



Sally Heller: Material Minutiae

## BECOMING SECOND NATURE

From a distance, Sally Heller's room-size installations seem ordinary enough. A tall, willowy tree. Flowers. A graceful cascade of hanging vines. A small stone path. A cozy cottage. Yet, on closer inspection, the material idiosyncrasy of the forms becomes apparent. A tree constructed from dimpled chunks of yellowing latex foam enclosed in an exoskeleton of twisted floral wire. Curly fuzzy, Day-Glo-colored pipe cleaners, wire and beads formed into diminutive daisies. A black-and-white minimalist curtain of white plastic golf balls joined by twists of black pipe cleaners. Pieces of cut brown felt meandering in a path across the gallery floor. A shanty shack constructed from painted wood shutters and scrap wood, encircled by yellow caution tape.

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 Deleuzian sense: although the artificial environments she constructs reference elements of nature and the real world, they are not replications 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."<sup>1</sup> 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 nihilism 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, fantasmagoric 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

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," in *The Logic of Sense*, edited by Constance V. Boudas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 112.

# 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 Simonne 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 Simonne 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/](http://www.depauw.edu/galleries/)