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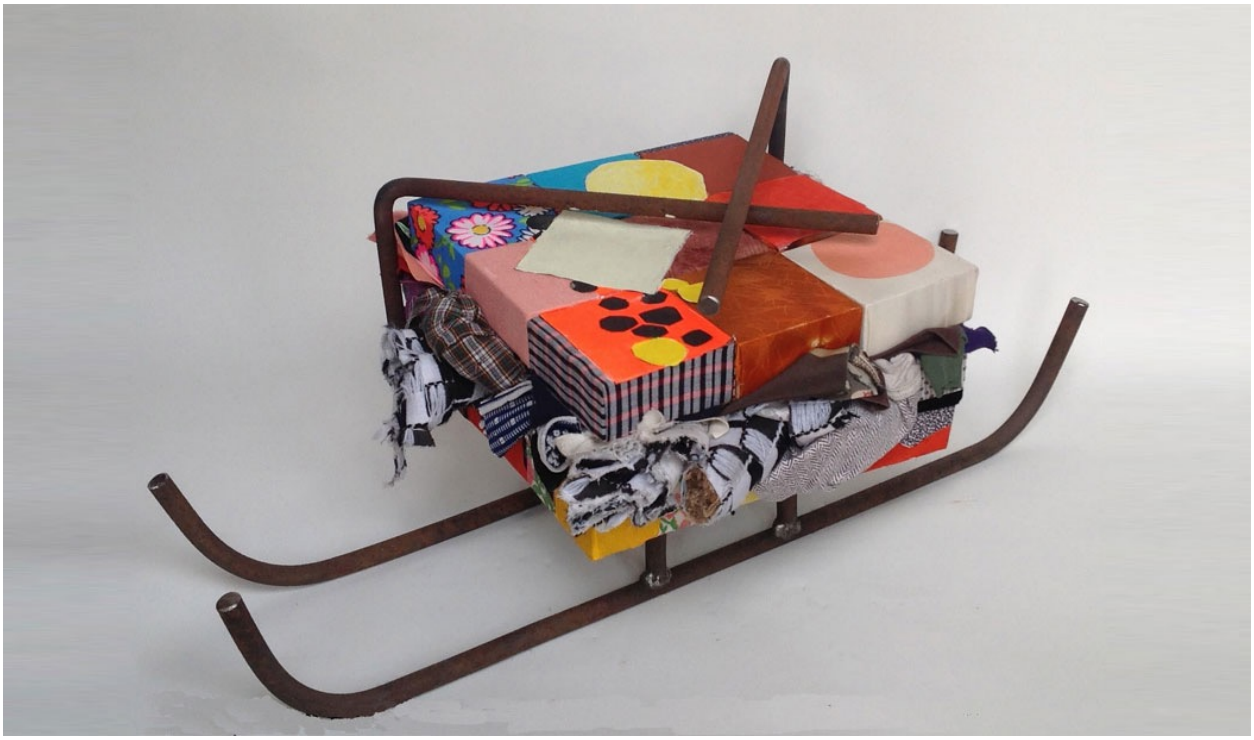
Skirting the Square: Nancy Shaver Breaks Boundaries with Blocks

BY JULIET HELMKE, MODERN PAINTERS | OCTOBER 16, 2015



Nancy Shaver's "To Richie Rich #2," 2014.
(Nancy Shaver and Soloway)

“I enjoy a little bit of perversity,” confesses Nancy Shaver, who has spent her four-decade career avoiding what is comfortable, either for herself—avoiding the risk of complacency with any one visual style—or those around her. After all, she points out, “artmaking is difficult; why shouldn’t it be difficult for the viewer, too?” Perversity gets a bad rap. Now synonymous with having unnatural sexual proclivities (which is still but a slice of the wider definition), the word is rarely used outside this context, save for the occasional “perversion of justice.” Arising from the Latin perversus, meaning “to turn around,” it has always had a sinister implication. To be “obstinate in opposing what is right, reasonable, or accepted” is its definition. And while we are used to being challenged in art, Shaver’s brand of contrarianism cuts against the usual grain.

In an exhibition of her work on view through October 25 at the Aldrich Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, a small chair, covered in a dusty cerulean patterned fabric cups between its armrests one of the artist’s block works—a grid of nine four-by-four-inch squares of wood

wrapped in various fabrics. Most of the blocks are blue, brighter than the blue seat that holds it. Is it one work or two? The answer is not so simple: “The block piece can go on the wall or on the chair. And if it goes on the wall, the orientation has to be reversed,” Shaver explains. With something like a friendly antagonism she argues, why can’t a work of art change after it’s finished? Be a single work sometimes, two, at others, and upside down, depending on the setting?

“It’s that perverse love that comes from my first days of making assemblages,” she recalls. “Art dealers would come and see them, and be practically out the door before they were in because I would say, “Oh, if you don’t like this, we can put this there, we can change this.” It wasn’t what anyone was used to hearing, but it didn’t make the artist change tack. “I love working with that kind of flexibility, creating confusion,” she says.

Sometimes what she loves to create is just a modicum of visual discomfort. In A Hybrid, 2014, a large decorative mirror, about three-and-a-half feet in diameter and shaped like a cogwheel, is flanked by diamond-shaped block compositions in muted fabric that have wavy blue and brown paper cutouts bridging the surface, and oblong protrusions from the edge that mimic the mirror’s shape. The mirror itself is a fascinating, hideous object, made up of embodiments of the various astrological characters—rams, crabs, centaurs—in heavily sculpted relief and painted imitation bronze. It could be plucked out of an overdecorated Greek taverna. The mirror came into Shaver’s life when she acquired it for her secondhand store, Henry, a mainstay of the Hudson, New York, antiquing circuit. Having hung it in the window, she soon noticed that it was getting a lot of attention, and not from the usual customer searching for a rustic table or an heirloom quilt, but from the teenage crowd and town loiterers, drawn to its swamp of fantastic figures as well as its comical ugliness. “That’s when it became interesting to me,” she says. “I wondered why people walking past on the street had this fascination with it.” It represents an idea of grandiosity and opulent decoration that it fails to embody. “As soon as I started thinking about it, it moved from my store and my wanting to sell it and get money for it, to wanting to make other people think about it,” she recalls. So she added her squares. “I thought, yes, there might be people who would like my diamonds, and there are people who would love the mirror, but now I’ve annoyed them all.”

As with the mirror, the objects that end up in Shaver’s work often start as acquisitions for Henry, which she has run for the past 16 years. There’s no telling when it might happen, or what it might happen to, but a shift takes place in which a curio that was at first just interesting for its physical form now holds something more potent. That’s when it moves from the store into her studio. The store in fact grew out of the artist’s superabundant collections, which had begun to take over her home. It’s an urge she has had since childhood, amassing small piles of things with visual qualities that appeal to her. From this fascination her initial interest in art sprang forth, suggesting that visual pleasure is available all around—not just in galleries but in the texture, color, and form of everyday objects, and that these humble items, too, constitute works of art.

An early supporter of this interest was Walker Evans, whom she met while auditing his photography class at Yale. It was the early 1970s and she had moved to New Haven with then husband and prominent ready-made artist Haim Steinbach, who has credited Shaver’s sensibility for decorative objects (and their trips to flea markets) for his own celebrated brand of assemblages. This was only a few years before Evans’s death, when he had returned with vigor to photographing signs, posters, and the language that pervaded the streets. Shaver had taken

up photography as a student at the Pratt Institute in New York City and was making images of cast-off items and detritus. Evans became an early fan, and soon they became junking partners, Evans relying on Shaver for help cutting down and stealing the signs that captured his fancy. He also made portraits of Shaver with the new camera he was experimenting with, the then innovative Polaroid SX-70. “He was an amazing collector of the vernacular: old squashed cans and beach artifacts and so on,” recalls Shaver. “It was absolutely the best education.” Evans’s tutelage allowed her the confidence to engage with the objects she was collecting—learning from an artist hailed for his sharp renderings of the commonplace and scenes that were not, at that time, considered worthy of photographic enshrinement. “I think I get this word—perversity—from my relationship with Evans,” Shaver says, “when there’s a sharpness there, when you really like and respect difficulty.” As a young woman from a rural, working-class background, Shaver found the road to artmaking intimidating: “I wanted to paint, but I just couldn’t. I didn’t feel I had the skills, the control, the understanding.” The history of art, she notes, “basically belongs to men and fabulous artists with fabulous egos.” Photography was the mass medium for the common man, and allowed her an entryway. Robert Gober, who became friends with Shaver while a student at Middlebury College in Vermont, where she was a teacher, included a series of her early photographs of kids’ thrift-store clothing in a 1999 exhibition at Matthew Marks gallery in New York; they were shown again in his 2014 Museum of Modern Art retrospective.

Photography gave her a start, but it was sculpture that allowed the artist a more charged method with which to pursue the aim that had grown out of those earliest works and that has since become her overarching theme: collapsing the structure that places fine art above decoration or what is considered lowbrow, kitsch, naive, or outsider. The shift came when she started stuffing parts of her collections into frames made initially for her photographs: “I was very interested in trying to break into the photograph, putting other things around it.” This gave way to working with assemblage and found objects with painted incursions.

Shaver’s next distinct visual change began some 20 years ago, in the mess of her studio, when she picked up some pieces of wood that were lying around and began to cover them with fabric. She had acquired some old kimonos and had been pulling them apart, fascinated by their traditional construction. “I realized that blocks were a perfect combination for me of the figurative and the abstract together, in the boundaries that their shape sets up and also because there’s just infinite possibilities,” she notes. These days, she uses mostly cheaply manufactured material, the kind in clothes found at Walmart and other big-box stores, where she is “nonplussed by the paltry choices available to women, and in a way, the lack of any choice being given to them.” Shaver compares it to the food industry, “which since the ’70s has put more and more sugar in their products. Now, many women who are raising their families and working at low-end jobs are constricted to a lifestyle that’s unhealthy, where it’s hard not to be overweight and what they have to wear is not very helpful.” She’s smuggling lowly material into the realm of high art, not so much in an attempt to elevate it but to put consumers of high culture in a situation where, in front of a work of fine art, they are also obliged to consider what is created for visual pleasure in the mass market. “The fabric leads me to one of those conversations that I really enjoy. And then my thought is, I want to make it beautiful.” A new body of work uses leopard-skin prints—a ubiquitous design that she loves because of its ability to cross boundaries, a pattern that is readily available and has the same meaning at the high end of the fashion spectrum as the low.

Though bent on disruption, Shaver makes works that— in their clash of color, pattern, and recognizable versus abstract form—are full of material beauty. A new stacked-block work with attached metal feet that are reminiscent of sled runners is playful, as is a planter frame stuffed with a block composition and bunches of fabric, mounted to the wall, titled Sausage. The artist shows that small works can have a big impact and that they can engage with social concerns while being formally attractive.

Shaver takes delight in uniting things that seem at odds. Her solo exhibition at the Aldrich presents much more than her work alone. On the entrance wall, her pieces are interspersed between found photographs and objects, like handmade rope, a Victorian vase, and a decorative kitchen ornament. All are credited to unknown makers. There are also works by other, named artists: A whimsical piece by Shaver's husband, junk- metal sculptor John Jackson, Banjo Man with Necktie; a B. Wurtz assemblage; a small painting by Tracy Miller; and a rug, yarn, and painting composition from local Hudson celebrity Earl Swanigan. Upstairs, photos by Evans as well as textiles by designer and artist Sonia Delaunay frame the artist's work. The show abounds with other works of art, included because of the conversation they stoke with Shaver's own, and each artist, known or unknown, famous or not, is given equal weight. In a similar vein, an exhibition currently on view at Soloway in Brooklyn, initially intended as a solo show, features Shaver's collaboration with Emi Winter, and includes selections from other artists Shaver feels are deserving of wider attention. "Because my work was going up at the Aldrich, I felt I didn't really need to have a show of my work at this point." Artists who spurn the spotlight in favor of giving attention to others are few and far between. But this one has never stuck to conventions: "Challenge is always valuable, and keeps you thinking and interested and not passive." She sets up that challenge not only for herself but for all who come in contact with her work, and she takes distinct pleasure in the confusion and healthy annoyance she has created along the way.

A version of this article appears in the October 2015 issue of Modern Painters.