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Multiplying the Variations

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Robin Hill

*Multiplying the Variations*

University Art Gallery
School of Fine and Performing Arts
California State University, Stanislaus
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September 7 – October 5, 2006

University Art Gallery
School of Fine and Performing Arts
California State University, Stanislaus

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Director’s Foreword

This exhibition, Robin Hill - Multiplying the Variations, represents Robin Hill’s most recent work, created on the east and west coast it shows an artist’s work that is both sensitive to our surroundings and insightful to our memories. As an artist I find a particularly kinship with the work of Robin Hill in the way a finished work is so completely perfect. As a curator I feel that her research helps to make some of the most fascinating work I have ever experienced and I am very excited to be able to exhibit the work for others to enjoy.

Many colleagues have been instrumental in presenting this exhibition. I would like to thank Robin Hill for the chance to exhibit her incredible work and for her dedication to the exhibition. Raphael Rubinstein for his insightful essay, University Communications, California State University, Stanislaus for the wonderful catalog design and Claremont Print and Copy for their expertise in printing this catalog.

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Dean De Cocker, Director
University Art Gallery
California State University, Stanislaus
Robin Hill’s Art of Processes
by Raphael Rubinstein

A conceptually ideal approach to writing about Robin Hill’s work would consist of taking some pre-existing text, preferably discovered by chance, and subjecting it to a number of transformative procedures. For instance, one could start with these words found in a statement by the artist: “My work assumes many forms. Underlying all of these forms is a response to matter and phenomena in my immediate vicinity” (see catalogue for “Proximity”, The Work Space, New York, 2002). Imagine, if you will, these phrases repeated so that they filled this whole page, or even an entire book. Now imagine them shrunk to so small a size that the line of type looked like a stray hair on a page and could only be read with a powerful magnifying glass. Or suppose each term was replaced with its dictionary definition, enlarging the statement tenfold. The text could also be overprinted with other sentences, creating a kind of palimpsest, or turned around to read backwards: “Vicinity immediate my in phenomena and matter to response a is forms these of all underlying. Forms many assumes work my.”

Far from being random, these proposed procedures for an experimental commentary on Hill’s work are themselves derived from another text by the artist. In a statement written for her seminal Blue Lines exhibition (Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York, 1995) Hill described how “the formal principle which dictates the geometric possibilities in both the floor and wall drawings is the manipulation of one singular line formation, chosen at random, through repetition, enlargement, reduction, layering, and inversion.” Visitors to this memorable show encountered large oil-stick drawings of intricately looped blue lines and, on the floor, 4,000 small blue plaster forms cast from paper cups. As Hill’s description suggests, the plaster forms were arranged to echo the mandala-like configurations of the drawings, though at an even larger scale. As she says, she manipulated a linear motif by, in succession, repeating it, enlarging it, shrinking it, superimposing it and flipping it around.

From the beginning of her career, but more emphatically over the last decade, Hill has been an artist whose work is driven, in large part, by an insatiable curiosity about what happens to forms and materials when they are subjected to various procedures (as in the morphing loops of Blue Lines). For this reason Hill is often seen as continuing the legacy of process art, and, indeed, she does owe a debt, openly acknowledged by the artist, to predecessors such as Eva Hesse. But there are also many points at which Hill’s work diverges from much process-oriented art of the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps the most important of these is Hill’s emphasis on using a multiplicity of techniques and procedures. She is never content to simply apply one process to one material or to one form. Instead, she brings to bear as many of them as her imagination or an exhibition space can accommodate. What Hill makes is not so much process art as it is an art of processes.

The present exhibition offers striking examples of this fundamental feature of her practice. Look, for instance, at a pair of sculptural works, Against the Wall and Concretion, both created in 2004 and envisioned to be shown in tandem. Against the Wall consists of 100 circular elements affixed to the wall in a tight 110-by-110-inch grid. Each element is a 10-inch-diameter plywood disc onto which Hill attached some 120 handmade wax balls arranged in concentric circles. About the size of a jawbreaker candy, these balls, which are noticeably irregular, are held in place by more wax that has been poured into the interstices. As an ensemble, the work combines dense geometric patterning with a rich tactility. Structured around ever-smaller circles – the wood discs, the rings of wax balls, the wax balls themselves – Against the Wall has the part-to-whole dynamic of a mosaic. Its companion, Concretion, consists of 100 Hydrocal discs cast from the wood-and-wax discs of Against the Wall, but instead of being displayed as a wall relief, these lumpy white objects are pressed together on the floor to create a 182-inch-long tubular shape that suggests a core sample drilled from ground, a toppled column or a rolled-up carpet. As with Blue Lines, Hill here presents two versions of the same motif, using two different techniques and using two different strategies of presentation. Another significant difference, one that viewers might not immediately appreciate, is the enormous discrepancy of time that the two pieces required: certainly
there was a lot of work involved in casting the 100 units of
Concretion, but even that represents a fraction of the labor
required to make the roughly 9,000 wax balls of Against
the Wall. (Although never actually visible, a sense of epic
labor accompanies many of Hill’s sculptures, hovering at
the margins as part of their conceptual content.)

What are the implications of this approach? One, of
course, is to stress the interrelatedness of various artistic
mediums. Hill’s frequent passage from drawing to sculpture
to photography (in her cyanotypes) and from wall-hung
to freestanding works, is a challenge to the stubborn
academic and institutional tendency to segregate works
by medium and artists by type (painter, sculptor etc.). On
a larger scale, one of the things it invites us to consider is
how everything that happens in the world, everything that
has ever happened, is simply the rearrangement of matter:
X number of molecules or atoms moved by some force from
point A to point B. Therefore, a work of art is, at the most
basic level, the result of material being transferred from
one location to another: in the making of a painting, for
example, paint is moved from tube to palette to canvas,
or simply from can to canvas (trying, as Frank Stella one
remarked, to keep the paint looking as good as it did in
the can). Generally this movement of matter is taken for
granted, but in Hill’s work it often takes center stage, with
illuminating results.

If Hill’s multiple transformations (significantly, she
titled her most recent New York show, in which much of
the present work debuted, “Multiplying the Variations”),
her carrying of forms from one medium or material to
another, signals interrelatedness, so, too, does another
important aspect of her practice: the use of objects – often
found, sometimes salvaged, on other occasions bought
– that were originally produced for some other purpose.
She came across the plywood discs of Against the Wall,
for instance, in a manufacturing surplus store in Berkeley
(in a coincidence the artist notes, these were the identical
size of the discs she fabricated for a 1997 piece, odd lint.
re-coil. the rolls are now ready to serve. Other works in this
show are made from cotton batting gathered at a factory
in Brooklyn that manufactures shoulder pads (Dissipation),
thousands of small discs of mica discovered in a dumpster
(Mica and Pins) and rusted stove parts that Hill found
washed up on a beach in Nova Scotia (Beach Debris).
This rusty flotsam is presented twice, displayed on a sand-
covered table and in a series of cyanotypes (a photograph-
like process popular in the 19th century that Hill frequently
employs). Her most recent work, the sculpture-photography-
sound installation Kardex (2006), made in conjunction
with composer Sam Nichols, uses a steel, visual storage,
 filing cabinet designed by James Rand Jr. for the American
Kardex Company in 1915 for business use and no doubt
a boon to information storage in the pre-computer era.
This installation features walls of institutional green and
sturdy utilitarian furniture typical of a 1950s back office. Hill
clearly has a fondness for outmoded technologies; as she
eloquently puts it, many of the things she works with have
come to her “on the tide of a much greater obsolescence…
the shift from 19th century industrial processes to the
digital, the virtual, and the outsourced.”

In each of these cases, the materials become
ambassadors between the function- and profit-driven
realms of industry and commerce (albeit those of yesteryear)
and the less pragmatic world of art. Interestingly, when Hill
uses such materials they almost never announce themselves
as “industrial” or “found” (Beach Debris, where it’s pretty
clear we are looking at pieces of some functional device,
is, like Kardex, an exception), which is in contrast to how
industrial cast-offs are generally employed by artists. This
seems to be largely the result of Hill’s visual sensibility: in
her scavenging she is attracted to items that aren’t obviously
functional, things that, when used in manufacturing,
tend to end up concealed inside other materials or are
discarded as remnants or byproducts. In Dissipation, for
instance, it’s unlikely that many viewers would be able to
guess at the origin of these small discs of spongy cotton
that Hill has made into 15 square sheets that move from
the wall to the floor. Even more mosaic-like than Against
the Wall, Dissipation surprisingly relies on friction alone to
hold together the cotton elements (behind them is a sheet
of paper with more cotton attached). In a recent in-depth
interview with the painter Ron Janowich, Hill discusses the
 genesis of Dissipation, revealing how when she began to
work with this material she wasn’t at all sure what form it
would take (early configurations included a curving line
and a tree form). Her eventual discovery is a nuanced,
haptic structure that builds on such precedents as Piero
Manzoni’s monochromes and wall-to-floor paintings by
Ellsworth Kelly and others. Equally important in establishing
interrelatedness is the way Hill incorporates those
components she makes herself with the found elements:
hers is a hybrid art in its seamless joining of the found and
the handmade.
There is also interrelatedness to be seen in the modularity that runs through the work. The basis of this modularity is the unremarkable appearance of the individual parts. In her interview with Janowich she recalls how in Blue Lines “the idea with the cups was that each unit on its own was nothing. They became essential through their contribution to the whole.” This nothingness of the units acquires further meaning in Mica and Pins, a wall piece that Hill speaks of as a drawing. Once again the result of an intriguing dumpster find – countless tiny mica washers strung onto a long string – the work appears as sets of looping, interwoven diaphanous lines. In fact, it consists of thousands of closely spaced straight pins (placed according to a template) with a single mica washer hanging on each one. Looking something like miniature CDs, the semi-translucent washers reflect light but because of their innate irregularities and the different angles at which they come to rest on the pins, the lines they create are full of tonal nuance. The ghostly shadows cast by the washers and pins add to the immaterial qualities of this unconventional wall drawing. Another feature of Mica and Pins, perhaps not immediately evident, is how the quadrilateral drawings are constructed from single motifs submitted to Hill’s favored techniques of repetition and inversion.

Another technique that runs through Hill’s oeuvre is chance. Obviously, her reliance on whatever materials happen to be strewn in her path, her constant attention to her “immediate vicinity,” means that accident plays a central role in the genesis of each piece. If she hadn’t come across that string of mica washers, if she hadn’t had a studio near a shoulder pad factory, if she hadn’t come across a cache of plywood discs, the works using these materials would never have come into existence. But this doesn’t mean that Hill is a mere slave to serendipity: when she looks into a dumpster, visits a factory or wanders the aisles of an industrial supply store, the materials that attract her tend to be those that respond to her well-defined sensibility. Chance or accident is never the determining factor in her work, it is simply another of her chosen processes.

On occasion, chance takes on a prominent role not at the moment the material is found but during the actual making of the piece. In The Shape of Things to Come, for instance, Hill determined the forms of dozens of small planar wax sculptures by dropping lengths of string into curvilinear designs. Looking back to chance-determined works by Duchamp and Arp, this work also evokes mid-century abstract sculptures and (to my eye) cartoon figures. These five-inch-high wax-and-string biomorphs are set on wax pedestals cast from plastic cups. Hill makes no attempt to hide the modest origin of these pedestals, something that is in keeping with her overall lack of pretension and taste for humble materials. To some degree, she sees her function as bringing attention to the beauty and artistic potential of quotidian stuff. In this mode, she has made esthetically riveting works with such seemingly unpromising materials as orange peels (Bushwick Wheel, 1998) and plastic bags (One Hundred Feet of the Sweet Every Day, 2001). One of her most inventive (and perhaps a bit mad) exercises in the poetics of the everyday was a 1997 piece that involved unspooling 100 rolls of Scotch tape, adding cotton batting to their adhesive surfaces and rolling them up again. The work’s recipe-style title (add lint. re-coil. the rolls are now ready to serve) underlines the demystifying impulse in Hill’s work.

But if her always graceful art revels in accessible materials and easily explained processes, it also is marked by repetitive, labor-intensive methods that approach the trance-inducing practices of countless mystical orders around the world. Just as a religious seeker might take a single phrase or physical movement and, through disciplined repetition, transform it into a vehicle of revelation, so does Hill pursue illumination through her meditative making. If her work stands at the intersection of several vectors of modern art practice (found-object sculpture, process art, chance procedures, monochrome art, endurance-based performance), it also is located at the crossroads of the mundane and the mystical, where the physical object pulls us into invisible realms.

(Unless otherwise noted, all quotations taken from Ron Janowich’s interview with Robin Hill conducted for the upcoming “Cultural Recycling” issue of the journal Other Voices; an audio version can found on Hill’s web site: www.robin-hill.net

1. Hill took the title “Multiplying the Variations” from Gaston Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space. The phrase occurs in the books final chapter, The Phenomenology of Roundness, which could have been an effective title for the show.
“....Van Gogh wrote: Life is round...If we submit to the hypnotic power of such expressions, suddenly we find ourselves in the roundness of this being, we live in the roundness of life, like a walnut becomes round in its shell. A philosopher, a painter, a poet and an inventor of fables have given us documents of pure phenomenology. It is up to us to use them in order to gather being together in its center. It is our task, too, to sensitize the document by multiplying its variations.”

- Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space
Multiplying the Variations
Images
Blue Lines, 1995
installation view
oil stick on wax paper, cast plaster, pigment
dimensions variable
dip to coat. allow to fall freely onto work surface., 1997
plaster, string
dimensions variable
being careful not to topple, stack paper on sawhorses., 1997
paper, wood, plaster
7" X 5" X 3"
add lint. coil. the rolls are now ready to serve., 1997
tape cotton batting, plaster
101” X 101” X 1 ½”
100 Ft. of the Sweet Everyday, 2001
cyanotype on paper, helium balloons, and
polyethylene bags
dimensions variable
Bushwick Wheel, 1995
orange peels
100” X 100”
Against the Wall, 2004
100 elements, wax and plywood
110 x 110"
Concretion, 2004
100 elements, Hydrocal
10 x 10 x 182"
The Shape of Things to Come, 2004
detail
wax, string, and mirrored glass
53” X 24” X 48”
Dissipation, 2004
Cotton batting and paper
95 x 24 x 70-1/2”
Beach Debris, 2003
10 panels
108 1/2” X 25 3/4” each
Kardex, 2006
with composer Sam Nichols
installation view
visible storage cabinet, ink jet prints,
interactive sound, assorted found furniture
dimensions variable
Curriculum Vitae

Resides and works in Woodland, CA and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

EDUCATION
1977 B.F.A., Kansas City Art Institute

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2006 Stanislaus, CA, University Art Gallery, California State University, Stanislaus, Multiplying the Variations, September 9 – October 9, (catalog)
   Los Angeles, CA, another year in LA, Karalex, an installation by Robin Hill with Sam Nichols, June 9 – July 7.
2003 San Francisco, CA, Don Soker Contemporary Art, Beach Debris, November 4 - 29.
   Davis, CA, The Davis Art Center, Casting a Net: an Installation of Cyanotype and Sculpture by Robin Hill, January February 7.
2002 Houston, TX, Project Row Houses, Round 16, October - January.
1997 Kansas City, MO, Kansas City Art Institute, Art and Design Auction, March 29, (catalogue).
1989 New York, Lang & O’Hara Gallery, Robin Hill.
1987 New York, Lang & O’Hara Gallery, Robin Hill.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS
   Riec-Sur-Belon, France, Espace Melanie, Distillations, 10 Years of Art-Making in Pont-Aven, August.
   Paris, France, Mona Bismark Foundation, “Is, Was, Will Be, the past present and future of the Pont-Aven School of Art”, September.
   Davis, CA, John Natoulsou Gallery, Gone West, Four Artists New In These Parts, February, (catalogue, essay by Peter Frank).
   Kansas City, MO, Kansas City Art Institute, Art and Design Auction, March 29, (catalogue).
   Davis, CA, Richard L. Nelson Gallery & Fine Arts Collection, Modern Multiples: Selections from the Fine Arts Collection
   Sacramento, CA, The Crocker Museum, Annual Benefit Art Auction
   Los Angeles, CA, The Brewery, Approaching Perfection, curated by Mary-Lynn McCormickle, September.
2002 New York, The Work Space at Dolgenos, Newman & Cronin LLP, Proximity, curated by Robin Hill, with works by Joe Amhrein, Susanna Coffey, Caroline Cox, Jane Dickson, Matt Ferranto and Joe Stauber, Susanna Heller, Robin Hill, Theodora Varnay Jones, Catherine Murphy, Jack Risley, (catalogue, essay by Heanne Pardee).
2001 San Francisco, CA, Don Soker Gallery, Group Exhibition, November - April.
   Philadelphia, PA, Ericson Gallery, From One Thing to Another: Pat Badd and Robin Hill, October 19 - November 17.
2000 Brooklyn, NY, Flipside, Philatuff: Robin Hill, May Judge, November 5 - December 17.
   Brooklyn, NY, Peregr, Super Duper New York, April - June.
   Houston, TX, FotoFest 2000: Installations, March.
1996-1997 Schenectady, NY, Mandeville Gallery, Union College, Place, curated by Robin Hill, December 8, 1996 - January 26, 1997;
   Allentown, PA, Martin Art Gallery, Muhlenberg College, January 28 - February 23.
New York, NY, E.S. Vandam, Place, organized by Robin Hill, including work by Sharon Horvath, Mary Hambleton, Suzanne Bocanegra, Robin Hill, January 11 - February 3.
Brooklyn, NY, 55 Ferris Street, 55 Ferris Street 111, curated by Frederieke S. Taylor with Joseph Zito, March 14 - April 25.
Brooklyn, NY, Long Island University, Six Sculptors, organized by Marian Griffiths, (catalogue).
New York, NY, Rosa Esman Gallery, Organization of Independent Artists, Benefit Exhibition.
New York, NY, White Columns, Benefit Exhibition.
Long Island City, NY, Socrates Sculpture Park.
Traveled to Lausanne, Switzerland, Musee Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, October 17 - December 11; New York, NY, City Gallery, Department of Cultural Affairs and The Swiss Institute, January 5-February 10, 1989, (catalogue).
New York, NY, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Paintings and Sculpture by Candidates for Art Awards.
1987 Birmingham, MI, Hill Gallery, Part to Part.
New York, NY, El Bohio Community and Cultural Center, Indoor/Outdoor Sculpture Exhibit, curated by David Hacker.
New York, NY, Anne Plumb Gallery, Stay Tuned.
New York, NY, Lang & O’Hara Gallery, Sculpture.
Brooklyn, NY, Grand Army Plaza, Memorial Arch, Five Sculptors, curated by Mariella Bisson.
Greenvale, NY, Hillwood Art Gallery, C.W. Post College, Unaffiliated Artists II.
New York, NY, Virtual Garrison, Sculpture Survey.
New York, NY, Craig Cornelius Gallery.
Brooklyn, NY, A Place Apart, 8 + 1 + 1.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUES AND GENERAL BOOKS
Martone, Michael. Place, Mandeville Gallery, Union College, Schenectady, New York, 1996.
PERIODICALS


AWARDS AND GRANTS

2003 Faculty Research Grant, University of California, Davis
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Faculty Research Grant, University of California, Davis
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1990 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship
1987 The New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship
1986 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship
1985 National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artists Fellowship
1983 The New York State Council for the Arts, Fellowship for Five Sculptors
1983 Artists Space, New York, Emergency Materials Fund
PUBLIC/CORPORATE COLLECTIONS
Brooklyn Union Gas, Brooklyn, NY
Chatham Imports, New York
Champion International, New York
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Cowen, Liebowitz & Lachman, New York
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Lee & Silva Terry, The Metro Companies, Atlanta, Georgia
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Wynn Kramarsky, New York

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Associate Professor, Sculpture, University of California at Davis, 2001-present
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Faculty, New York University, 1999-2000
Faculty, Pont-Aven School of Art, Pont-Aven, France, 1997, 2000
Faculty, Sculpture, Rhode Island School of Design, 1997-1998

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Union College, Schenectady, NY
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Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA
Middlebury College, Middlebury, CT
Parsons School of Design, New York
Empire State College, New York
State University of Arkansas, Jonesboro, AK
Brooklyn College, NY
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