

VISUAL ART

Adrienne Spier

Gary Michael Dault

Adrienne Spier's installation, *Three Bedroom Flat*, is an assortment of dense cubes of wood (and, occasionally, of veneered MDF) made from her having cut and layered once fugitive pieces out of what Toronto writer Aileen Burns, in her catalogue essay for the exhibition, describes as the artist's collection of "outmoded, abandoned furniture that its original owner believes has lost commercial, aesthetic or sentimental value." She harvests the stuff, Burns notes, from "curbsides, dumpsters, and estate sales...."

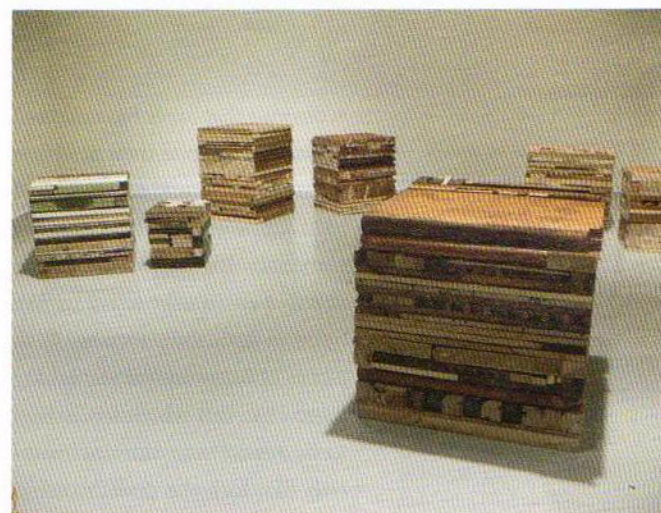
Spier is clearly not concerned with refurbishing. She is no restorer, except in the very special sense that, given the way she treats finished furniture material—as if it were raw furniture material—she re-produces the essence of the distaff pieces she finds, transforming them by a kind of carpenter violence into furniture core samples that, when distributed throughout a gallery space, look as self-referentially present as the classic works of '60s Minimalism (mostly Judd, Morris, Sol LeWitt and maybe Carl Andre).

There is a notice on the wall of the gallery that lists the kinds of cast-off furniture and the amount of it necessary for furnishing forth the 17 pieces that make up Spier's *Three Bedroom Flat*: four bedside tables, one bookshelf/cabinet, one bookshelf/dresser, one cedar chest (an olfactory giveaway), one

console, three desks, three dressers, two headboards and one piano bench. In their current, chunky cube form, these once disparate, once hierarchically organized furniture objects have now been democratized, morphologically speaking, into blocks of (albeit decoratively presented) wood, one looking pretty much like another. A power saw is a great leveller.

As with everything in the universe, however, the closer you look at it, the more complex it grows. Spier's dense, geometrized re-presentations of conventional furniture types initially look simpler, sculpturally speaking, than the furniture objects from which they have been derived: a collection of wooden cubes placed (with that predictably self-conscious rhythm of placement that suffuses artists and curators in installation mode) on the gallery floor. But examined more carefully and at closer range, the cubes seem substantially more complex than they were before, when they looked like furniture.

Spier's stacking has resulted not only in an accumulation, but also an intensification of each cube—now made up of its own history. If you examine the sides and tops of any of the cubes, you can see straightaway that each one is made up of what look like geological layers of material: each plane offers an overview of the aggregate slices of the furniture object that was. Because the sheets and strips of salvaged wood (and randomly occurring moments of veneered MDF) are made up of many different woods and materials and finishes and patterns, and because the layering of each cube is



top: Adrienne Spier, *Three Bedroom Flat*, 2008, detail, found furniture.

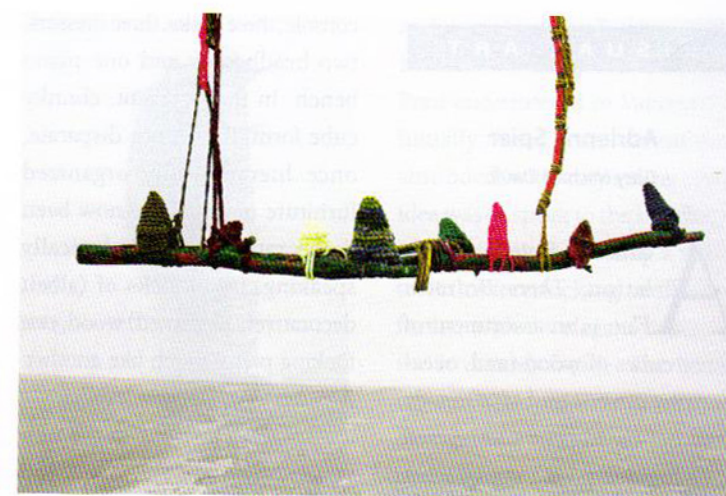
lower: Adrienne Spier, *Three Bedroom Flat*, 2008, installation view, Mercer Union, Toronto, 2008.

handled differently (depending on what the original article of furniture had provided and depending on the way the stacking was done), each cube is remarkably different from its neighbour. Some of them are deeply and purely woody, with the dignity of the original furniture object maintained. Some are more formally variegated—optically and texturally diverting sandwiches of woods of varying colours and textures, often with the predictable punctuations generated from a stacking of hunks of solid wood, alternated with a rhythmic distribution of open spaces.

Part of Spier's program is ecological—about recycling and reusing. Another part—the most absorbing part—is about an almost violent kind of desire to resurrect what

CROSSOVERS

Alexandra Bircken, *Stammgäst*, 2006, wood, wool, and acrylic paint, 57 x 86 x 22". Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York.



domestic culture has decreed to be dead, and doing so, not by any patient and loving rebuilding, but by wresting residual beauty and strength from the callousness, wastefulness and emptiness of ruin.

Aileen Burns touches on this point quite charmingly—if a tad eccentrically—in her catalogue essay: Spier's cubes, she points out, "have a weight and presence that is rare in new home furnishings. It is obvious that Spier has collected items that, despite their aesthetic shortcomings, are composed of high-grade materials. Thus the work calls attention to the ironic trap that ensnares many of us. We trade in solid but not-so-stylish pieces of furniture for something more chic, but which tends [sic] to be made from inferior materials that lack the craftsmanship common in older furniture...." This sounds a lot like Engels, and could lead her (though it really doesn't, except as a glancing blow) into a discussion of the way Spier seems to be attempting not only a gloss on the loss of quality in manufactured goods, but on the ways in which derelict styles, having been forced into early obsolescence by a wanton market economy, can be given a new shape and voice as the return of the saved remnant, of the rebuilt ghost of the dispossessed, marginalized and repressed mercantile idea. ■

*Adrienne Spier's Three Bedroom Flat was exhibited at Mercer Union in Toronto from February 28 to April 5, 2008.*

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VISUAL ART

Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century

Mark Clintberg

With the immateriality of Conceptual art poised like a spectral lupine force at the door, the object, formerly proscribed, is presented as an arsenal in the New Museum's exhibition, "Unmonumental." These works celebrate the thing liminal, discarded, recovered and damaged. Many of the materials that bind the "Unmonumental" category of practices are evident here: a plinth or strut, delicately or precariously arranged mementos, usually antiquated or weathered; a spray of photographic ephemera, snapshots or spreads of printed matter.

Richard Flood, Laura Hoptman and Massimiliano Gioni are the curatorial trio that conceived the 30-odd artist affair, which is nothing if not consistent in its selections. Something wantonly auspicious hovers over this show, being the inaugural exhibition of the museum's commodious new building and also the first instalment of a four-part

cumulative exhibition. The curatorial premise started with "Object," filling the floor with sculptures. The walls were next, mid-January, with "Collage: The Unmonumental Picture," followed in February by "The Sound of Things: Unmonumental Audio" and "Montage: Unmonumental Online," until the museum-container holds all four components simultaneously. And so, "Work in Progress" signs were scattered on the walls overtop splashes of half-executed artworks when I viewed the show in early January, as artists prepared the second module. As a curatorial premise, the show is meant to admit the viewer *in medias res*, as all hangs in the balance, presenting the art laboratory, apparently full of risks, circuitous adventure and reward.

In order to follow the meandering lead of this improvisational model (and to avoid the droves lined up for the elevators), I took the stairs, and bungled a carefully installed exhibition layout by stumbling sideways into an alcove holding a Carol Bove. Her *Driscoll Garden*, 2005, is a large wood plank resting on cinder blocks, with fastidiously placed, minimal concrete cubes, miniature Haake Plexi boxes, a