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ISSUE



LISA WILLIAMSON

Interview by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Studio Visit Images by Teal Thomsen

“YOU WORK IT OUT IN THE WORK ... THAT’S ONE OF
THE BEST PARTS OF BEING AN ARTIST ... AT THE END OF THE DAY,
YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT.” — LISA WILLIAMSON

Over the past seven or so years that she's been 'on the scene,' I sometimes get the feeling that what Lisa Williamson is really doing through sculpture is dreaming a new, ideal community for herself—a highly social community of perfectly singular objects with a common aesthetic identity and several core convictions: Reduce distraction. Simplify variables to empower them. Refine

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difference and throw it into relief. Be made well and with great care. Amplify graphic and chromatic boldness with formal terseness. When given the chance, go for kinkier. Slightly off is better than not. Disrupt geometries. Inhabit abstraction as a cipher for psychology, a testing ground for behaviors, and a metaphor for bodies. Take lightness and brightness, flirting and frolicking so seriously that joy itself becomes solid, dense, and opaque. Prove over and over again that paradox is richness.

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer: You've recently embarked on a new body of work that both inhabits a new medium (wood) and steps off the wall to occupy free-standing space as sculptures in the round. How have you approached the shift in material and form in terms of your practice's ongoing concerns? I.e., what has the process of hand-carving and the possibilities of wood dictated or influenced?

Lisa Williamson: For some time I had been thinking about what I wanted my new work to be – how I could transition from recent sculptural works that relied on the wall, to a body of work that was truly sculptural and free-standing. I knew that I wanted the work to be made of wood and to have a mass and weight that was real. I didn't want to make the shell of a sculpture but instead to make sculpture that was solid from the inside out. It's almost a conservative approach – an attraction to weight, proportion, color, scale, and material. Wood is an interesting material to work with because it changes over time and while my inclination is to anticipate or direct what happens in my work (and in general) that isn't ever totally possible. I've been thinking a lot about heaviness in terms of obvious physical weight but also psychological or artistic weight – there is a certain type of resonance in something solid. I've also been thinking about verticality which almost lifts or stretches heaviness into something else.

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Anyways, about a year and a half ago I started taking free carving lessons at a park recreation center in La Crescenta, CA. The group was called the Smoky Hollow Carvers Chapter #45 and was mostly made up of retirees and carving enthusiasts. I wanted to learn the basics and showed up for several Saturday morning sessions until I finished carving this small bird that was shaped like a heron or crane. After that I stopped going. My father also moved to California during this time. He used to do a lot of carpentry when he was young, so we've been spending time talking about tools, methods and problem solving. In my studio I began carving small rudimentary models from wood and at the same time making drawings and full-scale models]

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from cardboard. One form would relate to the next, each model would perpetuate another and this animated group of forms began to emerge. With some time I found my footing and now I am just in full scale production mode. It's been a learning curve to say the least.

SLG: Where have the forms come from for these new free-standing works? What other artists or objects, if any, have you been looking at while working on these?

LW: Right now, I'm working on a series of solid wood columns that have been milled, cut, or carved and then painted so that, while the form is the same, the individual works are distinct. The columns are made of pine and stand between 5-foot-4 to 9 feet. They are mostly 12 inches round – tree hugging size. Being vertical and tall, the work feels totemic and I often do refer to them as "totems." In some sense, the columns are meant to address "sculpture in the round" in the most literal way. The scale and proportions of each work relate to myself as well as to architecture. In one sculpture five head-size holes are cut through the wood; another has a series of eight fist-size holes; in another a long seam is sliced through the center. I imagine this new work to be almost like a forest of objects, sculptures that relate directly to the body. To be able to fit your head or arm inside of a sculpture, to extend or look through an otherwise solid object – that sort of momentum or potential feels important.

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I've been looking at a lot of different artworks and objects while working on this project — Japanese totems; Oceania slit gongs; German Expressionist woodcuts and sculptures; contemporary works like Gilbert & George's "The Singing Sculpture" as well as their series of drawings "The General Jungle" and Isa Genzken's totemic sculptures as well as her "Ellipsoids" and "Hyperbolos"; and then random objects like shrubs, barbells, prayer wheels, even fingers start to look like columns or totems. If you choose to work with a simple form you start to see it everywhere.

SLG: Consistently, in this new body of work and in past work, the abstract forms you construct radiate so much personality. Do you think of your objects (sculptural and flat) as having personalities or character?

LW: Definitely. I like the idea of pressing personality into an object, animating something inherently still. There is a certain physical resonance and material ambiguity in many of the objects I make, and I think this helps the work feel somewhat tangible or human. Writing is also an important part of my work and often runs alongside a series, text pieces sort of bouncing off the objects. In this space a lot of humor, poetics, and general strangeness can play out.

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SLG: You've developed a really playful yet distilled, even austere formal sensibility that is very distinctive to your work (and which feels of a piece with your bubbly-yet-meditative personality). I think of linear forms characterized by bumps, kinks, wiggles, bulges, holes, calibrated asymmetry, and strategic irregularity. Can you talk about how you pair form with color, how shape and palette marry? Does one grow out of the other? Offset or balance the other?

LW: Color and form are sorted out simultaneously in the studio. A lot of unexpected things happen when working through an object or series of objects. Intuition and play are a part of the work – you can definitely tell when something lands. But I also enjoy experimenting and putting in the time to figure out the 'right' color or to come up with a pairing that resonates. Many of the forms I use come from simple line drawings. I'm interested in how the work shifts between flat and dimensional and in how I can manipulate or transform a material. There are these jumps that happen in the studio – a lot of shifting. From drawing or folding paper, to making models in different materials, blowing something up, scaling it back down, all of this ends up finally balancing out in a work. Then it's about seeing how one form relates to another and following this logic until it exhausts itself or starts another train of thought.

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SLG: You mentioned that writing is a parallel pursuit to your art making. How do you approach writing and relate it to your objects? Do you have a literary work (or works) in mind that will extend out of or respond to these new totems?

LW: There is a book of writings that I'm gradually working on called "Amazon" that relates to the totems and some of the other new work in my studio. Ideally, it will come together this fall. I've been collecting ideas and titles for texts I'd like to write and have always wanted to publish a collection of writing. For me, relating writing to object-making is a natural way to delineate or organize a series and also helps me to think through the work. Usually, towards the end of a series or when working towards an exhibition, I will decide on some sort of literary form, whether a diagram, poem, artist book, or whatever. This part of the work is hugely satisfying and helps remind me of why I make art in the first place. Plus, it gives me another opportunity to press some of the weird, tangential thinking that is embedded in an object or set of objects.

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SLG: The large scale of your totems coincided with the recent move to your new (shared) studio. Can you talk about how the environment in which you work influences the objects you make and, related to that, how living in L.A. and its community of artists impacts your practice?

LW: Our studio is in Sun Valley, just outside of L.A. proper and, while this isn't very far, the location feels detached and autonomous. Having space has been really good for me and the work. Los Angeles has a lot going on in terms of an art community and it is great to have access to so many solid exhibitions, institutions, artists, and friends. But in terms of making my work, I feel like things shifted for the better once I had more physical and mental space. That seems normal enough! I love driving AWAY from L.A. towards my studio. Our neighbors are mostly fabricators and suppliers for different industries and I appreciate the classic 9am-5pm Monday thru Friday demeanor in the area. Plus there are mountains and lots of random eccentric places in the Valley to explore. It's great all around.

SLG: It's interesting that you highlight the importance of mental/physical space and getting distance as an artist, where your practice is at these days. I find myself thinking that more and more — that an age of mental clutter calls for and makes necessary the clearing of space as a conscious act, pushing muscularly aside.

LW: I think so. It's interesting to think about how artists, both historical and contemporary, have dealt with 'mental clutter.' Ideally, you carve out whatever space you need so that a distinct or singular language can take form. You work it out in the work. I guess, for me, that's one of the best parts of being an artist and also one of the hardest to remember — at the end of the day, you can do whatever you want.