BECOMING SECOND NATURE


The creation of recognizable yet improbable landscapes constructed from cultural detritus is ubiquitous to Heller’s artistic practice. A modern-day bricoleur, savvy cultural hacker and urban archaeologist, she assembles a litany of mundane materials and cultural castoffs into recognizable yet improbable environments that cleverly fuse macro and micro, architectural and organic, and artifice and nature.

Heller’s installations are simulacra in the classic Deleuzean sense: although the artificial environments she constructs reference elements of nature and the real world, they are not replicas of nature, nor are they degraded copies of the natural. There is no original to imitate. With a sardonic twist, Heller creates artificiality that, as Deleuze asserts, is “pushed to the point where it changes its nature and is reversed into the simulacrum.” Her work questions (re)constructions of the natural – or the simulacrum of the real – by mimicking mass-produced icons of consumerism that are the antithesis of the natural and, ironically, the very stuff that clogs our landfills.

Much like the artist Sarah Sze, who is known for her intricate, meticulously engineered site-specific sculptures and assemblages of ordinary objects and – frequently – live plants, Heller’s work often gives shape to ecological concerns. However, while Sze mixes natural and artificial plant life with the miscellany of the everyday as a means of commenting on the interaction of nature and artifice, Heller transforms her materials into inert ecosystems that present nature as artifice; they address the concept of artificiality, but go beyond artificiality by transforming into the simulacrum.

It would be easy to pigeonhole Heller’s practice – in particular her use of lowbrow materials – as yet another manifestation of the postmodern preoccupation with high/low art distinctions. Her irreverent use of prosaic materials – in particular those associated with craft store kitsch and decoration – can be read as a conscious effort to lash out against the ascetic structures of late modernist practice. However, she is less concerned with the hierarchical aspects of her materials than she is with their conceptual potential. Fully aware of the central, and often contradictory, importance of mass culture and its relationship to contemporary art, she is far more interested in the literal connection between her materials and the context in which they are being deployed. As such, she adroitly discerns the dual nature of the found object as an individualized form, as well as a thing whose value and interpretation are malleable.

A visual alchemist and cultural anthropologist, she claims to have “always been fascinated with the potential of mass-marketed products when viewed outside of their intended context. When making words or images out of these materials, I play on
the ironies inherent in the medium … I am interested in what our culture discards and what can be made from this detritus…” Her recombinant artistic practice – that of assigning new meanings to quotidian objects by strategically combining and modifying them – has much in common with the Situationist strategy of détournement, a primarily artistic, but often political, technique where works of art or mass culture are recontextualized in such a way that their use and value are transmuted.

Heller’s concern with the throwaway consumerism of pop culture is also manifest in the formal aspects of her work, such as her use of color. By adopting a highly saturated palette that is pure pop and candy bright, she reveals not only her skills as a colorist, but also our predilection for, or ability to be seduced by, the dazzling, plastic allure of cheap, Dollar Store merchandise. Process and materiality are key to Heller’s practice. As she states: “The tension (in my work) resides in the handiwork – twisting, threading and tying mass-produced objects together – these processes result in conflicts such as glut and space and the weight of the object versus the fragility of nature.” Spatial considerations are also important to Heller’s work, in particular her large-scale installations, for they are conceptualized in response to the architecture that contains them – in most cases, the white box of the gallery space.

Although she admits to being less interested in her work’s inherent commentary on consumerism, waste, and ecology than she is in laying bare the absurdity of our disposable, plasticized culture, sociological commentary often pervades Heller’s work. Her exaltation of the commonplace can be read as a meditation on the nihility of modern life and a reminder of the process of cultural decomposition on a global scale. And, the ephemeral quality of her installations, especially the disposability of her materials, can be interpreted as an allusion to the transience and fragility of nature and the human condition. Not simply wondrous landscapes that function as visual puns, Heller’s installations are provocative, fantastasmagoric constructions that critique consumption and cause us to question the boundaries between art and the banality of everyday life.

Kaytie Johnson
Director and Curator of University Galleries, Museums and Collections

Sally Heller
Lives and works in New Orleans, LA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2005  Sally Heller: Material Minutiae, Richard E. Peeler Art Center, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN
2004  Hanging by a Thread, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA
1993  Pieced Together, East End Arts Council, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2005  Atlanta Biennial 2005, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA

In Line, Rockland Center for the Arts, West Nyack, NY
Southeast: Contemporary Southeastern Art, University Galleries, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL
2004  Gypsy’s Curse, Worm-Hole Laboratory, Miami, FL
2002  I Fall to Pieces, Space One Eleven, Birmingham, AL
2001  Detritus, Refuse and Other Multiples, Galerie Simone Stern, New Orleans, LA
1999  Louisiana Artists, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans
1998  Art Exchange Show, New York, NY
1997  One on One: Artists Pick Artists, Max Fish, New York, NY
1996  Up Words, Helen Cevern-Harwood Gallery, New York, NY
1994  From Head to Toe, Longwood Arts Center, The Bronx, NY

Whateva, Dru Arstark Gallery, New York, NY
1993  93 New York 50, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY

Obsessive Collection, Art in General, New York, NY

1992  Things Ain’t What They Used to Be, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York
1989  Group Show, Ammo Gallery, New York, NY
1988  Cut Outs, Bridgewater/Lustberg Gallery, New York, NY

Emerging Artists, Galerie Simone Stern, New Orleans, LA
1987  Group Show, Jus de Pomme Gallery, New York, NY
1986  Face to Face, Hudson Gallery, New York, NY
1985  Works on Paper, Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

35 Under 35, Women’s Interarts Center, New York, NY
1984  Young New York Artists, Farthing Gallery of Art, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC and Hickory Museum of Art, Hickory, NC

Update, White Columns, New York, NY
1983  Portraits of the 80s, Protech McNeil Gallery, New York, NY

Brooklyn Terminal Show, Brooklyn, NY
Installation, White Columns, New York, NY
1982  Polychrome Sculpture, Lever House, New York, NY

Car Show, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY

Energism, Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA
1981  Positivism, ABC No Rio, New York, NY
1980  Major Works: Forty Louisiana Artists, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA

EDUCATION
1980  Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University
1978  Bachelor of Science, University of Wisconsin, Madison

Sally Heller: Material Minutiae
August 24 – December 4, 2005
Richard E. Peeler Art Center, DePauw University

Gallery hours: Mon.-Fri., 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sun., 1-5 p.m.
Location: 10 West Hanna Street, P.O. Box 37, Greencastle, IN 46135-0037
For more information: (765) 658-4336, www.depauw.edu/galleries/