

Loosely hanging appendages: on Rachel Harrison's Perth Amboy at MoMA

The artist believes that meaning accumulates with the amount of things thrown carelessly into a room

by Pac Pobric | 9 September 2016 | The Art Newspaper



A pile of straws and a tin can of salsa next to a reproduction of an Old Master painting are among the many random things lumped together in Rachel Harrison's installation Perth Amboy (2001).

Rachel Harrison is the kind of artist who imagines that anything—literally anything—she touches is made significant. Her sculptures, which she produces with the regularity of one who has no capacity to pause for reflection, are made from all kinds of things because no thing is immune to her charm. One work, for example, is assembled from wood and cement and chicken wire and a video monitor with sewing pins, lottery tickets and a can of lemonade. It is called *Tiger Woods* (2006). Another is made in two parts of two taxidermy chickens, two blobs of cement painted green and red and yellow and blue, two pieces of plywood and two cardboard boxes. The two parts were installed "so you could walk through them" at Harrison's 2007 exhibition at the Migros Museum in Zurich, she later said. These were, she claimed, the exhibition's "gatekeepers."

An artist who makes work like this must think herself untouchable—and not just untouchable, but divine. Consider *Perth Amboy* (2001), her one-work, installation-sized exhibition, which just closed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New

York. In a gallery full of flattened cardboard boxes, Harrison arranged a group of totally incongruous found objects and sculptures: a tin can of salsa next to a postcard-sized reproduction of a Flemish Old Master painting; a Barbie doll sitting in a tiny wheelchair facing a photograph of a ladder; a dingy bust of Marilyn Monroe inside a box on wheels; a pink pedestal holding aviator sunglasses, a Native American figurine and a miniature easel with small picture of a sunset; a group of four toy dalmatians turned toward a crumpled cardboard box; a ceramic figure of an Asian man next to a lumpy blue sculpture; and, most incredibly, a pile of straws.

It is difficult to believe, but apparently true, that this work is borne of religious inspiration. In September 2000, in a working-class section of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Ramona and Marcelino Collado claimed to have been blessed with a visit by the Virgin Mary. The image of the Madonna appeared, they said, in a smudged streak of color on their window on the second floor of an apartment building on Washington Street. The Collados made their residence into a shrine and hundreds of pilgrims gathered in. "Some knelt in the living room to pray beneath a large framed picture of Christ," a journalist wrote in the *New York Times*. "Some said the rosary. Others walked to the window and pressed their hands to the glass." The last gesture, for Harrison, was especially compelling. In 2001, she set up a camera outside the Collados' home and began taking pictures of visitors as they reached toward the apparition.

These photographs of devotion surround the rest of the installation as if in adoration. One picture shows a man or woman, obscured by glare, pressing his or her hands against the window. Another is of a woman holding a child as she does the same. Nineteen other photographs show basically the same thing, some from an oblique angle, some head-on, some with a wide view of this house, others quite tightly cropped.

Harrison has said that she wants to make "shapes that can't be described," which is odd, considering how painless it is to describe her work. It is, indeed, a lazy writer's dream. There is a simple formula any critic can follow to get to the heart of all of her work: here is one thing next to another, atop another, painted this colour, with this photograph or found object nearby. Nor are Harrison's sculptures or drawings or photographs complicated by their titles. That sculpture with the two chickens is called *Claude Levi-Strauss (2007)*, which is simply another loosely hanging appendage.

Harrison's supporters say her work, which is so aggressively ugly, is a polemic against decorum. "One should never overlook an artist who offends middlebrow cosmopolitan... taste", the critic Saul Anton wrote of her work. Anton, in general, is right: we should applaud those artists who expand our palettes. Our tastes are provincial by nature. How many times have we heard that tired phrase, I know what I like! Admirable artists broaden this narrowness. As Clement Greenberg said: "All profoundly original art looks ugly at first"—so ugly, in fact, it often does not look like art at all. This is the story of Modernism. When Duchamp, in 1913, put together

his first readymade from a bicycle wheel and a stool, even he did not consider it a work of art. "It was just a pleasure to have in my room, a pleasant gadget," he later said. To accept the possibility that it was something more, our culture had to undergo what Arthur Danto once called "a revolution in taste."

Yet Harrison's work is only ostensibly an assault on middle-class convention; it is, more profoundly, an assault on intelligence and intelligibility. That tchotchke of those dalmatians is not only ugly, it is senseless, especially across the way from that pile of straws on the floor. By any intuitive measure, it is impossible to picture how such things could be productively related, and Harrison always confirms and never challenges intuition; what you see is what you get, both materially and intellectually. The aesthetic homeliness of her art is also, more deeply, intellectual homeliness, and a reiterative homeliness at that. At its best, her work repeats only what life already teaches: that most things are trivial, that meaning is rare and that relationships do not exist simply because we imagine them to do.

But because the truth is difficult, it is easier to argue that Harrison's art is meaningful than to show the obvious, which is that it is not. Thus gathers a swirl of language around her work to guard it against intuition. Harrison, of course, is the first to speak. With Perth Amboy, she writes: "I was thinking about the idea of projection and blankness, of seeing what you want to see. A colorful splotch [on the Collados' window] was translated into a legible iconic form because someone believed that it could be. Something abstract and immaterial became a representation through a communal leap of faith, and it made the front page of the New York Times."

"Seeing what you want to see" is an instructive phrase; it shows that Harrison feels she has no editorial responsibility whatsoever. She has amassed all these things, now you figure it out. For the broad audiences that come to MoMA from around the world for enrichment, the experience must have been especially frustrating. Surely there must be *something* to this gaggle of stuff in such an important institution? (A guard at the museum told me, "I'm still trying to figure it out.") Harrison's reply is: take a leap of faith into—what? The belief that a schlock bust of Marilyn Monroe and a pile of straws speaks to some kind of truth? Only an intellectual would be happy with such nonsense. "Illusion, delusion and faith meet" in Perth Amboy, Holland Cotter wrote after he saw the work in 2009. "Religion in art, and art as religion. Believing as seeing, rather than the other way around. Such ideas circulate through a piece that, for this artist, has unusual closure and gravity, but is still as light as a play of puns."

This is atypically tortured language for an otherwise perceptive writer, but it is otherwise not atypical. To come to believe that Harrison's work says anything at all, one must inflict real violence on language. Here is how one critic began his review of her 2004 show at the Greene Naftali gallery: "Unlike Rachel Harrison's previous exhibition, this one didn't evade the fact that it was a showroom full of sculptures, autonomous things, standing there in plain view, whether openly embarrassed or

glamorously opaque about their status as aesthetic commodities. Harrison's best works seem to *sculpturize* an ambivalence about the job a work is meant to do: I show myself, you see me, value is in question, *now what?*"

This art and these words deserve each other; they both dissolve meaning into thin air.

In a perverse way, it makes sense that Perth Amboy began with a religious vision. As we must doubt that the Madonna really came to New Jersey, so we must doubt Harrison's work. She gives us little to believe in. But at least on Washington Street in that working-class section of that small city, the imagination of some believers was expanded. "I think most want to believe, that's why we're here," one woman told the New York Times journalist. Another man told him: "Anything is possible if you have faith. If it is true and you've touched it, you've touched something holy, like a relic."

I saw nothing holy take place at MoMA when a man bumped into one of Harrison's cardboard boxes and lazily pushed it back into place. He let out a faint sigh as he did so, shook his head a bit and quietly exited the gallery. I imagine he came to the museum for a dose of beauty, hopeful for a surprise, or, more ambitiously, to have his tastes broadened. Perhaps he even came, as some of us do, looking for a religious experience—I cannot say. But I hope that elsewhere, he found whatever he was looking for.

Rachel Harrison, Perth Amboy, Museum of Modern Art, New York, closed 5 September