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Talking May Only Ruin It

by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Weird Walks Into a Room (Comma)

Sarah Conaway, Lisa Williamson

The Box

977 Chung King Rd., Los Angeles, CA

90012

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I usually avoid qualifiers and hedging, but let me briefly say this: I know it can be done, and will be done, but at the moment it feels like a shame to have to talk about such a pleurably complete, beautiful, tight, surprising, weird, subtle, restrained, and resistant show. Its sense of humor might be a place to start talking. The title of Lisa Williamson and Sarah Conaway's superb collaborative exhibition, "Weird Walks Into A Room (Comma)," reads like the set up for a joke. But, instead of gags or one-liners, we find paintings, sculptures, and photographs governed by wit and a light, curious disposition. The strong implication of quirky narrative (in the title, press release, and accompanying artist's book) which seems to emanate from Williamson's pieces is precisely counterbalanced and appropriately deflated by Conaway's non-narrative (photo)graphic abstractions of her small handcrafted studio constructions. The combination resists conclusions, opening up instead to the emergence of shifting synergies that resonate through leisurely looking.

Williamson's and Conaway's works—the former painterly sculpture and the latter sculptural photography (photographically documented sculpture)—share a kindred attitude towards form. Straddling and hybridizing genres, the entirety of the exhibition feels so temperamentally consistent that it could have been the work of a single artist, which must be the mark of a special kind of collaboration. Both realize a Tuttle-esque strain of emphatically handmade abstract formalism elevated by its understated awe of simple material properties and minimal gestures framed in isolation with plenty of space: a sheet of canvas drenched in pink acrylic and latex, pieces of gauzy burlap slathered in white paint, diced Styrofoam sections arranged like pylons in a grid, netting, painted wood, clustered wire cuttings and tangles, absurdly tall wooden dowels, folded and cut paper casting graceful shadows. Conaway's mostly black and white photographs, tersely titled *I thru XI*, are meditative icons with straightforward, pared-down compositions whose graphic boldness is charged with a lilting sense of movement and impermanence.



Sarah Conaway, VIII, 2011, C-print, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Box, Los Angeles.

Williamson's work in particular, emphasizes the dynamics of draping; the aforementioned pinksheet of canvas hangs over a long bar or ridiculously skinny shelf that sticks out perpendicularly from the wall in the sculptural monochrome *Club Foot and The Towel*, all works 2011; it being the towel while a pink block of wood plays the role of club foot. Elsewhere, by the entry, a stiff pair of *Flat Pants!* cut out of painted wood folds rigidly over the side of a bench. And, in what is perhaps the highlight of the show, Williamson's *A Highly Articulate Step*, a very thin strip of canvas (maybe two inches wide and painted with flat black pictographs) is wound up in a scroll that hangs high on the wall and from which it ribbons down, draping over a long thin step to lie flat on the floor. (Who knew a painting, if that's even what it is, could look like this!) In the oversized crossed chopsticks that hold the piece's rolled up painting in place on the wall like a bun of hair on a woman's head, Williamson's and Conaway's works are characterized by a certain Japanese sensibility, evincing the inflected restraint of *wabi sabi*. This is probably most explicitly manifest in the downstairs gallery where *Top Down* resides, the pair's jointly created Zen-rock-garden-like platform that is sparingly scattered with small populations of materials. In Williamson's surrounding plates of plexi leaned against the walls and silkscreened with splotches, dashes, and ladders, the play and praise of shadows is treated with such unassuming clarity and delicacy as to make Junichiro Tanizaki proud.

Finally, in concluding revisitation of my initial remarks, I can say that talking in the presence of this show still feels like an unnecessary disruption, viewing it in animated silence a fuller joy for the time being.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Top Image: Lisa Williamson, *Club Foot and The Towel*, 2011, Wood, canvas, acrylic and latex paint, 52 1/2 h x 16 w x 67 d. Courtesy of the artist and The Box, Los Angeles.