



1.-5. "setting" for A. Pomodoro, 2006, detail (Courtesy of the Artist, maccarone inc., and Galerie Dennis Kimmerich)

Carol Bove

"setting" for A. Pomodoro

July 21 through October 1, 2006

WorkSpace at the Blanton

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If we think of the events, beliefs, and experiences of the past as material, then history is most certainly Carol Bove’s primary medium. Since graduating from New York University in 2000, Bove has become known for a diverse body of work that includes haunting ink on vellum drawings of images culled from magazines of the 1960s and 1970s as well as elegant sculptures and installations that double as highly personalized archives of a period known to the collective imagination as the Sixties.

For her exhibition at the Blanton, Bove has further synchronized her interests in history and sculpture by creating two miniature sculpture gardens, which were inspired by encounters with the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, designed by Philip Johnson in 1953. These depart from her other installations in the degree of their abstraction and the assertiveness of their physical presence. While all of Bove’s works address the viewer visually and intellectually, the two at the Blanton are also phenomenological exercises, engaging the eye and mind via the body. They signal a shift in the scope of her previous historical investigations as well. No longer confining herself to the 1960s and 1970s, the artist has broadened her perspective to encompass the whole of the 20th century, all the while remaining attached to the period that initially sparked her curiosity. Indeed, insofar as a sculpture by the Italian artist Arnaldo Pomodoro serves as the physical and thematic anchor for the larger of the two installations, 1963 (the sculpture’s approximate date) functions as the pivot around which its historical timeline revolves. Everything in the installation projects forward or backwards from this point in history. (The fact that Bove shares her exhibition with another artist testifies to two other defining features of her work: first, its generosity to the ideas and forms of other creative minds—Bove’s collaborators, as it were—and second, the modesty and temperance of its authorial voice.)

Bove’s two sculpture gardens narrate a history of 20th-century art, but they do so in a way that re-enchants this familiar story.

First, they privilege intuition over facticity and strict rationality. Here we find Bove sifting through the past in an organic fashion, sensitive to moments of connectivity and repetition, responsive to instances where the teleological view of art historical development stutters. Perhaps most importantly, Bove’s sculpture gardens proceed by allusion and association thanks to the individual objects displayed within them. Besides the Pomodoro sculpture, these include pieces of steel, driftwood, and foam; irregular lumps of wax; peacock feathers; railroad ties; Plexiglas and concrete cubes; square tiles made of concrete and bronze; and brass plinths that form open rectangles. The artist has said that she has a “sense of people [being] able to see through time by having physical contact with old objects. [Colin Wilson] calls it ‘psychometry.’” And indeed, psychometry is very much at play in Bove’s sculpture gardens, whose individual elements incite both the memory and fantasy of the viewer, raising the specter of different artists, movements, and even particular works of art. More specifically, these “ambiance cues,” as Bove calls them, represent forms that are associated with the Surrealists and Constructivists of the early to mid-20th century but that were revisited by artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s as well.

There is a third chapter to the art historical narrative conveyed by Bove’s installations: a poster the artist designed to accompany, and comment upon, the exhibition as a whole. On one side is a grainy reproduction of a relief sculpture (1958-1964) by the Surrealist-turned-Constructivist artist Charles Biederman; on the other is an excerpt from a 1963 essay, in which Biederman analyzes the significance

of the sphere, fundamental (in his view) to both art and nature. The poster thus returns the viewer to the central motif of the Pomodoro sculpture, a globe whose “skin” has been removed to reveal a chaotic assembly of marks, incisions, and forms. In this way, the poster completes the graceful circularity of Bove’s project.

One of the distinguishing features of Bove’s work is its tendency to saturate objects and materials with an abundance of meaning and historical weight. Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Larry Bell, Anne Truitt, and John McCracken haunt both of the installations at the Blanton, as do their predecessors who experimented with geometric abstraction and Constructivist principles in the earlier part of the century. Surrealism, as it was practiced before and after World War II by Max Ernst and Joan Miró, is present here, too. Allusions are made to Constantin Brancusi, Alexander Calder, and Mark di Suvero, while Alberto Giacometti is granted two doppelgängers. Bove has endowed the peacock feathers that appear throughout the exhibition with particular communicative weight. Here she weaves together elements from personal, ancient, cultural, and art historical narratives, including the story of Io, relayed by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, Ernst’s painted alter-ego, *Loplop*, and Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations for the 1894 edition of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*. The feathers also have bearing on the 1960s: Beardsley was the subject of renewed enthusiasm during this period, while a contemporaneous trend in men’s fashion was designated the Peacock Revolution.

Many of the quixotic protagonists that populate Bove’s sculpture gardens are vaguely anthropomorphic in scale, while others are endowed with expressive, poignant forms that allow them to function as sites of empathetic identification on the part of the viewer. Exacerbating the anthropomorphism of these objects are the platforms (strongly reminiscent of stages or theater settings) on which they are displayed. The “choreography” that takes place on these two stages exemplifies Bove’s environmental approach to

art, which is nourished by her study of interior design and architecture. The artist orchestrates colors, forms, materials, and objects in order to generate a subtle rhythm—a sense of variety within harmony, a sense of repetition punctuated by moments of surprise, incongruity, and even the occasional “flaw”—that alternately arrests and then releases the eye. In expanding this rhythm to encompass the whole of the exhibition, Bove has not only synchronized the works of art with the gallery in which they are installed, she has transformed what was initially a reticent white cube into a space infused with sensuousness, human warmth, and subtle psychological undercurrents.

While registering the movement of (art) history, Bove’s sculpture gardens also measure the passage of time. Suspended above the smaller of the two installations is a canopy covered in white suede to which 214 luminous bronze rods have been attached. The arrangement of these rods recreates a specific celestial event: on March 2, 2006, at 9 pm, they aligned with the stars congregating over the Berlin gallery in which the installation was then being exhibited. On the one hand, this portion of the work reverses the conventional relationship between human beings and the cosmos, between interiority and exteriority. Here the universe is scaled to the body and, by extension, contained within that which it normally contains: the gallery. It is, quite literally, a microcosm. This canopy of ersatz stars is also, as Bove has described it, a horoscope—understood in its etymological sense as a view (“scope”) onto an hour (“hora”). The term applies to Bove’s two sculpture gardens as well, which likewise provide views onto time—in these cases, glimpses onto a slightly uncanny, eccentric history of the 20th century.

¹ Beatrix Ruf, “Interview with Carol Bove,” in *Carol Bove: Below Your Mind* (Zürich: Kunsthalle Zürich, 2003), 172.

² They also allude to a Richard Lippold sculpture that hangs over the bar in the Four Seasons restaurant in New York. The Four Seasons is located in the Seagram Building, which was designed by Mies van der Rohe in collaboration with Philip Johnson in the late 1950s. In order to prepare for creating what was now conceived of as a constellation, Bove met with one of Lippold’s former studio assistants to discuss the specifics of the earlier project.