

Learning From Salmon

Contemporary Art Gallery
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Although the history of installation as an art-form is a relatively short one, artists working within its continually shifting and necessarily ambiguous boundaries have explored innumerable objects, materials and sites. One component which remains more or less constant throughout the many experiments undertaken by artists working with installation is the kinesthetic involvement of the viewer. Installation is distinguished from painting and sculpture proper by situating the viewer 'within' an environment created or altered by the artist. The viewer's physical involvement with installation activates his or her otherwise passive participation, and more often than not completes the piece. The movement of the viewer is essential to complete the meaning of Deborah Koenker's site-related sculptural installation, ***Learning From Salmon***.

Koenker's new work refers to the writings of Japanese macrobioticist Herman Aihara. Aihara speaks of the single minded purpose of the Pacific salmon which exerts a mysterious molecular memory to return to its birthplace to spawn and die. He considers the difference between the life cycles of salmon and humans: when humans retire from active life, the salmon takes on its greatest challenge.

Koenker's installation evokes rather than illustrates this idea. The installation, consisting of a labyrinth of mesh screens, a wooden ramp, stairs, and sculpture suggestive of net, platform, ladder and other less specific objects, is both a physical and cognitive experience to the ambulatory viewer. Through the strategic placement of referential objects, careful consideration of the associative values of materials, the use of the entire gallery space, and most essentially, the movement of the viewer through all of this, Koenker's work leads us through a metaphorical recreation of the aging salmon's final journey.

Koenker is fascinated by natural, rather than technological, phenomenon, although her new work comfortably utilizes materials which have been technologically processed such as lumber, rubber, steel reinforcing bars, mesh, chain-link and photography. Modernism's credo, "truth to materials" applies to Koenker's new work in so far as the materials used are basically in their pure form, untreated and unadorned; the structure of objects is apparent not concealed; and materials are handled in ways appropriate, or "truthful" to their salient characteristics i.e., lumber is treated as construction material, steel bars are used for support, and soft bands of rubber are stretched and bound. However, Koenker moved beyond this strategy in order to encourage an interpretive reading of her work. She selects materials not only for their formal qualities, but also for their associative and expressive effect: the fine mesh used in *MAZE* suggests ephemerality, its shimmering quality evokes water; the white paper which gently diffused overhead light through *SPRINGBOARD* conveys

weightlessness and ethereality. The chain-link *NET* is indeed net-like, and the pattern created by its wire in diamond-shaped mesh is similar to the pattern of waves, or fish scales. A sensation of the surface of the object in motion is achieved by gazing at the overlapped chain-link while moving perpendicularly to its length. This sensation of surface movement is suggestive of rushing water and is one of the several surprising perceptions offered to the viewer moving through the work.

Deborah Koenker has for several years worked primarily as a printmaker (she is the original Director and Founding Member of the Malaspina Printmakers Workshop in Vancouver), but since 1983 she has pursued through sculpture ideas of transformation and transition as found in both nature and human life. Koenker works in an essentially intuitive, non-didactic manner, encouraging individual, subjective responses from her audience, however, in this new installation the underlying reference to struggle, passage, birth and death as understood through the salmon metaphor is clear. The objects themselves are metaphorical: *MAZE* becomes an obstacle for the viewer, narrow and difficult to negotiate; *RAMP* becomes a path, a passageway by which we ascend to an unexpected vantage point, a place of new perceptions; the stairs are transitional, through them we descend to the rear part of the gallery, become submerged in the space which contains the suspended *NET*, the hovering, illuminated *SPRINGBOARD*, and the cryptic, wrapped *WALL PIECES*—this section of the gallery is at once a space for individual but related sculptural objects, and an imaginary site of transformation and repose.

In 1985 Koenker produced her first site-related sculptural installation at Claremont Graduate School in California. In a narrow, skylit room she assembled sculptural objects and organic materials to evoke the solitude, cyclical activity and transformation inherent in a garden. In 1986 she installed works at Whittier College which related to the specific architectural space and detailing of the turn-of-the-century Spanish style hall, while continuing to deal with her own interest in the balance, tension and relationship to space of sculptural forms. An outdoor site-specific collaboration with Roberto Pacheco titled, *The Cherry Tree Project*, was produced in Vancouver in 1987. Documentation of this work followed in an exhibition at the Western Front. This project was related to the Japanese tradition of cherry blossom viewing as a celebration of Spring. It was also an ambitious sculptural construction which bridged the fences of three neighbouring Vancouver gardens encircling an enormous blossoming cherry tree. The viewer was free to traverse the structure, which was essentially an elevated ramp, and to pause at the 'viewing stations' located on and off the ramp. The impetus for this 'sculptural event' was to frame the phenomenon of the seasonal state of transformation of the cherry tree in an art context, and to allow the viewer to witness something spectacular from a new perspective.

Structures such as ramps, bridges, stairs and screens recur in the personal iconography of Deborah Koenker's work. Her concern for the artistic expression

of transition in nature and life is well served by the sense of elusiveness, passage and change evoked by these references. ***Learning From Salmon*** is a good example of Koenker's mature work. The installation's well-crafted, carefully orchestrated objects succeed in eloquently communicating the metaphorical journey of the spawning salmon which is completed by the viewer's own journey through the work. This powerful, playful work remains faithful to the artist's continuing examination of nature and life from a metaphysical viewpoint.

Merike Talve/Curator