007), a quirky arrangement of connected frames sporting a "weathervane" of wooden cooking spoons, the suggestion is that the clean Modernist lines and geometries of Modernist abstraction are perhaps no longer an autonomous, universal domain but constantly intermingle with the pedestrian artifacts of our civilization. While preserving some of the rigors and syntax of formalism, Sterritt eliminates and problematizes the conceptual boundaries between furniture as emblematic of industry, and creative artistry, socializing and assimilating the two. Additionally, the frame is the domain of the painter and 2-D representation. Here Sterritt uses the frame much as David Smith in his groundbreaking sculptures of the 1950's, to delineate multiple views of space in contradiction to the painter's aim to position the viewer in a single spot for viewing a scene. Instead, these works become amalgams of painting and sculpture, signifying an interchangeability of representation, reality and illusion. This kind of spatial gaming disrupts the traditional antagonisms between painting and sculpture, suggesting that we need both to adequately describe our experiences.

This constant and exuberant cross-pollination of genres, disciplines and objects is perhaps most pronounced in works that refer specifically to natural processes or use natural artifacts in juxtaposition with the human made. Sharing an interest in organic abstraction with historical sculptors like Brancusi and more recent contemporary American sculptors such as Martin Puryear and Louise Bourgeois, Sterritt is not so much interested in mimesis of nature but in exploring our relationship to the natural world in the technological, consumerist age. As in many of the recent pieces, modernist purity abuts natural disorderliness. Its entire shape evoking an evenly weighed scale, *Ways of Seeing* (2007) with thick "forest" of birch limbs sprouting from a long cushiony upholstered seat back and then balanced on a stacked series of found furniture, conceives of nature as precariously balanced on civilization itself. A number of birch rings applied to the tops of the logs recall primitive statuary and totems with their highly abstracted, archtypal evocations of human heads. Stranded and crowded on their floating island, propped up by the cast-offs of our culture, this highly anthropomorphic band of trees reflects an anxiety about the mutual interdependence of humans and nature. This sentiment is expressed again in *Float* (2007), an accretion of jagged cork fragments perched on a rectangular wooden box with diminutive spindly steel legs. Out of this pile of "rubble" arise two wobbly stacked columns connected by a sagging suspension bridge. Entreating a lineage of sculptural landscapes from Louise Bourgeois to David Smith, Sterritt alludes in perhaps a more fanciful, Seussical fashion, to the cycles of man-made and natural destruction and devastation. The earthy color of the materials, the heaving, shifting, and undulating strata recall entropic geologic formations and processes resulting from earthquakes and cataclysms. Resting upon a pedestal whose shape references contemporary skyscrapers, this tabletop topography with its miniature architecture ambiguously hints at both ruins of ancient civilizations and a post apocalyptic landscape rising above the remains of an urban utopia.

The most recently completed work in the exhibition, *Blue Patina for Patsy Button* (2009) reiterates many of the formal issues described here especially in its improbable balancing, use of window-like open frames and heaping, layering, and wrapping of strips and slabs of lowly materials. Thrusting out of an angled plywood box partially supported by a cluster of furniture leg is an elongated open frame crowned by the weathered blue-green half of a scalloped tabletop. This awkward animalistic contraption with green vinyl

skin flaps seems to strut along like a surreal drunken rooster or a lumbering multi-footed sea creature. As the Sorcerer's Apprentice's broom anthropomorphized into an animated demonic nightmare, Sterritt's everyday finds are magically transformed to tap into our unconscious desire to reconnect with the natural, working to eliminate the conceptual boundaries between creations of nature and those of humans.

Included in this exhibition are a number of Sterritt's two dimensional mixed medium works on paper that reiterate many of the formal and conceptual strategies of the sculpture. While not considered working drawings in the traditional sense of blueprints for 3D works, Sterritt's highly intuitive working process is readily perceived here. The interplay of flat geometric shapes with biomorphic and organic forms evoking pods, microscopic cells and procreating life, swarms, corals, twigs, webs, insects, as well as cosmic gases and nebulae, ensues from the same impulse to combine the natural with the human-made we see in the sculpture. Using ink, pastel, acrylic, overlaying collaged strips of paper and masking tape, as well as cutting into the brushy surface of the paper to create holes, she creates a fluid atmospheric world where paint drips and splatters surrealistically morph into beings, and molecular structures appear to metamorphize into architectural designs. Overlapping, interacting, synthesizing, intersecting, this imagery points to the emergence of a dynamic network rather than the perennial stand-off between competing domains. In our era when ecological, social, and cultural concerns seem to endlessly collide, Sterritt forges a vision based not on a resurgent romanticism but of as yet untold possibilities.

Footnotes:

1. Craig Owens, *The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism*, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983) p.77

Constance Mallinson is a Los Angeles-based artist and writer.

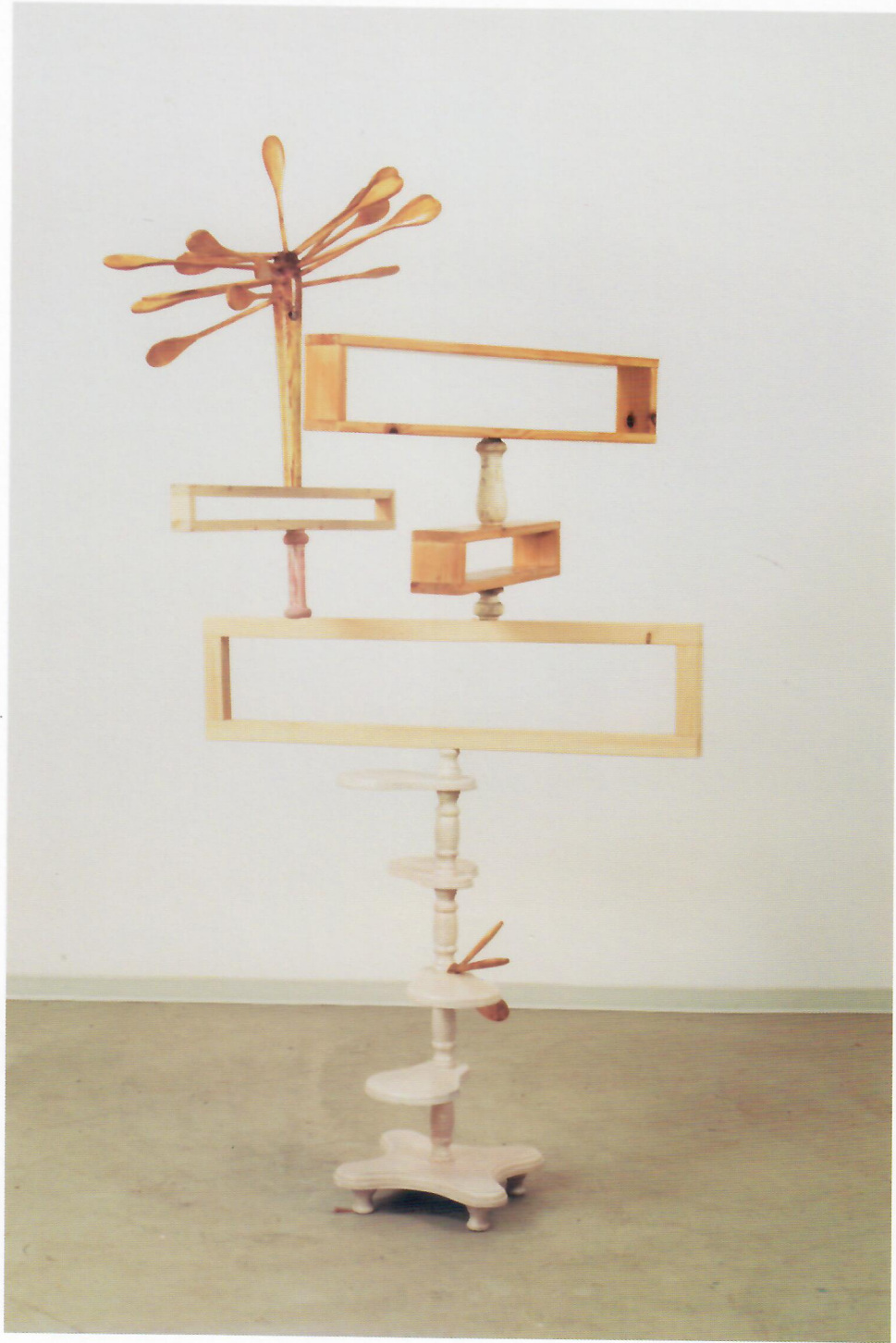
Images



Aeolian Tilt 2007
88" x 53" x 27"
wood, wire, varnish, found furniture, hardware, adhesive



Aeolian Tilt (detail) 2007
88" x 53" x 27"
wood, wire, varnish, found furniture, hardware, adhesive



Floaters & Flashes 2007
74" x 36" x 33"
wood, paint, shellac, hardware



Floaters & Flashes (detail) 2007
74" x 36" x 33"
wood, paint, shellac, hardware



Ways of Seeing 2007
80" x 38" x 75"
wood, vinyl, found furniture, hardware



Ways of Seeing (detail) 2007
80" x 38" x 75"
wood, vinyl, found furniture, hardware



Diagramme de Navigation de Mon Couer 2005
84" x 32" x 33"
wood, graphite, glue, found furniture, hardware



Diagramme de Navigation de Mon Couer (detail) 2005
84" x 32" x 33"
wood, graphite, glue, found furniture, hardware



Float 2007
90" x 23" x 57"
cork, wood, steel, hardware, adhesive



Float (detail) 2007
90" x 23" x 57"
cork, wood, steel, hardware, adhesive



Blue Patina for Patsy Button 2009
77" x 38" x 33"
wood, vinyl, found furniture, adhesive, hardware



Blue Patina for Patsy Button (detail) 2009
77" x 38" x 33"
wood, vinyl, found furniture, adhesive, hardware



Untitled February 2009 #3
44" x 30"
masking tape, pastel, ink on paper



Untitled February 2009 #2
44" x 30"

masking tape, pastel, ink and paper collage on paper



Untitled February 2009 #1
44" x 30"
masking tape, pastel, ink and paper collage on paper



Untitled April 2008 #1
44" x 30"

masking tape, pastel and paper collage on paper

Artist Statement

My current work reflects an ongoing investigation into the uneasy balance between nature and the constructed environment. This relationship is demonstrated through use of specific forms and materials. Forms are derived from both natural and manmade structures such as clusters, clumps, bridges, and trusses. Materials range from milled lumber to pine cones to found furniture. These combinations focus on the interaction between the organic and geometric; nature and culture; opposites and intervention.

I'm interested in incorporating chance elements such as someone else's discards or studio waste which enables me to somewhat remove myself and let the building process take over in a way that feels less encumbered by conscious, aesthetic decisions. This method of working provides a means of challenging myself and acts as a catalyst to move forward in my art-making process. It is a struggle between control and letting go, one both compelling and confronting, real and metaphorical.

Coleen Sterritt
January 2009

