

SUSAN YORK: NEW GRAPHITE SCULPTURE AND DRAWINGS

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TAKE THAT, FERMAT. We don't have to turn to the terse equation of Pierre de Fermat, scribbled in the margin of an ancient Greek mathematical tract, to make the case for the complexity of simple abstraction. Euclid's plane geometry will do for that. Or the plane geometry of art's primary forms.

The current show of graphite sculpture and drawings by Susan York is a reprise of the visual conceit behind her drawings in a joint show with Wes Mills at James Kelly Contemporary last year. What's different here is the actual presence of the sculptural counterparts to York's graphite drawings of these objects: smooth, carbon-black, solid-graphite rectilinear slabs, blocks, and beams weighing from 300 to 500 pounds each. What's new in the visual conceit itself is an extension of its earlier Minimalist tack in the placement of the graphite forms. A typical deployment in earlier installations (e.g. the *Graphite Rooms* in Chicago in 2004, the Lannan installation in 2008) had the rectilinear solids set on the gallery floor like sculpture bases, with the smaller slabs mounted on the wall, and the tall rectilinear beams (six feet and higher) either attached flush with the wall like pilasters or suspended from the ceiling—in both instances ending just inches above the gallery floor. The visual conceit is built upon the resulting “grounded versus floating” ambivalence—in the word's root sense of denoting a divergence of forces, conveyed here by the location, inches off the ground, of the graphite solids. The virtual suspension of weighty relief slabs and wall pilasters—and the actual suspension of a central half-ton beam from the ceiling—appear to defy a common adherence to gravity that should otherwise be reinforced by the ponderous density of the graphite.

What is new, then, in the visual conceit here is a subtle yet transparent inversion of that formal, illusive stratagem. In *Untitled (Bisecting wedge)*, a long 500-pound block of solid graphite some nine feet from the floor projects from both sides of a free-standing wall that divides the gallery space into two areas. The effect is of a massive slab that appears to pierce a wall—we assume it is actually two halves attached to the opposite sides. But the *Bisecting wedge* title is a complicit misnomer, misdirecting the viewer to read the piece as cut in half and mounted on opposite sides of the gallery wall, when in fact a hydraulic lift was used to raise the single quarter-ton slab to a point where it is “wedged” in the wall built around it, and projects into both spaces.

In its own way, *Bisecting wedge* supports the same notion of space occupied in the exhibit by earlier work. Both 72" x 10" x 10" *Corner Columns* (2008) belie the designation of these beams as “columns” by being, in effect, flat-sided pilasters—rectangular piers, engaged to a wall, treated architecturally as columns—at the same time as they perversely affirm that identity by their virtual suspension off the gallery floor, thus disclosing the purely visual function of pilasters that only mimic the structural support role of the columns. The *Bisecting wedge* piece only appears to mimic penetration of both sides of the gallery wall dividing the two spaces—thus unifying them—when it is in fact traversing it. And, by formal association with *Bisecting wedge*, the solid graphite piece high up on a wall in the adjacent space—attached by bolts and extending fifteen inches from the wall like some rogue protruding ceiling joist—impishly insinuates its opposite projection into Charlotte Jackson's gallery

on the other side of the wall. Both earlier and current graphite sculptures succeed, by diverse stratagems, in asserting the sense of an immediate, literal space which they inhabit.

Diverse yet devious stratagems: A strict constructionist view of the legacy of Minimalist art might find York's solid graphite objects to be antithetic to Minimalist principles. York's graphite modules operate apart from any grid. Their willful placement, ending inches from the floor or wedged high up on a gallery wall, are unabashedly illusive and expressive. While somehow they achieve the kind of literal, “installation” space sought by the likes of Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre, it can be argued that York's self-effacing, solid graphite medium abets the illusive ambivalence of the objects and thus suborns the installation's literal space in the service of some allusive content. That should banish York's approach to the *piu grassa* post-Minimalist aesthetic of Lucy Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction*.

So be it. The argument over Minimalist authenticity is moot here—perhaps anywhere. What Donald Judd sought in his box-like forms of stainless steel or aluminum arranged in grid-inferring rows is what every new movement affirms as the aim of art making: to produce work that is engaging, or “interesting,” as he called it in his 1965 “Specific Objects” essay. By “interesting” he meant “aggressive and powerful,” while the self-effacing, hard-edged structures of reluctant Minimalist conscript Agnes Martin sought instead to lighten weight and dismantle power. Minimalist or not, York's graphite sculpture and drawings, quiet and compelling, are in good company.

—RICHARD TOBIN



Susan York, *Untitled (Bisecting wedge)*, solid graphite, 2010