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Afterglow in Divided Space

RENÉE GERTLER
FEB 26 - APR 03
ELEANOR HARWOOD GALLERY

by Carol Anne McChrystal

Renée Gertler's solo show, "Afterglow in Divided Space," at Eleanor Harwood Gallery, conjures the space depicted in a photograph of a Marcel Breuer furniture show. Dating to 1930, the photograph shows two rooms: one for men and one for women. Breuer's furniture, exemplary of early twentieth century avant-garde design philosophy, sought to marry function, art, and new technologies, such as plastic and molded plywood. Despite the fact that his innovations spoke to newness and looked to the future, rather than reiterate traditional decorative furniture design, by the '70s Breuer's experimental conceptualizations had become popularized as mere fashion.

In "Afterglow," this fashionable, retro-'70s aesthetic pervades every sculpture in the collections of "objects that [Gertler] imagined a man and a woman would possess." [1] These objects populate the opposing cabinets and are accentuated by *Chair* (2010), the off-kilter carved-foam replica of Breuer's iconic *Long Chair* on the women's side. The largest and most central form is reminiscent of Rachel Harrison's lumpish objects in a way that is playfully compelling, rather than standoffish or confounding; an 8-foot-tall, carved-foam, folding room partition zigzags diagonally through the gallery, prohibiting simultaneous investigation of the two collections.

Women's Cabinet (2010) is a single shelf mounted at eye level and full of awkward, obviously handcrafted curiosities belonging to the so-called "mysterious sex." The contents range from objects of adornment—gold- and copper-leaved chains and rings fashioned from resin—to bass-wood reproductions of treasures from the natural world: two feathers, a spider web, a miniature black hole, and a marbled stone. Other functionless artifacts include metallic foam blocks and a miniature painted vase. Do these witchy, occult objects belong in a vintage furniture store or Stevie Nicks' closet?

On the opposite side of the gallery, *Men's Cabinet* (2010) stretches from floor to ceiling, and is a collection of similarly sized sculptures belonging to the supposed "intellectual sex." Rudimentary astronomical tools are on display: papier-mâché globes (both spherical and angular) alongside beautiful maps of the universe. *Milky Way* (2009) is a beautifully simple gesture composed of ordinary paper lunch



Men's Cabinet, 2010; mixed media. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Sean McFarland.

in the natural world and in the world of scientific inquiry. Her rough-and-ready approximations speak to abstractions that we've always been compelled to grasp—from the tiniest web a spider weaves to the limits of the universe.

Gertler's objects ask us to reconsider the seemingly objective truths we construct in order to find our bearings in the universe. Her magical geometric and natural forms mimic alternative paradigms for formulating our place on planet Earth, like Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion framework or Carl Sagan's relentless inquiry into the cosmos. Simultaneously, her forms point to a disturbing aspect of the concept of ontological truth—that it governs and limits how we're able to conceive ourselves in the story of the universe. Altogether, the intentionally unsophisticated replications in both of her collections describe humankind's age-old endeavor to unlock the ancient, secret knowledge of the galaxies.

Inside this galaxy. Gertler's utilization of traditional gender

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bags pierced with millions of minute pinholes that allow points of light to shine through and reflect a diminutive universe in the mirrors below. It's something you might learn to make after school from Bill Nye the Science Guy.

Within this collection of objects, the implementation of model-making materials to depict natural phenomena is central to Gertler's practice. Generally, designers use model-making materials to describe and explore concepts that have not yet been fully realized. In "Afterglow," Gertler presents quirky prototypes of things that definitely already exist, both



Chair, Women's Cabinet, and Dividing Screen, all 2010; mixed media; installation view, Eleanor Harwood Gallery. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Sean McFarland.

more the gaily, serene, and whimsical of traditional gender constructs dismantles the framework from the inside out. She sets up the obviously outmoded understanding of opposing sexes: women are associated with the natural, men with the intellectual; men are from Mars, women are from Venus. Gertler's funny little gesture of imposing and enforcing arbitrary categorical labels on objects of her own making points to the absurdity of this practice in our daily lives.

Yet, at the same time, these dusty, gendered, geometric trinkets are the possessions of the leisure class—the *wealthy and adventurous yachting type*. Is this a high-end retail store, a Modernist design showroom from another dimension, or a satellite location of the *Museum of Jurassic Technology*? Gertler gracefully layers ontological "truths"—whether they're gender constructs, philosophies on design, or the almost ungraspable notion of human consciousness in the face of the universe—in order to call them into question, as well as point out how paradigms of thought go in and out of style much like seasonal fashion collections.

Gertler is getting at something so simple that she necessarily cannot speak plainly; something that may forever be just outside our ability to grasp, no matter how many rigorous scientific, social, or philosophical frameworks we construct. "Afterglow" is the logical extreme of Gertler's practice of "invok[ing] the pleasures of circuitous conversations about life and the universe" through "wran[gl]ing humble material into something dazzling." [2] As we ramble, stumble, and bumble our way through the cosmos toward home, Gertler and her mysterious, determinedly unrefined models remind us, as *Carl Sagan* says, that even "the simplest thought like the concept of the number one has an elaborate logical underpinning." [3]

"AFTERGLOW IN DIVIDED SPACE" IS ON VIEW AT *ELEANOR HARWOOD GALLERY* IN SAN FRANCISCO THROUGH APRIL 3, 2010.

NOTES:

[1] Renée Gertler. "Solo Show: Afterglow in Divided Space," Eleanor Harwood Gallery, <http://www.eleanorharwood.com/>.

[2] Glen Helfand, "Renée Gertler," *Artforum* (April 2009): <http://artforum.com/new.php?pn=archive&id=22495>.

[3] Carl Sagan. "The Persistence of Memory." *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*. Television program. Directed by Adrian Malone et al., Los Angeles: The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), 1980.