



tative, if not clumsy, under scrutiny. Still, the results are frequently compelling.

While varying from just under two to just under six feet high, all twelve vertically oriented paintings follow a similar structural logic, relying on a woozy but insistent grid that provides the group with an obsessive seriality. (The show was too densely hung, adding to the intensity of this effect.) Mendel-Black starts each work with a loose weave of wide marks that serves as a background of sorts for an intersecting network of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal strokes. These structures, which look like architectural frameworks or diagrams of chemical compounds, seem to occupy a foreground, transforming the paintings into representations of pictorial space. The relatively large canvas #73 (all works 2006) offers the deepest illusory space, with an audacious assembly of ruby red and sienna over blurs of grayish-blue with dribbles and daubs of fluorescent pink and acid green. Color is what pries open space in these works: #75, given its reduced palette of black, gray, and silver, is resolutely flat.

Following a logic that seems consistent, if ultimately impenetrable, each of these paintings features one to four vertical elements applied as an almost vulgar spume of impasto oil and acrylic paint. These thick, textural marks are like objects (I want to call them "figures") in the foreground and slow down the visual scanning of each painting. One might picture these as one would witness a body free-falling in a movie: Apprehended by a long lens, the body becomes stationary against a blurred background. The effect is often vertiginous.

The show was titled "The Paintings Are Alive," and surely an allegory about the medium is somehow coded in these works. But are we supposed to buy the stale notion that painting ever "died"? Is the artist imagining these paintings as a pack of loping zombies arriving belatedly at the party? Given Mendel-Black's admitted interest in science-fiction and horror films—he has frequently written on similar subject matter in print and on his blog, Kulturedrome—the potential for such signification is rich but ambiguous. While such outside information, including a manifesto-like artist statement written for the show, thickens the plot, ultimately it cannot determine the outcome of these paintings. If we are to accept the premise of the show's title, these paintings live through difference: Each follows a rigorous structural logic yet emerges as a unique, individuated example in a relentless stream of potential variation. Beyond outmoded questions of taste, it is difficult to say if, or why, one is better than another. Still, as with falling bodies in movies, we anxiously wait to see how each one lands.

—Michael Ned Holte

TORONTO

Adrienne Spier YYZ ARTISTS' OUTLET

Adrienne Spier's sculptural installation *Unwanted, Broken and Useless*, 2006, the single work that constituted the whole of her recent

show, seems at first glance to be merely a spare assortment of old furniture, albeit one that appears to have been deliberately arranged for some elusive purpose. An orderly row of four damaged wooden modernist chairs stand to the left side of the gallery. One has a missing seat; all have stained upholstery. But such details of ordinary wear and tear pale into insignificance given that the furniture has undergone radical surgery, having been dismembered and reassembled by the artist.

The seats are hinged and held together by thin, shiny cables pulled through tiny holes. The cables here extended upwards—via a system of weights and pulleys—through the ceiling beams, and down again to an oval dining table held vertically, with its underside facing the viewer. A diagram displayed nearby instructs visitors to push the table toward the wall. Compliance leads to an abrupt conclusion: The cables loosen and the chairs topple over like dominoes. But a vigorous pull on a red handle causes the whole setup to return, noisily, to its previous position.

Visitors to Spier's show, however, tended not to spend much time in awe of the engineering acumen that had informed the building of the artist's absurdist contraption. Rather than resting on her technical laurels, the artist has performed a more impressive feat—that of effectively conveying the metaphorical resonance of viewers' participation, the simple acts of pushing and pulling transforming pieces of furniture into laboratory animals, hapless victims of a cruel experiment.

The installation's other component, the scarred remnant of a wooden desk, appears also to have been the victim of an act of violence. The desk's drawers have been removed and its sides amputated, then reattached, hinges allowing the object to lie flat and prone on the battered floor. A pair of weights—composed of antique stereo components and timber pieces—are attached to the desk with cables and pulleys. Two participants are required to press down on the weights simultaneously in order to achieve the elevation of the desk's central portion and a corresponding downward release of the hinged legs, which roll delicately along on casters. For a moment, the two opposing participants face one another and regard an object resembling a desk before a communal letting-go results in a jarring crash. The work's do-it-yourself, low-tech, socially playful nature recalls Allan Kaprow's *Environments*.

The combination of blunt absurdity and formal restriction exhibited by Spier's choice of objects nods to the dream logic of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, such as *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915, a snow shovel hung from the ceiling. But Spier's focus on obvious traces of use makes her works perhaps more reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*. Here, they are concerned with the furniture itself—its physical history as a functional object and its anthropomorphized status as the apparent subject of both playfulness and brutality.

—Dan Adler



Adrienne Spier, *Unwanted, Broken and Useless* (detail), 2006, furniture parts, cables, pulleys, 5 x 6 x 8'.