

Tara Donovan

recall paparazzi shots, the people who posed at the roadside for Wallace were fellow artists, including Douglas, Graham, Wendy Elliot and Arni Runar Haraldsson. Whereas John Heartfield used newspaper pictures and typography to assemble ironic, exaggerated allegories, and Man Ray dreamed a violin onto a nude model's bare back in the darkroom (*Ingres' Violin*, 1924), in Wallace's work, rather than taking control of pictorial space, photo-collage contextualizes it.

This is the approach adopted in *The Idea of the University I - XVI* (1990), a series of apparently documentary colour photographs, loosely recalling campus situations, lined up as a long sequence, interrupted by orange, purple, white and green monochrome strips. Installed in the spacious environs of Witte de With, the panorama of 16 panels, each 152 cm wide, remains visibly composite. Nevertheless, one can imagine that in a more cramped setting the viewer would not be able to take the work in as a whole, only as a succession of individual moments.

The 12-part photo-painting panorama *Look-out* (1979), based on 12 black and white images of a coastal landscape, introduces a different technique. Contact sheets and sketches on display at Witte de With show how Wallace asked people to adopt specific poses before inserting them into the original images and painting the entire work in tones that imitated photographic hand-tinting. Perhaps, then, Wallace's lined-up fields of image and colour are best understood in the context of film montage. While collage builds up a picture layer by layer, cinematic montage can be understood as an extended, serial collage.

There are works by Wallace that appear conceptually stoical and cool, like the videos and photographs in his 'At Work' series (1983-ongoing) - frontal views of the artist reading in his studio were presented as a DVD loop in Zurich. Overall, however, it is Wallace's persistent fondness for his own avant-garde art scene, his enthusiasm for *Nouvelle Vague* cinematic motifs, and the quality and density of his semantically over-encoded surfaces that add up to the quality that sets him apart - and with him the Vancouver School - from the many conceptualisms of the 1970s and '80s. This quality is perfectly encapsulated in *The Summer Script I & II* (1974), a sequence of photographs, begun with Graham and Wall, which develops out of a halting succession of panels that are apparently hand-tinted. Considerately installed within the symmetrical architectural surroundings of Witte de With, the work provides a revealing contrast with *The Idea of the University*. In *The Summer Script I & II*, a number of figures set in profile against a grassy backdrop are paired with the cropped corner of a garden table, brightly coloured fabric patterns and a vase of flowers, creating a moment that is charged with both the *vanitas* elements of classical still life painting and the cheerful humming of bees.

Catrin Lorch

Translated by Nicholas Grindell



Tara Donovan
Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)
2004/2008
Styrofoam cups, glue
Installation view

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA

In nearly every room of this ample exhibition of Tara Donovan's work, a visitor crossed the threshold with a wide-eyed smile, slack-jawed in pleasurable disbelief at its intricate and ingeniously simple illusions. My own face I'm sure proved no exception. The effect common to every installation - wrought in each instance out of workaday materials - is the protean appearance of its objects from afar. From across the gallery, *Untitled (Mylar Tape)* (2008) evokes not the frank banality of its medium, mentioned in the title, so much as a commingling of nacreous shellfish or a cluster of seaborne invertebrates, huddled and glinting against the gallery walls. Only on closer inspection do they reveal themselves to be mere loops of reflective tape. *Nebulous* (2002) similarly evinces the organic by virtue of its plain installation: buckles and blossoms of Scotch tape pasted to the gallery floor in a gossamer expanse. It suggests not only the ethereal dispersion of clouds, as its title would imply, but also the membranous cells of some unidentifiable flora or fauna. The

craggy stalactites of *Bluffs* (2006), too, are no mineral accretions but a towering assembly of plastic buttons.

An encounter with the works up close inevitably dispels their mirage-like effects. But it also spurs a reflection on the nature of their artifice, on how multiplicity here almost magically alters appearance, rendering each substance greater than - or at least different from - the sum of its parts. *Untitled (Toothpicks, Pins, Glass)* (2002) takes this effect to the extreme. One of the large cubes consists of sheets of sky-blue tempered glass, layered in fractured sheets. Another is made of seemingly infinite needles; the last of countless toothpicks, somehow held together in cubic propriety. Each piece's solid, geometric integrity stands at odds with the fragmented divisibility of its materials. I was reminded of Eva Hesse's 'Accession' pieces (1967-9), and their own dialogue with the fraught legacies of Minimalism's hermetic surfaces. Although the question of gender seems to resonate less insistently in Donovan's case, her work's oblique engagement with the history of craft conjures up important questions in its own right. Donovan's titles eschew the literary for the more straightforwardly descriptive, even when they conjure up topography and geography. She refuses, unpretentiously, to foreclose on the wide-ranging, elastic metaphorical valences of each work. Somewhere between sculpture and installation, the formal lyricism of Donovan's work derives from a productive paucity of materials and a remarkable inventiveness of means.

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