



Raphaella Platow: Tell me about the process of creating your sculptures. How do you come up with the shapes and forms, choose the materials, and put it all together?

Rebecca Smith: I began the group I call Cage Pieces in 2001. I initially had the idea of some sort of enclosure of space that was based on metal window guards, but it became something between painting and sculpture, which referred to the space of the painting not as a window to look through but as a field projecting out from the wall, like Mondrian's paintings. I use thin steel because it is a strong and flexible construction material. I start with many small drawings, then make scale drawings in tape on large pieces of paper. I take these to fabricator Marc Roussel and he cuts approximate lengths of steel that I then weave together and he welds. The process of cutting and welding can last from several days to a couple of months.

RP: It is interesting to me that you use the word "weaving," which has such feminine connotations. How do you weave steel "threads"?

RS: It's like a basket, constructed by weaving strips in and out. This stock is fairly thin and light, so I can bend it by hand. Sometimes I need to take a hammer to it. When I began working with

steel strips, my first idea was of a window cage like you see in gyms, but it became more about a field of operations on a grid. The grid is certainly the way the human-made world is set up, yet we deviate from it all the time. I had thought that the last thing I would ever want to work with was the grid, because it seems so tired out as a concept. But I'm interested in the way the grid creates a strong framework for expectation and therefore the opportunity for dramatic visual moments when a norm is broken or a direction is changed. When these deviations and riffs happen in an obdurate material like steel, it feels exciting to me. The accidents and choices create a new path and a particular feeling.

RP: When the bars of steel turn and twist like a ribbon, a feeling of softness suddenly enters the grid. Could you talk about this?

RS: Manufactured steel bars are rigid, but when twisted they can have a perverse, noodle-like quality. They act out a playful and arbitrary narrative of the masculine and feminine. I've been trying to get a sense of illusion into these physical objects, which is difficult to impose onto an object, so I apply oil paint to them with a brush, mixing the colors myself. When I get the unpainted piece in my studio I live with it for a while to see what color it wants to be. Sometimes I see the color right away and sometimes I have to try it over and over. Colors can have many references, both natural and artificial. As signs, they can be pragmatic, like the red of stoplights, or symbolic, like pink, which has a baby blanket and girl idea behind it. Colors arouse states of feeling.

RP: Colors can pertain to particular meanings or zeitgeists, like orange in the '70s, but they are also culturally associated. Your colors seem to rise above and beyond all that.

RS: Color is really personal for me. Heavy Orchid [2009] is a purplish/pinkish/grayish color that comes from a certain kind of gum I chewed when I was a child. It's a color that's weighty and sort of like a body color. Recently I looked at a sketchbook, and realized I had described the same color about three years ago. Heavy Orchid is the only piece I've done in a stock that was too heavy for me to bend myself--Richard Weber helped me with that one. Because I wanted a heavier feeling, I wanted to use paint the color of storm clouds threatening to burst.

RP: The behavior of light causes your colors to change slightly and influences how we respond to what is on the wall. When interference pigments are used, as in Glen Echo [2008] and Fairy Nightgown [2009], the iridescence creates a more emphatic contrast at the places where one bar lays on top of another. The changing surface color of Fairy Nightgown makes it strange and misleading. It is sparkling and shining, but can go from looking very glamorous to very dirty.

RS: I wanted the color to push the lightness of the sculpture even further. The iridescence makes you forget about the physicality of the piece. Pink House [2009] was originally going to be on the wall but ended up on the floor. The bars across it are twisted and curvy and very pretty, which makes you think of a dysfunctional piece of furniture or maybe even a toy.

RP: One of the bars has tight twists at the end and soft undulations in the middle. The end bar doesn't lie flat so the element across it doesn't rest vertically. It is as though the little toy table started coming apart. It produces a sensation of disintegration. It has a life of its own, bouncing, sitting, ready to hop away. There's something very playful, humorous, and imaginative about it.

RS: What you might call its topographical structure is very obvious, but the twists deny the functionality proposed in the structure.

RP: It's interesting that you use the word "topographical" since something that comes to mind when I look at the shadows of your work on the wall is a topographical diagram. A subtle outline of something else that is almost attached to the piece itself, but which becomes another reality. Is this related to your tape pieces?

RS: I first used the tape for scale drawings, to imagine what the sculptures would be like at their actual size. I found that I loved making drawings with tape and erasing them by peeling it up. For the Ring sculptures I made drawings that synthesized an orb spider web with the New York City subway system. I worked this out in tape before I made the sculptures. Now I have a larger repertoire of imagery, much of it coming out of maps, graphs, and forms of script such as shorthand and Nushu, an ancient Chinese written language. In the most recent tape drawing installations I've tried to create the illusion of deep space on the walls. I made "scarred" pieces by putting tape onto string in thin, vertical lines.

RP: All your tapes have different material qualities, and you sometimes ruffle them when you make a turn.

RS: I like the fact that you can't get the most ideal shape with tape--it keeps messing up. In an installation, the tape makes a sharp line of color, but wrinkling gives it three-dimensionality. I've done some elaborate ruffling with tape in a lacy, cake-frosting style.

RP: You've mentioned that you find tapes wherever you travel, and they are manufactured in different ways, and have different characteristics.

RS: When one tape is no longer manufactured I introduce a new one, testing how it is going to adhere to the wall, how translucent it is, what color it is, whether it's shiny or matte. There is paper-bag tape and masking tape and that obnoxious shiny brown packing tape that I have sometimes been able to make beautiful. It is fascinating to me.

RP: Have you ever done really large-scale pieces? Enormous?

RS: Birthday [2008] at the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center was 26 feet high by 37 feet long. Tarrawarra Catchment [2005] at the TarraWarra Museum of Art in Victoria, Australia, was installed in a gallery measuring twenty-five feet by thirty-nine feet with a sixteen foot high ceiling. It took me eight days. This scale is different from that of my sculptures, which are scaled to the human body.

RP: If the sculpture is connected to the body, the tape pieces seem to be connected to landscape or architecture. You show great sensitivity to space in the way you place your works in an architectural environment. What spatial issues are at play in the Studio School show?

RS: This is the first show in which I combine sculpture and tape drawings in fairly equal measure. I am curious to see how they interact together; I am used to experiencing them separately. To stage the dialogue, I came into the space with a strategy influenced by what I've read about the Lascaux cave complex in David Lewis-Williams's *The Mind in the Cave* [London: Thames & Hudson, 2002].

RP: Can you tell me more about what you know of Lascaux?

RS: According to Lewis-Williams, the entrance to Lascaux was a big "hall" where public rituals took place. On the walls there are drawings of animals created in a consistent style. Deeper inside, the rooms get increasingly narrow and the drawings change in character: the images are less recognizable, more irregular, and obviously made by different artists. Some images are abstract: geometric marks, incisions, and cross-hatchings layered on top of each other without any logic. Lewis-Williams thinks that the deepest reaches of the cave were designated for individual shaman-artists to pursue their inner experience of spiritual quests. He proposes that the shaman entered a state of altered consciousness, either drug-induced or natural, and on this psychic "journey" made contact with the underworld. The cave walls were a "membrane" to which spirits could be summoned and where they could manifest themselves. The shaman-artists "found" the animal spirits by incorporating undulations and cracks of the cave walls into the paintings, at the same time projecting their mental images of animals onto the walls. Hence, the image was both "found" and created. I love this conception of the drawing surface as a "membrane."

RP: Can you explain how you applied these ideas in the planning of the exhibition?

RS: I am using the notion of a prehistoric painted cave both as a source of imagery and as an overarching conceit for integrating the sculptures and tape drawings. The first room will deal with clarity and the recognition of imagery --several grid wall sculptures along with a tape drawing version, directly on the wall, of the original drawing on which the sculptures are based. Tape will be used to accentuate the architecture of the room and seek to create an illusion of deeper space. These are opposites, but they work together. Aluminum foil tape will echo the 1930s Art Deco chrome-decorated arch at the entrance to the gallery.

RP: Vilém Flusser, one of my favorite philosophers, reflects on the cave paintings in his new-media theory. Let me share an excerpt I think might be relevant: "Hunting bison is a necessity to life. One should not approach this task without thinking (the way the jackal does it). One should reflect on this task from the outside (beyond subjectivity) and orient oneself to what one sees. By doing this, one will hunt better. But what one sees is fleeting. It needs to be suspended on the walls of a cave and in such a way that others will also be able to orient themselves to what has been seen."

Of course, creating a work with tape on the walls of a room also draws viewers into an experience that is connected to one site, and one site only. Something that interests me about your tape drawings is that they connote imagery that often has a sign-like character. It toys with the notion of a visual language that is collectively understood in a deep, almost instinctual manner. And it seems to me that the medium of tape with its innate qualities gives you permission to draw in such an elemental way.

RS: Flusser is talking about the "moment" in human development when the image was first used to communicate meaning. I have always wanted my art to do this in a vital way that remains visual and primal and doesn't resort to representational images or text, or subverts them in some way. I have gravitated to drawing--in both the sculpture and the tape installations--as the most direct way of communicating visual thought. I like to think of the arrow that you draw on a map left for a friend visiting your house as a very good drawing.



RP: Let's return to your installation plan. What will be in the second room?

RS: Well, the show is still two months from now but I think I'm going to try stacking or interlocking three floor pieces in the center. They are intended to be separate, but in this installation two or even three could nest together well. Green Insect [2009], eight feet tall, will be hung on a wall it just fits, as in a niche. Reprise [2009] and Concealer [2009] will be installed on a long wall, fairly close together and up high like two "windows." I want thick white tape to make a long, Baroque, looping, tangling journey around the periphery of the room, as I did in Birthday [2008]. I initially envisioned a consistent line two-thirds of the way up the wall, but this doesn't seem quite right--too tight and confining. Maybe if the line meandered...which reminds me of the "Lascaux Meander," a narrowing section of the cave complex that has a drawing of an upside-down horse apparently falling through space. A "traveling line" sounds good, and would be quite challenging to draw in the way I am imagining it. The tape line around the perimeter would tilt and skew the space, gradually listing and sometimes abruptly lurching, while at the same time making loops and furbelows.

An upside-down horse apparently falling through space doesn't sound so bad, either.