

Theodora Varnay Jones @ SJICA

Posted on 21 December 2009



Transparency # 38 and 32, (2009, 2007), acrylic polymer, pigments, graphite and wood structure. Photo: David M. Roth

Expressiveness is not a quality we normally associate with Minimalism. Its reliance on “objective” (and occasionally mathematically derived) formulas for creating material presence has always cast the practice in a cold light. But must this always be the case? Might it be possible to take Minimalism’s most salient features – insistent geometries, impenetrable surfaces and its penchant for modular, repeating units – and inject new substance? A little feeling, perhaps? *Manifold*, a 10-year survey of works by post-minimalist Theodora Varnay Jones, answers with an emphatic yes.



"Indistinction #4B", 2007, paper, graphite, color pencil, acrylic polymer, wood.

For the most part, Varnay Jones sticks to the tropes of Minimalism's classic period (1965-1975); but she brings to it something we usually don't see in this realm: a prodigious level of craft. Her work is so detailed and full of her precise handiwork, that it might qualify as *sui generis* were it not shadowed by the influences of Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Eva Hesse and Sol Lewitt. This isn't always a bad thing. In four pieces from her *Transparency* series, she coats wall-mounted wooden boxes with a semi-translucent gel that reveals, at varying levels of opacity, layers of geometric patterning that shimmer from below in a kind of iridescent haze that is impossible to fully penetrate or bring into focus. The surfaces are reflective, refractive and interior-lit, all at the same time. Acrylic polymer and fiberglass are what enable these dislocations; yet the pieces, no matter how hard you stare, remain perceptual mazes.

The aptly titled *Indistinctions* series toys inventively with the famous Martin grid, by inserting into it hand-painted and pencil-drawn dots whose edges seem to ooze, like bacteria multiplying in a Petri dish. Sequestered in their requisite spaces, the dots, which bring to mind Chuck Close's pictorial elements, set up a hypnotic rhythm that's broken by irregularities in shape, texture and color. This interaction, of indeterminate cellular forms within imprecise "lines", makes for a pleasurable off-kilter viewing experience, especially in pieces like *Indistinction #6* where the everything is obfuscated by a coating of beeswax and delicate skeins of fiberglass mesh.



"Transparency #27", 2009, paper, graphite, pigments, acrylic polymer, fiberglass, plexiglass and wood structure;
"Ghost", 2009, plexiglass, acrylic and mirrored Plexiglass. Photos: David M. Roth

Varnay Jones' most prominent 3-D pieces – three Lewitt-like sculptures comprised of see-through boxes, a Judd-influenced grid of 48 wall-mounted wood boxes scored by burning incense sticks, and two paraffin and beeswax constructions that recall Hesse — hew closely to their roots, but not enough to detract from anyone's pleasure. Various subtleties see to that. For example: The false shadows affixed to *Transparency #27*, a chair-shaped geometric sculpture, add a touch of unexpected humor; while the inclusion of mirrors in *Ghost*, a Plexiglass-encased floor piece, extends the cubist metaphor into infinity.

Such departures from hide-bound mannerisms show that post-minimalism, at least in Varnay Jones' hands, can not only inspire, it can push right past the boundaries that minimalists once claimed as the end-all in their quest for purity: a fact-based materiality devoid of expression and feeling. Varnay Jones, at her best, displays an abundance of both qualities.

–DAVID M. ROTH