

By: Susan Rosenberg

Jilaine

Jilaine Jones What Surrounds Her House 2008 [not in exhibition]



Metal and clay are sculpture's brain, flesh and bones, tools for materializing its conceptual and physical armature. Intermediaries between an artist's ideas and intuitions, these materials have long been treated as the elemental means to sketch in three dimensions – to think and feel a sculpture into being. In the 20th century, clay's traditional role in modeling the figure was partly usurped by its stature within newly elevated categories of craft, while metal secured an independent identity for itself as the primary medium of abstraction. Jilaine Jones's new sculpture marshals these contradictory legacies to the project of monumental abstract art. Her work displaces concerns with the human body onto an objective, architectonic mode of modernist sculptural investigation, objectifying particular, intimate physical experiences as form and thought.

Since 2005 Jones has brought clay's literal plasticity – and sensuous physical presence – to techniques of open construction in welded steel. In her new work, the legacy of clay as a credible means to capture the immediacy of thought and movement, brings body, but also intimations of the body's lost presence, to a constructivist tradition much eclipsed by developments in art since minimalism. Informed by her work from the live model, Jones's new sculpture reconciles divergent modes of representation: one based on cubist models of sculptural transparency, and the other founded in a figurative tradition for articulating plastic equivalents – if not images – of the human body as presence, gesture or imprint.

Separated from the generation that felt itself beholden to formalist criteria regarding the purity of sculpture's means, ends and boundaries, Jones is instead, in her words, "motivated by the concept of conveying the physical experience through time." Clay has been her primary medium since the 1980s when she used it to make abstract objects responsive to sources ranging from Anthony Caro and Donald Judd to Chinese sarcophagi. At the time, clay's association with craft traditions raised hackles, but Jones's interest in moving outside of the

narrowly defined parameters of contemporary sculpture proved productive: as Jones points out, “You could say Rodin’s ‘ceramics.’ We don’t. He was making sculpture which spoke about the direct handling of clay.”

Jones’s sculptures of the 1990s, such as *With Her Weight the Burden Shifts*, 1994-1995 and *Box Embodied*, 1995, married embodied subjectivity to classical statuary and geometric form to the body’s sinewy gestures. She searched for ways to translate clay’s warm plasticity into cold steelwork and to communicate the body’s experience from within, as opposed to the eye’s response to nature or abstract form from without. The point of departure for that work – sensations of unconscious physicality experienced by the body in relation to gravity and space – established the foundation for her new sculpture, which emerged from a period of working with the live model in 2003-4.

In this project Jones was much informed by the approach of British sculptor Tim Scott, for whom she had worked as an assistant in the 1980s. Scott’s reintroduction of the practice of working from the model to sculpture students at St. Martin’s School of Art, London, in the 1970s had been inspired by the desire to recover the figure as sculpture’s touchstone, a deliberate reevaluation of what formalist sculpture had left behind. Rather than returning to the project of translating nature into form, Jones designated her approach “perceptual”, suggesting an investigation that locates its most important content in the relationship of subject and object, eye and body, opticality and physicality.

During a period of intensive work from the live model in 2003-4, Jones instructed the figure to move through an architectural scaffolding of her own making and through a tripartite succession of poses. The results of these intensive studies, fragile sculptural sketches of wooden sticks and glue, seem to wind the clock back on sculptural history to the moment of Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Umberto Boccioni – just before figural sculpture and analytic cubism decisively parted ways. As Jones observed the model – and the body’s mechanics as the model lifted herself from seated position upward, walked forward, and positioned herself in relation to the architectural frame – and found abstract sculptural allegory in the shifting relations of the body’s states of being to architecture, inside to outside:

“I wanted to capture such mechanics as radial shapes that the body is constructed to be able to make; the measured lengths of space it can traverse in one thrust; variations in speed in regard to the complexity of movement and weight carried vertically or horizontally; dramatic changes between the body’s expansion and compression; the negotiation of gravity, to push from, fall towards or acquire equilibrium.

*WonderWorld*, 2006, synthesizes these concerns in monumental form. Unfolding from left to right in three zones, the sculpture derives from Jones’s investigations of sculpture’s three fundamental scales for addressing the viewer - floor, pedestal and monument - as unified in a single work. Its structural and volumetric divisions and gravitational momentum evolved from *Swingset*, 1999-2000, in which Jones treated chronological and physical stages of life as a sequential narrative and spatial ordering: from a child’s fascination with the body’s real weight and gravity, to the adolescent’s extroverted ascendance in opposition to the ground, to adulthood as inert monument or past tense memorial.

*WonderWorld* objectifies this empathic fluctuation between sensations of distance and interiority and the undermining of boundaries between artist, object, and viewer. A steel skeleton supports

the ascension, collision, torque and expansion of the form, and the delivery of space, to the viewer's ground: "The interstitial zone between confinement and openness comprises a compression of levitated weights gradually developed in movements between forms."

Constructed of concrete board, cast concrete and welded steel, WonderWorld functions sequentially: it is grounded on the right, suspended illusionistically in the center, and available to the viewer's physical and visual response at the left. Its central section emerges like a bas-relief from the flat – a nugget of rough concrete operating as a core that is excused from gravity's pull, yet artlessly physical and suspended between conflicting forces. In confrontation with this object in real space, solid geometry rises to splay out as shimmering optic experienced in actual conditions.

Perceptual, sculptural and behavioral investigations are integrated.

As architectural maquette, bodily metaphor, and operative machine, *She is Like Her Children*, 2005, insists that the sculptural object mediate between an internally experienced physicality and an external, objective measuring of movement. In *She is Like Her Children*, a fragile drawing in space, clay's real mass and response to gravity are calculations subject to structural articulation: weight, lift and suspension are embodied in the relation of clay mass to delicate spatial grids. Another form stands apart, as if to embody the presence of an onlooker in the sculpture and a surrogate for the viewer and artist. Being 'like her children' here means recognizing physicality as that which makes experience and thought intelligible, that which is elemental to sculptural language. *She is Like Her Children* amplifies this body consciousness, focusing on the self-experience of the body from which identity originates.

In *Portrait of a Solitary Walk*, 2007, the body's physical weight, sensate intelligence and vision are powerfully materialized in the sculptural dynamic of physical mass and linear drawing, spatial breadth and containment, motion and inertia. Inspired by the artist's daily walk in the Connecticut landscape where she lives, it features a cast concrete volume interpenetrated by rocks that index the actual landscape. This form occupies a space created by a steel channel that measures the width of the artist's pelvic bones. An implied relation between this massed volume and the compact steel construction that faces it sets up a dynamic of vision and movement. A compression of temporal and spatial multiplicity is achieved materially but also extends into the viewer's space, delineating three realms of sculptural experience: object and distance, embodied space, and the space behind. These three realms define a landscape psychically charged by inflections of the female body moving through it, grounded in a repeated, lived experience.

*Portrait of a Solitary Walk* revisits the thematic of physical and experiential zones explored in *WonderWorld*: it incorporates the content of the artist's viewings of distant forms or areas as small structures attached to the realities of the walker's larger physical experience. The artist states:

"I am interested in it merging with and extending the time-frames of the viewer's own physical experience. What happens physically between the viewer and the parts or passages of the sculpture is as important as its own internal ordering: this ordering is informed by the inside experience of the body through a space and the view through the eyes of the subject becoming extended as structure and incorporated content."

Embracing incongruous sculptural languages and materials, *Portrait of a Solitary Walk* diagrams relations between walker, walk, experience and objects of vision as an inescapable spatial pathway charged by sexual presence in absentia over time.

That presence – or absence – travels unexplored sculptural spaces in *What Surrounds Her House*, 2008.† Its tabletop structure fans out as square support. The interior complex is a meeting ground of bodies and objects, interpenetrated by what is external: a carefully adjusted still life of stony, organic elements poised between attenuated structure and a weighty foot that scoops through space. This out-of-scale marker is a weight on actual ground that cuts through the sculpture's delineated ground plane. In the process it accumulates metaphorical weight, to suggest vast subterranean spaces that are unavailable to the eye: simultaneity triumphs sequentially ordered space, time and history. Inspired by David Smith's *Reliquary House*, Jones's *What Surrounds Her House* invites the unseen, the below ground, to be present and whole: what may be a reliquary box to some is Pandora's box to others. In taking sculpture towards her body, Jones's work unearths a world of heretofore barely articulated physical and perceptual sensation in actual space.

† The sculpture referred to here is not included in this exhibition.

All quotations from email correspondence with Jilaine Jones, January - March 2008.