

Split

DIANNA FRID +
RICHARD REZAC

With an essay by Matthew Girson

Complementary

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Dianna Frid + Richard Rezac

Conversation

Richard Rezac: A natural place to start this conversation involves what it is that makes our work similar and different. Do we have something in common perhaps in the way that we go about making our work?

Dianna Frid: The first thing that comes to mind, rather than the formal manifestation of what the work ends up being, is that we both make works that, to varying degrees, have points of reference that perhaps are not known to a viewer. Our works are invested in looking at and through other material objects. There are points of reference that may be coming from very nearby or very far away, not just in terms of geography, but also in terms of another historic moment.

RR: Right. The finished work is not representational or literal in the way that art is often polarized between abstraction and representation. There is clear meaning in your work, and people can see and understand the intention and its defining principles. There's a directive without being representational.

DF: In both our works, there's a material reality to the object that is very concrete. This material presence is part of what informs what the work is doing in terms of content and of what exceeds its content.

RR: And there is a deliberative and rather slow making procedure in your work and in mine. There's reflection, there's rethinking, there's—certainly in your case—many sources that converge, and the synthesis or unification of these various interests or sources then becomes manifest in an object. The viewer confronts the physical, the

tactile, the surface. In addition, color participates in equal fashion with these other elements. So there's complexity and there are layers. Your work functions in a way similar to mine in that it asks the viewer to take time to discern those several readings.

DF: You mentioned that we think and rethink. But, in my process, if a gesture or thought doesn't operate within the whole, it often gets covered or it gets cut off. How does that work in your process?

RR: I would characterize my process as being quite traditional in terms of sculpture, where a drawing is necessary to begin to clarify and to circumnavigate the possibility for what's ahead. Because I prioritize a simple form with regular surface and legible silhouette, the drawing is necessary for me before I start engaging the material for reasons of practicality and efficiency, so I have a template in the drawing. Like an architect has a drawing to begin building, I have a drawing to initiate the sculpture with some reliability.

DF: Since in some instances drawing yields to the making of a sculpture that takes a long time to realize, where does a drawing begin? Is drawing immediate, or is there a thinking and rethinking process that yields to a drawing that also takes a long time to emerge?

RR: Well, it varies, of course. Most of the time, the drawing truly begins with a blank sheet, and as I don't quite know what is ahead, it can take weeks or months to develop. Even so, it's also the case that it's reliant to some degree on what I have recently done. The frame of mind or the stimulation of previous work enters onto that sheet of paper. But I do value the notion that options are wide open when I start a new sculpture, and this is initiated by a blank sheet of paper.

There are some exceptions that began in a very different way. I knew before I even did the drawing what the subject was, what its proportions were, and, in general terms, what the forms were going to be. Those had a tittle from the very beginning. For others, that's not true. They fall more within the realm of abstraction, almost

pure abstraction. This range in my work has been typical over the last twenty-five years. There are those occasional works that are representational or, at the very least, symbolic.

DF: Which works in the exhibit are not necessarily the results of drawing?

RR: *Pacific Sailor* (pg 48), *A's Robins* (pg 56), and *Lucia* (pg 52). Those three are explicit in their source. For example, *A's Robins* is after a painting my mother made late in life. Her first name is Agnes, and it depicts two robins in a tree with fall leaves. It's a painting that has great charm, and when we brought it home, I decided to make a sculpture based on her composition. The cast forms convey the size and gesture of the robins. For most people, it's certainly understood as abstract. I recognize that, but my mother's painting drove virtually every decision I made.

DF: That also demonstrates a process of interiority. It's not that it's randomly obscure, but that the conversation that you have with that painting is profoundly personal and particular to a familial relationship. You're navigating different layers. One of them is that your mother made the painting. The other is the painting itself. And the third one—to bring the word that I think applies to both of our works—is that you metabolize something in a very idiosyncratic way. Even though, as you describe it, the work itself has a profound resonance with another work of art, that resonance is not transferable by itself to a viewer. Yet what happens is something of great importance. The artist is a metabolizer of experiences that are not generic and that don't necessarily come to mean the same thing to a viewer. The sources yield something else that then gives us a common experience, which in the case of *A's Robins* is a sculpture.

RR: I've always had the feeling of something extremely personal and thought-through in your work. The absorption of literature, of the view of the world, of the operation of certain biological systems—all of that and more ultimately finds itself in a felt way. Your work holds a presence of quiet, reflective thinking and invites the viewer

to study it. There's not the demand that people pay attention; rather, it is more of an invitation, and there's the necessity on their part to take the time to see and understand what's there.

DF: I've never been afraid of works that appear, at first, inviting yet obscure, because my whole life I have been surrounded by things that have an iconographic meaning that I wasn't able to access spontaneously. For example, growing up in Mexico City and walking around an urban site that is seven hundred years old and has a palpable accumulation of different cultures, I was surrounded by traces of material culture that are not legible in straightforward ways. I experienced, during my formative years, realities coexisting with other realities.

There are sensual realities in the things that we make that require a kind of consideration that's not necessarily going to result in a particular narrative or in a finite arrival at deciphering something. But they propose that we pay attention, as you suggest.

One difference, perhaps, between your work and mine is the act of drawing. My works are more like palimpsests. The way in which I inhabit the making of drawing and sculpture is through layering, piling up, and stacking.

RR: For me, there is change, erasure, and rebuilding in the drawings I make that lead to sculpture, but they are on a single sheet of paper and not layered as such. They ultimately need to be as legible as a stark blueprint, and the arrival at the finished composition in my drawing has the hallmarks of what we think of as drawing. Based on the way you described your process, maybe drawing is a general term that we can apply to it, but it obviously folds into itself other things too. Yours is part painting, part sculpture; it's more complex. The term you use, palimpsest, is especially useful in that regard.

DF: Another term that came up when we were talking about the show with Matthew Girson, the curator of this exhibition, is *trans-historical*. There is something about paying attention trans-historically that allows for multiple points of reference to come into a work. Let's talk,

for instance, about the Ottoman miniature (*Untitled, Janissary*, 17th-18th century) (fig 6). I think what registers about it for me and, I believe, for you as well is that it has been annotated, which means that it has been used not necessarily as an artwork that gets framed and put on the wall, but as a page in a larger work in which somebody else, not the author, continued to inscribe it with thought and with interpretation. Neither of us read Arabic, but we know that there is a conversation that's happening in several layers: somebody wrote the text that composes the manuscript, somebody illustrated it, and then somebody else annotated it. The marginalia unmistakably designates a form of interaction with an object across time. That is something that art does very well: it allows us to have conversations across time.

In one of my pieces, *Transcription for a Transcription, I* (pg 31) engaged with an aphorism of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky through transcription and encryption as a way of trying to get inside the language, literally. I'm taking language apart and transliterating it into symbols. The aphorism is "Rhythm is the fundamental force, the fundamental energy of verse." It is from the 1926 book *How Are Verses Made?*. The Russian formalist poets had a profound belief that one of the means to rethink the world, politically and artistically, was through the form, energy, and force of poetry. I find this idea mysterious and inspiring across time.

RR: That's a great observation—the connection of the Ottoman miniature with your work and Mayakovsky's contribution, and the collapse of time as we consider these together. The realization that you articulate between seemingly unlike things will appear, of course, throughout this exhibition, with our work set alongside a diverse group of objects and books from DePaul's collection.

As one goes through the museum, though, a clear distinction between your work and mine is that language is instrumental in your work. The fact that you're bilingual points to your deeper understanding of the potential that the printed word can have. I've never gravitated toward literary representation, so that begins to explain the ab-

sence of language in my work, but for the rare title. This is another example, perhaps, of my orientation more toward something purely visual.

DF: This brings me back to something you said earlier, when you framed your work within traditional sculpture. How easy is it for you to frame your work within a discipline? I cannot readily do this when it comes to my work. Clarice Lispector wrote the following in a short story called “The Disasters of Sophia”:

“My entanglement comes from how a carpet is made of so many threads that I can’t resign myself to following just one. My ensnarement comes from how one story is made of many stories.” As an image, the carpet resonates with me because I am trying to connect various sources and give them form in what I do.

Having said this, when I was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I sought to study with you because I intuited that there was something valuable that I could learn with you as my teacher. It had to do with your description of the influence of the painting of the birds by your mother—that someone looking at the sculpture does not have to know the background of its source to have an experience. And yet, all along, your work is focused within the discipline of sculpture. How did that come to be for you?

RR: In my education in the early 1970s, I was faced with a critical question—whether I would fully pursue painting or sculpture. Ultimately, I selected sculpture, and I can’t tell you now quite why. To ameliorate that, drawing is so much a part of my process that I’m still having it both ways, and sometimes, in fact, my sculpture behaves more like painting. It’s often frontal; there’s strong silhouette, and if it’s on the wall, it functions more like relief sculpture than volumetric sculpture. For me, what’s important is the making by hand, which allows considerable control, and the size then becomes part of that. My sculpture is within arm’s reach. Its human scale forces the viewer to look at it at close range. If that happens, then the surface, whether regular and consistent in the making or inconsistent by design, matters.

DF: In my work, by contrast, a key point of reference that I bring has to do with how textiles are constructed. I’ve made sculptures and I’ve made installations, but my more recent work has focused on the intersections of text and textile. Whether there’s text in the work or not, I do believe that textiles are a form of script, of inscription, of code. These inscriptions happen on a surface, but that surface has a back and a front, and just like in a weaving, you can turn the object around and both sides exist. One orientation might have the information and be the preferred viewing position, but it doesn’t negate the other orientation.

RR: Whether it’s one of your books where you turn the page and are aware of the side that you’ve just turned while seeing its backside, or you see the embroidery or the stitching or the very edge where two pieces of fabric join, that thorough, all-around experience of front and back is not so true of my work. Generally, a sculpture has an internal, inaccessible substance and an obvious surface. You recognize the volume, but you’re not privy to seeing the totality of it in the way that often occurs in your work.

DF: There’s another word that I’ve been thinking about lately, *boustrophedon*. It means “as the ox plows the land,” but it describes the way in which writing was first inscribed onto stone in the Latin alphabet: the words would go from left to right, then the next line would go right to left, and the next left to right. That is also how a basic weaving gets constructed. When we talk about fronts and backs, I’m also thinking about reading and the conventions that we’ve arrived at in the history of art. For example, in the larger conversation about art, the way in which textiles have been discussed is generally as utilitarian objects. They keep being left out of a conversation in which these kinds of objects are complexly experienced as vessels for ideas and sensations.

What I’m trying to say is that, in my work, I do not follow disciplinary classifications. Sometimes my work is closer to painting or collage than to sculpture. Or it is close to textiles. But I want to stick to what our friend Jen Bervin says: “To make the work and allow for the genres

to arrive later.” What you call it may or may not emerge eventually. Of course, that makes it difficult to frame within a particular historical lineage, but what feeds into the work, metaphorically, is a series of lines or threads that then get metabolized.

RR: Right.

DF: I sometimes wish that, like you, I could claim clearly that these are sculptures or that they’re paintings. Mine is not a stubborn refusal to name, but I know that when I do, I place the work into one category when it could have possibly been in another. This is where classification is insufficient.

RR: For better or worse, that’s the state of affairs today in contemporary art and in the world today generally: things are faster and are abruptly juxtaposed, and we need to make sense of their meaning. Within art that friction or that complication is enriching. It forces us to think through and to think more thoroughly about what we’re looking at, what its meaning is to us, how true it is to the culture at large.

Contributors

Dianna Frid is an artist working at the intersection of text and textile, matter and subject matter. Her sculptures, installations, artist's book and mixed-media works have been shown nationally and internationally, most recently in Chicago at the Poetry Foundation (2015) and at the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa in Mexico (2015). Frid was born in Mexico City where she lived as a child until her family immigrated to Canada. She currently lives in Chicago and is an Associate Professor in the Art Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Matthew Girson is a painter whose work has been exhibited locally, nationally, and internationally. His most recent solo exhibition *The Painter's Other Library* was held at the Chicago Cultural Center (2014) and featured paintings of bookshelves in the dark. Previous curatorial projects include *fitter, happier: an exhibition concerning technology* at the DePaul Art Museum (2004) and *Operation: Human Intelligence* at the Hyde Park Art Center (2003). He is a professor in DePaul University's Department of Art, Media and Design.

Richard Rezac lives and works in Chicago. Since the mid-1980's he has primarily made object-sculptures, essentially abstract in form. He has received the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, among others. Recent exhibitions include Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin (2015), Marc Foxx, Los Angeles (2015) and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago (2014). He is Adjunct Full Professor at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.