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Like This: An Exhibition of Near-Representations

by David Rhodes

Jo Baer, Anne Neukamp and Diane Simpson at Mitchell-Innes & Nash

December 13, 2014 through January 24, 2015

534 West 26th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 744 7400



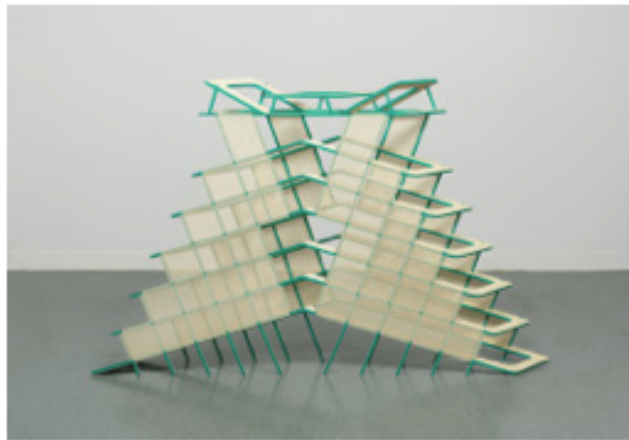
Installation view, "Jo Baer, Anne Neukamp, Diane Simpson," 2015, courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

This three-woman exhibition consists of very different, though interestingly related, approaches to the use of recognizable subject matter. The subject matter is variously displaced, distorted or fragmented. As a consequence, the paintings and sculptures present combinations of recognizable parts that function abstractly, at once both generalizing, through reconfiguration, and particularizing, through new formal relationships absent in the original context. The new frameworks created represent likenesses, now estranged and somewhat alienated.

Formal echoes and conceptual conversations are found repeatedly between paintings and sculptures throughout the exhibition, for example Diane Simpson's 2011 sculpture *Neckline (extended)*. Its vertical, rectangular fiberboard planes surround an empty triangular section at center, lined with gray and reminiscent of a revealing dress or blouse. There are arm-like extensions at either side, made of curved, linear aluminum. The sculpture could be a distant relative of the geometric figures found on a Dessau Bauhaus theatre set of the 1920s. Anna Neukamp's *Insert* (2014) hangs behind this sculpture and to its right side. *Insert* features just that: the appearance of an insert central in the painting's composition, together with a depicted, angled metal armature held by a large red schematic hand. The two works, so different in most aspects, still share compositional and associative characteristics. Elsewhere, Baer's

trptych contains grey vertical shapes against an ocher ground that are repeated — in exactly, of course — in the end view of Simpson's *Underskirt* (1986), placed nearby. Even Neukamp's 2014 sculpture *Latz* ("bib," in English), with its vertical, leaning, threaded-through segments, reverberates with the same shapes as Baer's triptych. Remarkably dissimilar, the works nevertheless display connections despite such obvious diversity.

For Baer, a key issue is how to release ideas through painting. The triptych *Facing, Turning (Intro/About), Cleaving (Apart/Together)*, from 1978-79, evinces an interest in antiquity and prehistoric times seen in Baer's earlier drawings, but not paintings her from this period. The elemental shapes in Baer's paintings function like signs, and subtly rendered images of animal or human parts recall cave paintings while remaining mysteriously cryptic. Her mostly earth-toned palette used enhances this association. In moving through the sequence of canvases, a possibly ritualistic narrative is implied. After the Minimalist works Baer became known for, the turn to what she called "Radical Figuration" seems completely apposite in the context of this exhibition's constituent aggregations of abstract and representational divides.



Diane Simpson, *Underskirt*, 1986. Oil stain and acrylic on MDF with cotton mesh, 44 by 69 by 7 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Simpson's exquisitely invented objects present both an acute sensitivity to aspects of construction and specificity of materials. The titles orient the viewer to one source of the form, now reinvented as an object independent of function. The potential readings, given the hybrid quality of her sculptures, include historical, sociological, psychological or architectural. Take *Mesh Bonnet* (1992), which is a basket- or bonnet-like object made of pinewood, cotton mesh and waxed linen thread: suspended from above by the thread, the bonnet is now transformed and suggests anthropomorphic, historical and architectural referents. What would have been a chinstrap appears to be held by two downward-reaching arms. The body of the sculpture forms an enclosure on the shelf upon which it sits, like a shelter or canopy. Formalist and Duchampian, Simpson's appropriation and nuancing of familiar forms enrich an understanding of inherent complexity in objects of common (or once common) use. The finely crafted construction retains an essence of the sourced object, which is simultaneously heightened, refined and expanded.

Neukamp's boldly graphic and compellingly illusionistic paintings scallop and contort pictorial space. In *Crook* (2014) a rhythmically doubled image is seen as situated on an abraded surface. What is represented in the paintings and what the origins are is not revealed. The typically scoured surfaces that intrude upon obscurely familiar shapes — like brand logos or instructional symbols — leave us to meditate on the fictive spatial events at which painting can prove so proficient. Unsettled figure/ground relationships are further complicated by the roughened surface, which not only contrasts with the sharp graphic delineation of the two repeated black-and-white, highly illusionistic elements, but also crosses over onto them, contradicting the established illusion. Another Berlin painter, Frank Nitsche, sometimes comes to mind in looking at Neukamp's paintings as another artist who creates paradoxical spatial structures with abstracted representational components.

There is integrated reality and paradoxical purpose inherent in the works by all three artists. The simple play between perception and physical surface in two and three dimensions is amplified through a deferred knowledge of origination. The thinking required to translate the various substitutions and transformations engages many strands of thought — there are no simple answers. Pleasure, in tactile surface, elusively fragmented shape or coexistent facture and form make the process of viewing this exhibition as much about being embodied as being able to project or embrace ideas. Here, sensuality is of equal consequence to the intellectual conundrums posed, and separating these two aspects is simultaneously impossible and pointless. They are active and compounding; they define each other.