To Sleep, Perchance To Dream

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the devaluation of monumentality identified by architects in the mid-twentieth century, this paper examines how the reduction of form throughout the history of architecture and how such reduction affects space framed by such architecture. By applying the malleability of symbolic meaning to a closed set of symbols, the nature of the set is re-made and subsequently manipulated to theoretically set the stage for a romantic narrative. A formal interest in reproduction and repetition serves a conceptual interest in allusion of forms in the creation of the illusion of narrative and romance.
TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Ambiguity is the fountainehead of Romance. When thinking about the purposed mystery and allure of Romance, one can imagine, or recognize it’s feeling before its image comes to mind. There is an assumed infinity behind the notion of Romance—a boundlessness that cannot obey time and space, which defies logic. But with no rules and no logic, how does one pursue or create Romance? Ay, there’s the rub. Such a pursuit is the core of the Game of Love. But what is a good tale of Romance without a properly set stage? Rather, with regard to the Game of Love, one needs a proper Arena to play in.

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN AN OBJECT NAMED AND HOW IT FUNCTIONS

“Expression--of what? The Parthenon did not serve the same purpose as its wooden ancestor. An airline terminal does not serve the same purpose as the Parthenon. Every form has its own meaning. Every man creates his meaning and form and goal. Why is it so important—what others have done? Why does it become sacred by the mere fact of not being your own? … Why is everything twisted out of all sense to fit everything else? There must be some reason. I don't know. I've never known it.”

—Howard Roark in Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead

The focus of this section is on the perpetuation and saturation of architectural forms in other media, such as painting and sculpture, as a mode of decoration but also a method for imparting meaning through visual reference. For the purpose of this overall statement, I first identify the most ubiquitous architectural forms as the column, the arch and the plinth. Second, I reclassify the use of the term ‘monument’ to not refer to a specific commemorative structure but instead to refer to these ubiquitous architectural forms listed just now. The purpose of shifting the use of monument as a label is to
connote that these forms have reached a saturation point within visual culture where they now have an inherent self-reflexivity: rather than point to a specific instance of their use, they refer to or commemorate themselves.

In Anthony Vidler’s *The Architectural Uncanny*, he points to this issue of structuring meaning through form. Although he identifies the meaninglessness of material as a complicit factor in this issue making his argument applicable to all of the material—or plastic—arts, his discussion is geared primarily toward the inability of any architectural practice to effectively create buildings that are meaningful. Vidler turns to the philosopher Georg Hegel to explain the void that arises when architecture seeks meaning. He synthesizes Hegel’s argument that, “The very act of impressing meaning on meaningless material, the fact that, however embedded in form, this meaning will remain always external to the material, gives a particular instability to the artistic process,” (Vidler 123). Capitalizing on the instability inherent within constructed meaning, I make work to engage with the space where the cube begins to recall a building but not a specific source. As an example, an ionic column is not identifiable as part of the Parthenon’s colonnade although it could be. The ionic column is a natural feature of countless structures from historical monuments to institutional buildings (banks, libraries, museums) and suburban homes. Such lack of specificity of the column as an object that populates our modern physical and visual landscape has led to the development of its heightened virtue as well as a vagueness as to its function—no longer a structural necessity, its use has evolved past its original function. It continues to find its way into arenas because the ideal Arena is virtuous (as is the column; aspirational) setting up the players for future greatness.
Formally, as I execute my work I attempt to condense the volume of information available in the physical realm into a digestible dosage. In his book *The Information*, author James Gleick makes a strong case for a certain amount of economy when communicating—pragmatism and efficiency, however, are not governing rules of art (Gleick 42). While resplendent, cacophonous detail is often the norm for art, the purpose of reducing this detail is to point to its ancillary nature. On one hand, that a building or structure is recognizable as such, with or without its decorative features, services this notion that adornment is merely a surface treatment. On the other hand, that a geometric volume—a cube for instance—can be embellished with architectural detail and effectively replicate the visage of a specific building calls into question the importance of surface decoration. Through formal condensation or essentialization of detail I seek to
locate the symbolic representation of whatever object at hand (‘object’ used here as a
blanket term referring to any number of possible things from buildings to chains).

In my work there is a treatment of interchangeability between monuments and
material objects, which relates to the summary given by Philip Shaw in his essay,
“Modernism and the Sublime”, of philosopher Julia Kristeva’s argument concerning the
relationship between the abject object and the uncanny. Shaw writes: “the abject is
related to the uncanny by virtue of its capacity to exceed the distinctions between the
subject and the object…the abject is a reminder of the primal repression preceding the
subject’s entry into the symbolic order,” (Shaw). The notion of the abject object that
Shaw and Kristeva locate in their discussion of the modernist sublime motivates my own
repression of detail in my work. I acknowledge that for form to reach the status of
symbol, a certain amount of generalization is necessary in order to achieve universality
(an inherent characteristic of symbol). Similarly, Vidler identifies the same generalization
of form within Hegel’s discussion of architecture; however, in regard to architecture and
by extension material objects, the inability to have inherent meaning leads to a linguistic
issue in my consideration of objects as symbols. I recognize the ability for a material

Carla Steppan, *Marble Dust Veil (Constituent Deconstruction)*, 2015. Monotype print, powdered marble, rabbit skin glue on canvas over panel.
object to have an iconographic representation (which all objects have) that is separate from any symbolic identity (which all objects do not have). Meaning separates the two: on one hand, the iconographic has universal recognizability and on the other hand, the symbolic has universal significance, or value. The naïve aspiration to find any object’s iconographic description and turn it into a symbol parallels the romantic aspiration to shift the existing rock-hard virtuous associations of an already scripted visual language. I am considering the cognitive distance between an object named, or just recognized, and how it functions.

A FOREBODING SENSE OF FAMILIARITY

“He dreamed that he was going into an empty house with white walls and that he was upset by the burden of being the first human being to enter it. In the dream he remembered that he had dreamed the same thing the night before and on many nights over the past years and he knew that the image would be erased from his memory when he awakened because that recurrent dream had the quality of not being remembered except within the dream itself. A moment later, indeed, when the barber knocked at the workshop door, Colonel Aureliano Buendia awoke with the impression that he had fallen asleep involuntarily for a few seconds and that he had not had time to dream anything.”
—Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude

I focus on objects that exist past the expiration of their symbolic identity, for instance the ‘monuments’ I introduced earlier, whose symbolic function is now trapped in self-reference rather than any initially intended importance. Instead of referring to the symbolic nature of such monuments I will refer to their capacity as signals, alluding to their emptiness as containers for meaning. In my work, the use of non-distinct monuments and commonplace material objects creates the illusion of familiarity. An
illusion that has “recall” but is rendered nonspecific or non-referential through a lack of detail, a distortion of form and/or scale, or an disjunction in the logic of each formal reference. In my calling upon the viewer’s capacity to recall the monuments I have isolated, I also call upon the broader hierarchy of the viewer’s frame of reference, an intentionally western hierarchy. Doing so seeks to prompt consideration of how such a hierarchy of meaning is formed, and how it is prejudiced to serve the viewer’s own tastes and those of an existing art cannon. Such a realization could be foreboding.

The notion of signaling an expired significance is intentionally elusive, feeding further into and conflating the naive sincerity of symbolism and the superficiality of meaning in art. For the purpose of pinning down illusion, Vidler provides a useful example of such post-symbolic forms in the red ‘standing stones’ of Cannareggio. He discusses them as a labyrinth that is no longer inhabitable in order to illustrate the devaluation of meaning in architecture. He writes, “it is the mark of their posthumous existence that they have already symbolized, have already been occupied. The entire history of architecture is implied in absentia, so to speak, in their resistance to meaning. Which does not lead to the conclusion that they therefore mean nothing; for precisely in
the rejection of history, and the defined moments in history rejected, signification is retrieved, but not now in its attempted fullness,” (Vidler 124). Vidler makes the important distinction that while the posthumous existence of the symbol-turned-signal does not imply that the signal has no meaning, only that its meaning is markedly removed from a previous era.

Compared to other realists of his era, painter Andrew Wyeth distances himself: “My people, my objects, breathe in a different way; there’s another core—an excitement that’s definitely abstract. My God, when you really begin to peer into something, a simple object, and realize that profound meaning of that thing—if you have no emotion about it, there’s no end,” (Meryman 45). Wyeth understands that there is power in an object named outside of its capacity to fulfill its intended function. For my work, it is this power that gives objects the capacity to prompt recognition, to recall a past encounter, to drive a narrative. The key to accessing this power is to hold back on the description of setting—a removal of sorts—and allow space for the viewer to fill in his or her own detail. In essence, to leave circumstance ambiguous allows for the mind to reel and capitalizes on the innate nature of humankind to fill in the blanks. Ambiguity is key.


This section might as well be titled “AMBIGUITY IS KEY” because it is ambiguity that makes the moment with a foreboding sense of familiarity at once
“familiar” in that it is similar if not the same to something you’ve seen before all the while being “foreboding” in its distance from something namable, in its resistance to neatly fitting into a hierarchy of meaning that has developed in part through recognition.

THE ARENA & THE GAME

“But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?”
—Romeo From Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet

An issue arises where there is a necessary lack of specificity in order to visually describe an object (aside from replication) yet, a certain level of description is necessary for that object to be identified as belonging to its own categorical existence. Beyond communicating identity all detail is ancillary but tends towards specificity, which breaks down the romance that surrounds ambiguous objects. Wyeth again testifies, “I have such a strong romantic fantasy about things—and that’s what I paint, but come to it through realism. If you don’t back up your dreams with truth, you have a very round-shouldered art,” (Meryman 45). The game is to find the balance of romance and reality, to find a space where both can exist.

In naming and reusing a closed set of monuments whose iconographic existence is on the order of highest recognition yet whose symbolic function has expired and now serves a signal of each individual post-meaning, self-referential meaning, I create my own personal lexicon of symbols. Taking advantage of the identifiable nature of these symbols I have chosen for myself, I use them to construct arenas that access real, civic environments in a liminal manner to subvert expectation or limit the ability to fully place/access an implied narrative. I seek to set up spaces that function as arenas that inherently have a quantifiable level of recognizability (familiarity) from the forms while
capitalizing on the nonspecificity of the structures. Although Wyeth’s paintings are constructed in the language of realism, author Corn points out, “He rarely lets us glimpse the multitude of private associations any single painting holds for him, letting them simply suffuse a picture with a general flavor. Like Picasso, he has created a veritable private iconography, hard to penetrate and impossible to fully comprehend,” (Corn 152).

Similar to Wyeth in his development of a personal lexicon of symbols are surrealists Leonora Carrington and René Magritte. The air of realism that motivates the works of Wyeth and Magritte is much more interesting to me than the surrealist language that codes works by Leonora Carrington. My interest in Carrington is in her capacity to expand her own lexicon beyond painting and onto the stage. It is her method of spatial arrangement, both on stage and on canvas, and the theatricality of her work that I look to in creating arenas to frame narrative.
Leonora Carrington, Pénélope, 1957. Play by Leonora Carrington
Staged by Alejandro Jodorowsky in Mexico City; Set design and
costumes designed by Carrington.

By reducing (via repetition, reproduction, forced redundancy, etc.) these symbols
in my work they take on a new function and effectively become commonplace objects
populating or cutting out space. Usurping the sacredness of symbol is allows for the
symbol to once again be useful rather than becoming stagnant in its own contained
meaning/sacredness. The reason symbols are effective is because they are – they take up
space and they make you recognize; in this they have agency—here I use them as objects:
mutable, transformable, casual and quiet in their presence and they in turn come into their
own capacity as narrative protagonists, activating the arenas I construct.

There is an inherent futility involved in both attempting to construct spaces that
are only partially accessible and in attending to these spaces once created. Such futility is
a source of tension, or resistance, against which to strategize. Strategy is the underlying
structure to the compositions I create—how can I assemble my symbols into a new
space? How do I create a mood? How do I incorporate references without making the
work a one-liner? This line of interrogation is fueled by the romanticism surrounding any
sort of aspirational endeavor, arguably a commonality among all figurative art and even
more so for abstract art. In essence, framing narrative is a strategic game as constructing
romance is a game. Fortunately both narrative and romance are instances where
balancing realism with abstraction, detail with ambiguity, are strategic devices to organize objects and in doing so, a world on one’s own arena is made.

Carla Steppan, *The Final Stage/Collapse (Romeo & Juliet)*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 72 x 58 in.
WORKS CITED


LIST OF FIGURES


Carla Steppan, *A Basis for Civic Infrastructure (NYCDPR Plinth Study)*, 2015. UV Ultra and color copy paper, PVA, book tape, Rives BFK.

Carla Steppan, *Marble Dust Veil (Constituent Deconstruction)*, 2015. Monotype print, powdered marble, rabbit skin glue on canvas over panel.


René Magritte, *The Human Condition*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 81 x 100 cm.

René Magritte, c. 1935. Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm.

Leonora Carrington, *Pénélope*, 1957. Play by Leonora Carrington Staged by Alexandro Jodorowsky in Mexico City; Set design and costumes designed by Carrington.

Carla Steppan, *The Final Stage/Collapse (Romeo & Juliet)*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 72 x 58 in.