Phoebe Washburn, ***Nunderwater Nort Lab,*** **2011,** mixed media. Installation view.

Phoebe Washburn

MARY BOONE GALLERY/ZACH FEUER GALLERY

Phoebe Washburn's *Nunderwater Nort Lab*, 2011, an installation that filled the main space at Zach Feuer, looks a good deal like a fort. The wide, cylindrical structure is ragged and slipshod, built from piled-up two-by-fours that appear to have been scavenged from other, previous incarnations. Holes, placed at regular intervals, offer glimpses of the walled-off interior, but those views are blinkered by cylindrical tunnels on the interior side. What can be seen within suggests the aesthetic of a hardware store or bodega: an assemblage of extension cords in bright colors, bits of colored paint, zip ties, coolers, neon stickers, pouches of Gatorade powder, and plants under clip-on lights. Faint sounds—of a knife against a cutting board, murmured conversation, and reggae music turned down low—are audible, and one can detect the smell of food, but it recalls less a homey kitchen than an institutional cafeteria.

The structure is thus secret but not hermetic, titillating you with its interior as much as hiding it. Its vibe is friendlier than the walled-off survivalist-camp setup might suggest—a mix of biosphere experimentation, the jury-rigged aesthetic of Burning Man, Andrea Zittel's self-sufficient systems for living, even a secret marijuana-growing bunker. Unlike Zittel's (and probably the biosphere's) careful and transparent parsing of particular problems of human existence (the most efficient way to eat, sleep, eliminate, and create relying on limited means), *Nunderwater Nort Lab* is a deliberately obscured view of an unknowable system; from a formal point of view it is an only slightly shattered monument, a teasingly cracked Torqued Ellipse. In earlier works, such as *Tickle the Shitstem*, 2008, Washburn set up a Rube Goldberg–style scheme that produced T-shirts bearing the gibberish word ORT and a bottled drink; the water used to rinse the former was recycled to create the (undrinkable) latter: a nonsensical but productive system. Here the result is less obvious. A sort of anti-relational aesthetics event takes place every day: Food is prepared, conversation takes place, but we the viewers, with those partial glimpses through tunnels and sounds muted by the fort's thick walls, have only limited access to both. The installation, like Washburn's others, can be seen as an attempt to exert control over chaos—over an unending tide of garbage—with the order it produces the product, even if the product is only lunch for a small group.

A related exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery contained small sculptures assembled on the backs of generic folding chairs and tables, each made with materials familiar from Washburn's other works: golf balls, shells, rocks, zip ties, stickers, neon paint. The titles of the works—*Skills Learned from my Hippie Orthodontist*, and *Solar Eclipse Viewing organized by an Ambitious Hippie* (both 2011)—seem at the same time mocking but still somehow respectful: Hippies are self-reliant, after all. The sculptures are animated by a push and pull between the natural and the ordered. Some are as neatly arranged as a garden at Versailles or a laboratory taxonomy; in others, the materials seem to organically pour forth from cracks as though growing toward the light. They, too, hint at a system with absurd rules to which we are not privy—and that could very well fall apart.

—Emily Hall

Hall, Emily. "Phoebe Washburn." *Artforum* October 2011: 315 - 316.

CHELSEA GIRL

Phoebe Washburn shows at two of New York's most influential galleries, feeding body and mind

A look inside *Nunderwater Nort Lab*

Over the past decade, 37-year-old New York artist Phoebe Washburn has made a name for herself hoarding scraps off the street and turning them into meaningful installations. From the beginning, these have been massive—undulating, rising, and sloping, like fantasy waves or mountains, colored in pastel hues, cobbled from cardboard, newspaper, and hundreds of odd bits of lumber. You'd walk around them, under them, through them, wondering how they were built and chuckling at their cheeky names: *Minor In-House Brainstorm*, *Nothing's Cutie*, *Heavy Has Debt.* Then, Washburn's work started doing work itself—her installations began housing simple machines, basic factories. *Regulated Fool's Milk Meadow*, at the Berlin Guggenheim in 2007, produced grass for the installation's own roof. For Washburn's entry at the 2008 Whitney Biennial, flowers grew in tanks of neon Gatorade. Her latest, *Nunderwater Nort Lab*—a 12-foot-tall fortress that feels like an *Arte Povera* riff on a Dharma Initiative bunker from *Lost*—will make lunch. Inside of it, interns and Washburn herself will be cooking for gallery employees. Viewers will be shut out but can watch through slats, windows, and holes. "I wanted to look inward and deal with space on every level," Washburn says. "I didn't want the piece to be about the art world and behind the scenes. I want to focus on an activity everyone can relate to. Lunch seems pretty logical." *Nort Lab* is showing at the Zach Feuer Gallery in New York from June 29, the same day a corresponding exhibition of Washburn's smaller works—wall-mounted sculptures involving blocks of wood and spray-painted gravel embedded into the undersides of folding tables—goes up at nearby Mary Boone Gallery, kicking off, in Chelsea, anyway, the Summer of Washburn.—*Howie Kahn*

Washburn at work

© Jacqueline Bates

The New York Times

Phoebe Washburn

'Nunderwater Nort Lab'

Zach Feuer Gallery
548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 12

'Temperatures in a Lab of Superior Specialness'

Mary Boone Gallery
745 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street
Through July 29

The convention of super-large, labor-intensive structures in art galleries is getting a bit worn and familiar, perhaps, but Phoebe Washburn's latest effort squeaks by. For one thing, she helped formulate the genre, or at least an obsessively D.I.Y., lavishly recycled, hilariously pseudo-scientific subcategory of it. For another, "Nunderwater Nort Lab" is the most monolithic piece Ms. Washburn has yet made, and it has an insouciant sculptural formidability that is unusual to her work.

Filling nearly the entire space at the Zach Feuer Gallery, it is an immense, looming, (dare we say?) Serra-like cylinder. Except that it has been bricked together from hundreds of two-by-fours from previous Washburn installations and has a radiant, patchwork effect.

The edifice is a kind of greenhouse. At least there are plants in the wormhole windows, also made from the two-by-fours that extend deep inside, like small tunnels or large telescopes. These openings provide tantalizing glimpses of life within, where interns regularly tend the plants, cook and eat lunch and listen to music. (The work is also more continuously occupied than most Washburn pieces.) But you never get a clear notion of the structure's internal volume or what's going on inside, and this disorienting effect may be the most interesting aspect of the piece. The outside and inside feel unusually far apart and unrelated.

At Mary Boone, Ms. Washburn continues to experiment with smaller, more portable and, by implication, salable works with a series of reliefs that lean on or hang from the wall. Here, lab-worthy folding tables and chairs, folded, serve as frames, their undersides covered with different combinations of painted gravel or seashells and chunks of wood. The effect is of specimen trays or filters. These works are pleasantly decorative, but too contained. They lack the bristle and sprawl of Ms. Washburn's larger efforts, acting like paintings rather than sculptures. *ROBERTA SMITH*

ZACH FEUER GALLERY

Phoebe Washburn's cylindrical "Nunderwater Nort Lab" at the Zach Feuer Gallery.

Smith, Roberta. "Phoebe Washburn" New York Times 22 July 2011: C26.

frieze
Current Shows October 2008

Phoebe Washburn

ZACH FEUER, NEW YORK, USA

'Tickle the Shitstem' (2008), installation view

As the global economy heads towards meltdown and the American government contemplates a daunting repair job, Phoebe Washburn's large-scale installations have acquired super-added relevance. Following her memorable installation at the Whitney Biennial, Washburn's current exhibition at Zach Feuer presents another self-contained ecosystem, one that brings to mind nightmares both ecological and economic.

Sardonic and strange, Washburn's machines operate according to a deliberately obscured logic. The gallery abounds in sporadic bursts of neon colour; pipes, plywood boards and fish tanks full of murky liquid are hauled into the most unlikely of production lines.

Tickle the Shitstem (2008) emphasizes the capitalist rationale that underlies Washburn's relentless machines in the sale of goods 'produced' by the installation. These goods range from pencils and T-shirts to bottles of undrinkable liquid (accompanied by the tart warning, 'Liquid in ORT bottles not to be ingested'). There are also neon-tinted sea urchins - pale and delicate, the occasional aesthetic byproduct of the capitalist machine.

These goods are sold from a stand that is prominently placed in the front gallery, and provide a visible purpose and narrative to the otherwise mysterious machine. The gallery attendant manning the stand also lends an incongruous human presence; Washburn's machine exerts its fascination through the improbable course of its seemingly self-regulated production.

But Washburn's machine is also deeply personal, albeit in the most emblematic of ways. If the unconscious is a factory, then Washburn's factory touches upon the workings of the unconscious. Equal parts fantasy and nightmare, pulsating with drive and desire, the machine is also distinctly idiosyncratic. The irregular logic of the installation's individual components - a washing machine here, a collection of golf balls there - is what lends the work its sense of deep unease.

The sheer unlikeliness of Washburn's installations, which are full of both humor and unspecified menace, give them their own distinct life. They are not unlike a parade of Frankenstein's monsters: lovingly constructed products of a singular mind, which nonetheless succeed in reflecting the most alarming elements of our social life.

Katie Kitamura

Phoebe Washburn: *Tickle the Shitstem*

Installation view

★★★★★½

Zach Feuer Gallery, through Oct 4 (see Chelsea)

With attractive international interns operating a store and reggae resounding through the gallery, it's easy to dismiss Phoebe Washburn's show as a hipster event. Yet this Poughkeepsie, NY, native, who was in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, has a lot more to offer than just good times for sale.

Washburn's multi-part installation, with its naughty, scatological title, is a quirky cross between a child prodigy's science fair booth and a DIY project gone wrong. Its centerpiece is a washing machine in which used T-shirts are rinsed daily before being branded with the word ORT and sold for $25 each. The water used in this process is then slowly purified through a series of vats and tanks. The end result eventually fills a massive barrel, which is emptied by the intern on duty.

Washburn's "rules of the game" stipulate that the excess water needs to be creatively reused. Plants are hydrated; sea urchins, T-shirts and pencils are dyed and sold; soda is peddled so that the bottles might be recycled to hold more water. It's a never-ending battle to keep the system functioning as production and consumption, usable material and waste, become outlandishly interchangeable. With supply exceeding demand, defeat seems inevitable, and the remainder of each day's water is transported to a plastic kiddie pool where it ungracefully stagnates. Washburn's show is a powerful demonstration about the fragility of our natural resources, which, when intertwined with human needs and desires, are placed in grave jeopardy.
—*Nuit Banai*

GALLERY-GOING

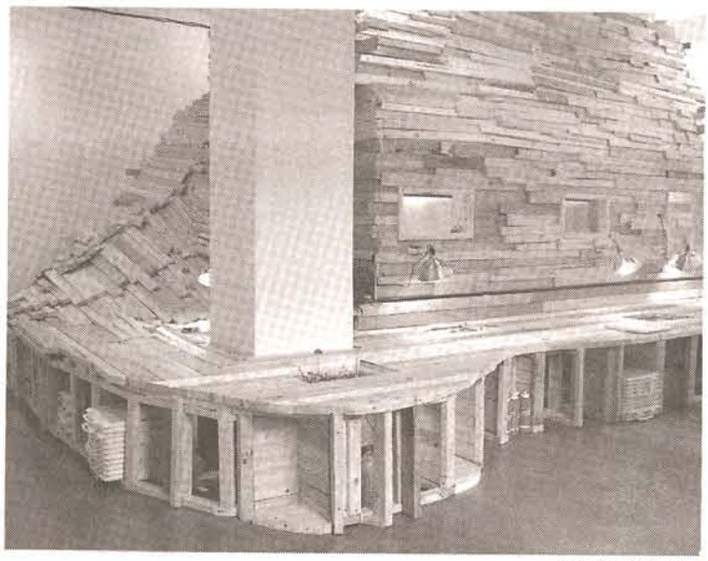
Locating Propriety in the Inappropriate

By DAVID COHEN

There is something appropriate in finding Zach Feuer Gallery open for business in mid-August with a Phoebe Washburn installation, when the rest of Chelsea is a ghost town. Seeing this Dadaistic riff on productivity in a gallery district that feels like the artistic equivalent of the Rust Belt cannot but accent an initial response to it. Almost every door on West 24th Street has notices of apology as galleries prep themselves for the relaunch of the season, after Labor Day.

PHOEBE WASHBURN: Tickle the S---stem

Zach Feuer Gallery



ZACH FEUER GALLERY

A detail of Phoebe Washburn's 'Tickle the S---stem' (2008).

Ms. Washburn's sprawling, complex, decidedly nutty piece, "Tickle the S---stem," which is something of a "happening" in the old-fashioned sense, a work poised between sculpture and performance, is all about the foibles of an improvised production line. Because it is a zany exploration of progress and decay, this is a work that, by its very nature, will unfold and only fully realize itself with the passage of time, when the built-in failures inevitable in such a wacko system take effect.

By the time the art world throngs to the gallery for the delayed private view on September 4, therefore, the piece will have had a couple of weeks' head start on its audience. This probably explains the odd choice of opening time for such a high-flying young artist who, at 35, has already been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Berlin Guggenheim and UCLA's Hammer Museum.

As you enter the gallery, you are confronted with what has become the trademark look of a Washburn piece: a shimmering surface of at first seemingly randomly knocked together two-by-fours, appearing to be a cross between panicked or lackluster carpentry and some outgrowth of nature. But this ramshackle first impression is deceptive, and this is a robust, if primitive-seeming, workable structure. Turn the corner and you see that it houses a hive of industry — or to be more precise, commerce, as a pair of workers offer an odd mix of merchandise, in the form of unappetizing soft drinks, printed T-shirts, and various inexplicable souvenirs whose enigma is their sole attraction.

Penetrate further into the gallery and another workstation presents itself, linked to the sales barn by various tubes and wires. There is a washing machine feeding a stepped arrangement of glass tanks, the top three of which are filled with brightly colored golf balls, and the last with a hardy water plant. Off to one side, though again linked with hosing, is a big orange Igloo drinks cooler, filled with sand, and feeding a garbage bin, over the top of which a dirty T-shirt is stretched, attached by bright orange pegs that match the cooler and one tank of golf balls.

In a third space is a water feature, a fountain surrounded by garishly colored, rolled-up towels, once again linked to the goings-on of the other elements of this playful factory. Such Heath Robinsonian ingenuity — everything works, but only just, and by the most circuitous and intentionally obtuse means — serves to underscore how, despite the efforts of Andy Warhol, "art" and "factory" are contradictory terms. A factory, after all, turns out something useful with streamlined efficiency, whereas art, as Oscar Wilde insisted, is by definition useless. The aesthetic experience, in fact, is what is exposed by inefficiency, in the cracks between expectation and actualization.

By now, the viewer is itching for explication, which is at hand from the press release, or the salespeople back at the souvenir shop. The industry here revolves around the machine-washing of found T-shirts, and the management of the liquid waste emerging from that process. The stuff for sale — soft drinks of the same colors as the golf balls, the bottles to be filled afterward by undrinkable waste liquids of the same colors — is secondary to the process of its own manufacture. In fact, the "S---stem," as its name implies, conflates waste and productivity.

Faux industriousness has a long pedigree in the Dada tradition, dating right back to Marcel Duchamp's meditations on constellations of displaced mechanical objects (chocolate grinders being a favorite) in such works as "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even" (1915–23). This proceeds via the twittery, jerky, pointless-seeming machines of Jean Tinguely to Ms. Washburn's neo-Dada contemporaries. These include the late Jason Rhoades, with his manically compulsive arrangements of appropriated detritus; a stablemate of Ms. Washburn's at Zach Feuer, Danica Phelps, with whom she shares an obsession with color-coding, and the technophile absurdist Roxy Paine, with his elaborate machines for making art. Semantically close to the scatology of Ms. Washburn's "S---stem" is Wim Delvoye's "Cloaca," a super-elaborate machine that produces excrement.

But while there might be some shared intentions and values in these waste generators, with a humor tinged by ecology, Ms. Washburn's aesthetic stands in contrast to that of Messrs. Paine and Delvoye in that it eschews mechanical streamlining to insist on a homey, hippie aesthetic of the handmade and pieced-together, recalling instead — though without the heavy-handed moralizing — the not-much-fun-fair aesthetic of the Swiss Thomas Hirschhorn. Another distinction of Ms. Washburn's strategy, bringing her closer to the American installation artist Sarah Sze, is a willingness to create elaborate mechanisms in which an allowance of some kind of erosion or failure is built into the life of the work.

What Ms. Washburn does have in common with all these artists is a need for narrative. This, however, is a departure from her artistic origins. When she first came to public attention with her staggeringly sumptuous installations of stacked and tacked-together shards, such as "Nothing's Cutie," her debut solo exhibition at LFL (the precursor of Zach Feuer), the emphasis was on the formal experience, not its underlying meaning, although the very use of detritus and the rushed sense of improvisation undeniably gave the piece an ecological edge. This was a moment in her development when the experience could only be described in abstract, phenomenological terms: Kim Levin, for instance, aptly observed how Ms. Washburn's "improvisational logic is rhizomic, fractal and not nearly as precarious as it looks." Now, the emphasis has heavily tipped from form to content, from stasis to process. With more "happening" there is correspondingly less that is sculptural.

Recalling the impact of that early work, it is hard not to regret Ms. Washburn's progress, and to yearn for a reconnection with her initial ecstatic creativity. In the meantime, though, and taken on its own terms, her funky aesthetic affords plenty that is fun and thoughtful, which is not a bad place to be.

Until October 4 (530 W. 24th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-989-7700).

Art in Review

Phoebe Washburn

Zach Feuer
530 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Oct. 4

Over the past few years Phoebe Washburn's installations have evolved from wavelike aggregations of scrap wood to a more sophisticated form of recycling: working "ecosystems" of plants, water and sports drinks. Consumerism enters the picture in her latest site-specific project, which demonstrates a hyperawareness of "green" technology and its ubiquity as a marketing strategy.

In a Rube Goldberg-esque process, a series of pumps and hoses connect the gallery's three rooms. T-shirts are laundered in a washing machine, and the "gray water" is then filtered and used to dye sea urchin shells. The candy-colored urchins are offered for sale (as are Gatorade, colored pencils and screen-printed T-shirts) in an elaborately constructed wooden storefront. Eventually, the water is pumped into a kiddie pool-turned-fountain. Some elements of Ms. Washburn's system — bits of greenery, fish tanks filled with Day-Glo golf balls — seem more decorative than functional, but it's hard to tell.

The work's scatological title (which can't be printed here) connects bodily and industrial waste. Ms. Washburn suggests that the byproducts of art making must also be dealt with, and that resourceful artists can find ways to benefit from this new economy.

KAREN ROSENBERG

Phoebe Washburn's While Enhancing a Diminishing Deep Down Thirst, the Juice Broke Loose (the Birth of a Soda Shop) *(2008), at the Whitney.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHELDAN COLLINS/COURTESY OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

ART

When Cool Turns Cold

The Whitney Biennial, chockablock with bloodless M.F.A. product, is a little too smart for its own good.

BY JERRY SALTZ

AT THE WHITNEY, 2008 is the year of the Art School Biennial. Not because the art in the new Biennial is immature or because the artists all went to art school—although I bet they did—but because it centers on a very narrow slice of highly educated artistic activity and features a lot of very thought-out, extremely self-conscious, carefully pieced-together installations, sculpture, and earnestly political art. These works often resemble architectural fragments, customized found objects, ersatz modernist monuments, Home Depot displays, graphic design, or magazine layouts, and the resultant assemblage-college aesthetic, while compelling in the hands of some, is completely beholden to ideas taught in hip academies. It's the style du jour right now. (It also promises to become really annoying in the not too distant future, but that's another column.)

THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL
THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART. THROUGH JUNE 1.

Perhaps the show is so inclined toward the current art-school moment because its curators, Henriette Huldisch, 36, and Shamim M. Momin, 34, were in part selected for their youth. I was thrilled that the Whitney was prepared to give itself over to young curators. No sooner had they been named, however, than Whitney director Adam Weinberg pulled back the reins, announcing that the two would be "overseen" by the museum's chief curator, Donna De Salvo, and that they'd "worked with" the advisers Thelma Golden, Bill Horrigan, and Linda Norden. If you're going to entrust young curators with your signature show, you ought to give them enough rope to do it. (Plus enough time: Huldisch and Momin had all of thirteen months to pull this show together.)

But never mind the institutional politics. Like many young curators, Huldisch and Momin are more cerebral than they are visual, and this show feels very, very controlled. The art and its presentation are orderly and methodical. Viewed over time and on repeated visits, the works develop interesting interrelated cross-conversations. But the circumspectness and consistency mean there are few moments that stop you in your tracks, confuse, delight, set your nerves on end, or provide moments of "What is this?" There's little that's overtly sexual, shocking, angry, colorful, traditionally beautiful or decorative, almost no madness or chaos. The show doesn't alchemically add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Huldisch and Momin assert that current art is exploring what Samuel Beckett called "lessness," and that it's in a "do-over" phase. Huldisch writes that artists are working in modes of "anti-spectacle" and "ephemerality," and employing "modest, found, or scavenged materials." Momin adds that the do-over "creates an unfixed arena of past possibilities," and that artists "think viral, act viral." I'm not sure what that means, but it may be her curatorspeak way of saying that artists are working together and off one another, and that they're making use of the open-source systems, self-replicating strategies, and decentralized networks of our YouTube-MySpace world. These things are changing the look of art, and of cattle calls like the Biennial.

Or they're starting to, anyway. It's clear the curators only have eyes for installation, sculpture, and video. There are 81 artists in this show, only seven of them painters by my count. Four of them—Olivier Mosset, Robert Bechtle, Mary Heilmann, and Karen Kilimnik—have been lauded for years. The youngest painter, Joe Bradley, 32, contributes three works that are boring, puckered versions of Ellsworth Kelly. These curators seem to think that painting is in-

Saltz, Jerry. "When Cool Turns Cold." *New York Magazine* 24 March 2008: 69-70.

capable of addressing the issues of our time or that it's passé. I suspect Momin and Huldisch didn't want to include painting at all. Although that kind of academic orthodoxy is moth-eaten—a medium has potential until the ideas it addresses are exhausted—it's a shame they didn't go all the way with that notion. A No Paintings Biennial would've at least made everyone hysterical.

On the upside, Momin and Huldisch should be congratulated for mounting a thoughtful show that, while academic, is neither dogmatic (painting/photography dis notwithstanding) nor sprawling (recent biennials have been crammed with over 100 artists) nor sexist (about 40 percent of the artists are women, which may be a Biennial record). Critics have already called this show both pro-market and anti-market. It's neither, and it takes the position that most artists take: The market isn't the point.

Given that the consistency of the show means that the art tends to blend together, the things that stand out do so because of qualities like color, scale, or outright oddness, rather than for their preapproved art-world signifiers. For me a striking moment came in Mika Rottenberg's dilapidated installation that looks like a beaver dam or wooden shack. Inside, video images depict women with fetishistically long hair (one is reportedly a porn star who does nothing but wave her hair at men; who knew?). These women reach into the earth, milk goats, and make cheese. Rottenberg's palette, sound, materials, and timing combine to make something like an animal language of images. You don't know whether to think about grooming, barnyards, the means of production, or mythic beings' doing bizarre things. This lets you escape the art-world conventionality of so much of the show. Phoebe Washburn takes a similar chance in her sprawling sculpture/termite tower/greenhouse. It has its own irrigation system of Gatorade pumped into aquariums that grow flowers in tanks of golf balls. Like Rottenberg's, Washburn's art throws viewers "don't ask" visual curveballs.

BACKSTORY

It should come as no surprise that this Biennial's bright young curators come with **sparkling academic CVs.** Henriette Huldisch did her first master's in American Studies at Humboldt University, and another in cinema at NYU. Shamim Momin studied art history at Williams, and did Ph.D. work at CUNY. But don't accuse them of being square. Huldisch oversaw last year's *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, a show heavy on album covers and light on substance that was **a critical flop and an audience hit.** Momin's last exhibition was the much-buzzed-about Terence Koh show, an almost empty installation **flooded with superbright light.**

This kind of caught-napping relish dawned on me in front of Cheney Thompson's almost-monochromes that are meticulously painted patterns that are themselves hard to identify. It's a welcome change to be lowered into the trapdoors of perception this way. Those doors crack open as well in Jedediah Caesar's Larry Bell–meets–Donald Judd–meets–Lynda Benglis block of iridescent Styrofoam—another work with an unpredictable surface and hard-to-determine reasoning.

That kind of engaging strangeness is at work in the best films and videos on view. It becomes tragic in Omer Fast's outstanding dual-screened projection of an American solider recounting stories of dating a German girl and his accidental killing of an Iraqi civilian. We see the relationship and the shooting reenacted on separate screens, blending together. A death has rarely seemed more pointless; the end of empire, so sad. This sadness turns outlaw in Natalia Almada's *Al Otro Lado (To the Other Side)*, a stunning 66-minute work documenting the Mexican music known as *corrido*, a style that has gone from telling stories of troubadours to recounting tales of drug-runners and "coyotes"; as one musician bitterly sings, "I didn't cross the border; the border crossed me." A subtler rupture permeates Amie Siegel's excellent exploration of the former East Germany.

The three most effective films in the show are the craziest. In them you sense humanity tugging on the bit, mired in uncontrolled emotions. These are Coco Fusco's indoctrination into the interrogation techniques of the U.S. military; Olaf Breuning's treatise on hapless American ecotourism; and Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's wild woman walking around L.A. with Viking horns on her head and a hunk of fake cheese under her arm.

The best chance viewers have of escaping the art-school gravity is to see the show in reverse. Start by visiting the performances and installations at the glorious Armory on Park Avenue. And go at night (the place is pretty empty during the day). It's possible that the looser and more experimental atmosphere, the hanging out, the free tequila, and the amazing architecture will give your experience a boost. So far, among others, I've seen outstanding performances by the legendary "loser" Michael Smith in which he dressed in a baby diaper and interacted with audience members, Gang Gang Dance playing a twenty-minute set of tribalistic trance music from behind a huge mirror, and, best of all, Marina Rosenfeld's *Teenage Lontano*, in which she had 40 teenagers from New York public schools stand in a long line as they sang the vocal section of György Ligeti's 1967 *Lontano*, a piece of modernist music from the *2001: A Space Odyssey* era. Watching this piece, I felt the opening of a portal between a failed utopian past and the possibility that the more real present is already something to love. I was transported.

This show comes at a restless, discontented moment. Institutional critique has become an institutional style, and the socio-artistic movement known as "relational aesthetics"—that is, art that's all about your own relationship to being in public with it—has gone mainstream. Most in the art world want more than that. They're longing for art to be more than just a commodity or a comment on art history. They yearn for a less quantifiable, more vulnerable essence, perhaps what Lawrence Weiner called, "the eternal little surprise of *Well, is it art?*" I still have faith in Momin and Huldisch, but while some of the art in their biennial has this essence, much of it simply looks like what art looks like these days. ■

Mika Rottenberg's Cheese *(2007–2008).*

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHELDAN COLLINS/COURTESY OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

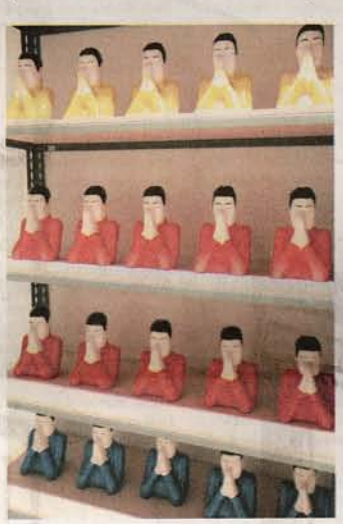
Saltz, Jerry. "When Cool Turns Cold." *New York Magazine* 24 March 2008: 69-70

The New York Times

Art's Economic Indicator

LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Whitney Biennial 2008
The installation for "Cheese" (2008), a multichannel video piece by Mika Rottenberg, is one of scores of artworks in this show on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Park Avenue Armory.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY, FROM LEFT, RUBY WASHINGTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES; CENTER AND RIGHT, LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

RUBY WASHINGTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from above, Olaf Breuning's "Army" (2008); Phoebe Washburn's "While Enhancing a Diminishing Deep Down Thirst, the Juice Broke Loose (the Birth of a Soda Shop)" (2008); Eduardo Sarabia's "Gift" (2008); and M.K Guth's "Ties of Protection and Safekeeping" (2007-8).

HOLLAND COTTER
ART REVIEW

Advertisements for the 2008 Whitney Biennial promise a show that will tell us "where American art stands today," although we basically already know. A lot of new art stands in the booths of international art fairs, where styles change fast, and one high-polish item instantly replaces another. The turnover is great for business, but it has made time-lag surveys like the biennial irrelevant as news.

Maybe this is changing with the iffy economy. Several fairs, including Pulse in London, have recently suspended operation. And this year we have a Whitney show that takes lowered expectations — lessness, slowness, ephemerality, failure (in the words of its young curators, Henriette Huldisch and Shamim M. Momin) — as its theme.

A biennial for a recession-bound time? That's one impression it gives. With more than 80 artists, this is the smallest edition of the show in a while, and it feels that way, sparsely populated, even as it fills three floors and more of the museum and continues at the Park Avenue Armory, that moldering pile at 67th Street, with an ambitious program of performance art (through March 23).

Past biennials have had a festive, party-time air. The 2004 show was all bright, pop fizz; the one two years ago exuded a sexy, punk perfume. The 2008 edition is, by contrast, an unglamorous, even prosaic affair. The installation is plain and focused, with many artists given niches of their own. The catalog is modest in design, with a long, idea-filled essay by Ms. Momin, hard-working, but with hardly a stylistic grace note in sight. A lot of the art is like this too: uncharismatic surfaces, complicated back stories.

There are certainly dynamic elements. A saggy, elephantine black vinyl sculpture by the Los Angeles artist

Continued on Page 34

Biennial 2008: Art's Economic Indicator

From Weekend Page 31

Rodney McMillian is one. Phoebe Washburn's floral ecosystem is another. Spike Lee's enthralling, appalling HBO film about Katrina-wrecked New Orleans is a third. In addition, certain armory performances — a 40-part vocal performance organized by Marina Rosenfeld; Kembra Pfahler and her group, the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black commandeering the Drill Hall — should make a splash.

But again, the overall tenor of the show is low-key, with work that seems to be in a transitional, questioning mode, art as conversation rather than as statement, testing this, trying that. Assemblage and collage are popular. Collaboration is common. So are downmarket materials — plastic, plywood, plexiglass — and all kinds of found and recycled ingredients, otherwise known as trash.

Jedediah Caesar, one of the show's 29 West Coast artists, encases studio refuse — wood scraps, disposable coffee cups, old socks — in blocks of resin for display. Charles Long makes spidery, Giacometti-esque sculptures — the shapes are based on traces of bird droppings — from plaster-covered debris. Cheyney Thompson cannibalizes his own gallery shows to make new work. With thread and a box of nails Ry Rocklen transforms an abandoned box spring into a bejeweled thing, iridescent if the light is right.

Devotees of painting will be on a near-starvation diet, with the work of only Joe Bradley, Mary Heilmann, Karen Kilimnik, Olivier Mosset and (maybe) Mr. Thompson to sustain them. Hard-line believers in art as visual pleasure will have, poor things, a bitter slog. But if the show is heedless of traditional beauty, it is also firm in its faith in artists as thinkers and makers rather than production-line workers meeting market demands.

Not so long ago, Whitney biennials were little more than edited recaps of gallery seasons. Much of the art in them had already been exhibited in galleries and commercially preapproved. By contrast, the Whitney commissioned the bulk of what appears in the 2008 biennial expressly for the occasion. If some artists failed to meet curatorial hopes, others seized the chance to push in new directions. Whatever the outcome, the demonstration of institutional faith was important. It means that, for better or worse, the new art in this show is genuinely new.

And new comes out of old. Almost every biennial includes a contingent of influential elders. This one does. Ms. Heilmann is one. Her pop-inflected, rigorously casual abstraction is a natural reference point for Ms. Kilimnik's brushy historical fantasies, for Frances Stark's free-associative collages, and for a very Heilmann-esque Rachel Harrison piece that includes a harlequin-patterned sculpture and the film "Pirates of the Caribbean" projected on the gallery wall. (Work by Ms. Harrison is also in the New Museum's "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century," a show that overlaps the biennial's sensibility.)

The California Conceptualist John Baldessari — born in 1931 and deeply networked into the art world — generates another, even wider sphere of influence. His hybrid forms — not painting, not sculpture, not photography, but some of each — offer a permissive model for a lot of new art, from Mr. Bradley's figure-shaped abstract paintings to Patrick Hill's tie-dyed sculptures to a multimedia installation by Mika Tajima who, with Howie Chen, goes by the collaborative moniker New Humans.

Mr. Baldessari's use of fragmented Hollywood film stills in his work has opened new paths for artists exploring narrative. And there's a wealth of narrative in this biennial, much of it in film.

The video called "Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out" by Harry (Harriet) Dodge and Stanya Kahn, is a kind of lunatic's tour of an abject and empty Los Angeles. Amy Granat and Drew Heitzler turn Goethe's "Sorrows of Young Werther" into an Earth Art road trip. In a multichannel video piece called "Cheese," with an elaborate, barnlike setting, Mika Rottenberg updates a 19th-century story of seven sisters who turned their freakishly long hair to enterprising ends.

And there's a beautiful new film by Javier Téllez, produced by Creative Time, that dramatizes an old Indian parable about the uncertainties of perception. In the film the artist introduces six blind New Yorkers to a live elephant and records their impressions, derived through touch. The encounters take place in what looks like the open, empty plaza in front of a temple or church, though the building is actually the vacant Depression-era bathhouse of the McCarren Park swimming pool in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Architecture and design form a subcategory of motifs in the biennial, partly as a sendup of the luxe environments that much new art is destined to inhabit,

"Whitney Biennial 2008" runs through June 1 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, and through March 23 at the Park Avenue Armory at 67th Street.

RUBY WASHINGTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Olaf Breuning's installation, "The Army" (2008), is on view at the Park Avenue Armory. Below, a scene from a film by Javier Téllez being shown at the Whitney, in which six blind New Yorkers, like the man below, give their impressions after touching an elephant.

ONLINE: COMPLETE COVERAGE

An interactive tour of the Biennial, narrated by Holland Cotter, and information on the museum, including tips on where to eat in the neighborhood:
nytimes.com/design

SAM HORINE, COURTESY OF CREATIVE TIME

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Cotter, Holland. "Art's Economic Indicator." The New York Times 7 March 2008

but also in line with the show's concern with transience and ruin. Alice Könitz's faux-modernist furniture sculpture, Matthew Brannon's wraparound graphics display, and Amanda Ross-Ho's fiercely busy domestic ensembles all mine this critical vein.

But William Cordova's "House That Frank Lloyd Wright Built 4 Fred Hampton and Mark Clark" makes a specific historical reference. An open-work maze of wood risers, it may look unfinished, but it's as complete as it needs to be: its basic outline replicates the footprint of the Chicago apartment where two Black Panthers were ambushed and killed in a predawn police raid in 1969. Here the scene of a stealth attack is open for the world to see.

The passing of baldly political art from market fashion has been much noted during the past decade. But the 2008 Biennial is a political show, at least if you define politics, as Ms. Huldisch and Ms. Momin do, in terms of indirection, ambiguity; questions asked, not answered; truth that is and is not true.

An assemblage by Adler Guerrier impressionistically documents an explosion of racial violence that scarred Miami Beach, near his home, in 1968. While Mr. Guerrier attributes the piece to a fictional collective of African-American artists active around Miami at the time, the collective, like the piece itself, is entirely his invention.

Omer Fast weaves together sex, lies, and a civilian shooting in Iraq in a film-within-a-film based on actor-improvised memories. William E. Jones takes a very personal tack on the subject of civilian surveillance by recycling an old police video of illicit homosexual activity shot in an Ohio men's room. The video dates from 1962, the year the artist, who is gay, was born, and the police sting triggered a wave of antigay sentiment in the town where he grew up.

There's more: videos by Natalia Almada and Robert Fenz dramatize, in utterly different ways, the border politics of Mexican-United States immigration. One of the show's largest pieces, "Divine Violence," by Daniel Joseph Martinez, fills a substantial room with hundreds of gilded plaques carrying the names of what Mr. Martinez labels terrorist organizations, from Al Qaeda to tiny nationalist and religious groups.

Mr. Martinez, an extremely interesting artist, is making a return biennial appearance. He contributed metal museum-admission tags reading "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White" to the famously political biennial in 1993. (One of that show's curators, Thelma Golden, now director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, is an adviser to the current exhibition, along with Bill Horrigan of the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University and Linda Norden, an independent curator.)

For a total immersion in the political and the personal, there's nothing quite like Mr. Lee's television film "When the Levees Broke," which is on continuous view in the show, though for me Coco Fusco's hourlong video "Operation Atropos" is almost as powerful. For this exercise in creative nonfiction, Ms. Fusco and six other women submitted to a "prisoner-of-war interrogation-resistance program" conducted by former United States military personnel. Technically, the whole program is a species of docudrama performance, a highly specialized endurance challenge. Even knowing that, the sight of men making women gradually break down under pressure is hair-raising, as is a follow-up scene of the women being briefed on how they can do the same to others.

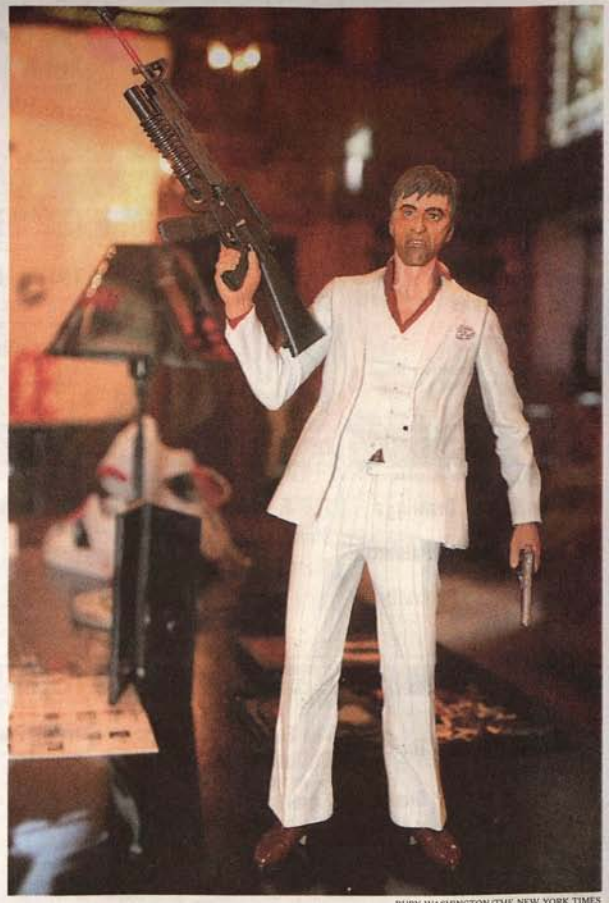
The growing presence of women as military interrogators will be the subject of a live performance by Ms. Fusco at the armory, the ideal setting for it. And under the auspices of the nonprofit Art Production Fund, several other biennial artists have made site-specific works in the building's outsize, baronial, wood-paneled halls.

In one Olaf Breuning has mustered a cute army of teapots with lava-lamp heads. Mario Ybarra Jr.'s "Scarface Museum," composed entirely of memorabilia related to Brian De Palma's 1983 remake of that 1932 gangster film, is in another. In a third M K Guth, an artist from Portland, Ore., invites visitors to participate in therapeutic hair-braiding sessions, the hair being fake, the psychological benefits presumably not.

Ms. Guth's project has a sweet, New Agey expansiveness that is atypical for this year's hermetic, uningratiating show. Ms. Pfahler and the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, with their teased wigs, low-budget props and friends-of-friends underground roots are firmly in the 2008 picture. Ms. Pfahler's Biennial stint will include a seminar on an art movement she recently founded. Based on the idea of the attraction of abjection, it is called "Beautalism," and a fair amount of what is in the Whitney show qualifies for inclusion.

LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A 2007 sculpture by Charles Long based on traces of bird droppings.



RUBY WASHINGTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mario Ybarra Jr.'s "Scarface Museum," at the Park Avenue Armory.

From top: Phoebe Washburn in her Brooklyn studio; pieces of sod for *Regulated Fool's Milk Meadow*, 2007, Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin; installation view, *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, painted wood, sawdust, screws and other mixed media.

Dumpster Diva

One man's trash is artist Phoebe Washburn's treasure.

Portrait by ADAM FRIEDBERG

A few years ago, Phoebe Washburn arrived every day at the loading dock of the Barnes & Noble bookstore near her Brooklyn studio to trawl through its discarded boxes. After a few months, she recalls, the workers asked her, "You're still packing your house? You haven't moved yet?" No, Washburn told them, she wasn't moving—she was hoarding the cardboard for her work.

Washburn's sprawling landscapes of detritus have made her, at age 34, one of the country's most closely watched young artists. The critical attention has won her a coveted spot in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, opening in March. "She's able to incorporate such a range of experiences in one work," says Biennial cocurator Shamim Momin. "You can see it as a sculpture, as a painting, as a living environment that changes. And your relationship to it constantly shifts as you walk through it."

Since that early cardboard period, Washburn has moved on to newsprint and scrap wood, but what her massive, room-size architectural sculptures all share is that they're built from the scavenged bits of the urban world in which she lives. She prizes the castoff and mass-produced—the pencils, crates and day-old newspapers that none of us much cares about—and then sorts, layers and transforms them into what she calls "spectacles of environments."

"This concept that art gets made only after you step inside a studio that's completely steeled off from the real world feels very artificial to me," says Washburn.

Solway, Diane. "Dumpster Diva: One man's trash is artist Phoebe Washburn's treasure." *W Magazine* February 2008: 166-168.

Dumpster Diva

Her magpie inventiveness is everywhere on view in her studio, which calls to mind a high school science project gone awry.

"I'm not interested in art with a capital A," says Washburn, who considers the beginning of a work to be the moment she decides to bring the trash we dump outside back indoors for a second look. "This concept that art gets made only after you step inside a studio that's completely steeled off from the real world feels very artificial to me."

Washburn's magpie inventiveness is everywhere on view in her studio, which calls to mind a high school science project gone awry. A cavernous space, it's jammed with fish tanks, conveyor belts, wood scraps and power tools. In a corner, tropical water lilies from a recent work are growing in a makeshift pond. Much of it Washburn has carted herself during her daily commute from her Manhattan apartment near the Bowery.

But there's no hint of the bag lady in Washburn. A plain-spoken, unassuming beauty, she has startling gray eyes and pale coloring, which are set off by the gray hoodie she's wearing today. As she gives a tour of her projects in progress, she apologizes for the obstacle course. "Sometimes I find myself working in the oddest places in here," she says. Washburn laboriously builds up her works onsite, regularly reusing materials from previous shows as well as the stuff left behind in the gallery space. As a result, she's never certain how they'll come out. "I think because my work is so much about process and about what I learn along the way, it makes sense to go through it the hard, slow way."

There's been nothing slow about Washburn's ascent. While a grad student at New York's School of Visual Arts, she was a standout from the start. "We all thought, Wow! This is pretty amazing, something that was beyond a student sensibility," recalls painter Gregory Amenoff, who was one of her professors and now chairs the visual arts program at Columbia University's School of the Arts. "She made these sophisticated sculptural statements from the lowliest materials possible."

Of course, she's not alone: Low-tech, gritty art built with what many would consider rubbish is hardly a new idea. (Think Schwitters and Rauschenberg for starters, and more recently, works by Tara Donovan and the late Jason Rhoades.) Still, notes Amenoff, "It's very hard to transform everyday materials. And it's especially hard to manipulate them in such a way that you're aware of them in the context that the artist creates, not in the context that you see them in every day. That's one of the things that makes Phoebe so fresh and original."

Chelsea gallerist Zach Feuer came to the same conclusion after Amenoff and Jerry Saltz (another of Washburn's SVA instructors and now *New York* magazine's art critic) urged him to drop by to see her work. In June 2002, one month after graduation, Washburn had her first solo show at Feuer's gallery. Her maelstrom of cardboard, wrote Kim Levin in *The Village Voice,* "engulfs the gallery like a force of nature."

Like many artists of her generation, Washburn favors a process-oriented approach that roams freely among artistic disciplines. Her second show at Feuer, an installation titled *Nothing's Cutie,* in 2004, was built using painted strips of wood and drywall screws. That it looked like an exploding shantytown was an "unexpected, happy accident, a by-product," Washburn says, acknowledging that she's drawn to images of favelas. "I do find them very powerful and beautiful, but I'm not romanticizing building out of trash, where people have to solve problems out of necessity as opposed to being an artist tinkering."

Washburn was still tinkering with her ideas for *Nothing's Cutie* the day Feuer brought Los Angeles collector Dean Valentine to her studio. "It was like walking into the underside of the bleachers at Shea [Stadium]," recalls Valentine. "It took up the whole apartment, and I was just flabbergasted by the combination of the rawness of the crap she'd picked up on the street and her formal control over these vast expanses. And there was Phoebe, who's very attractive, with a carpenter's apron around her waist and a hammer in her hand. I thought the whole thing was crazy and sexy and charming."

Valentine bought the piece on the spot for $14,000, which enabled Washburn to finish it. To date, it's the only one of her installations owned by a private collector. Her environments are typically commissioned by museums and exhibited temporarily (though some come with instructions for reinstallation). Their scale, mass and materials make them a tough sell to collectors. In the past two years alone, she's made works for the Hammer Museum in L.A., the Whitney Museum at Altria and the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. And while inclusion in the Biennial is known to boost an artist's value, Washburn, apart from the occasional smaller piece, "is pretty close to as un–commercially marketable as is possible," says Feuer.

For the Whitney Biennial, Washburn was trying to figure out what to do, and reluctantly scaling back, after the museum suddenly nixed her original plan, an installation that involved selling soft drinks in the gallery.

If her works seem to cry out with some sort of eco commentary, Washburn insists that is not her intent. "I'm not green; I'm greedy," she says, conceding that she benefits from this age of waste and excess. "There's definitely an aspect of hoarding that drives this, absolutely! If I see someone walking down the street with a nice piece of wood, I'm like, Where did they get that?"

Washburn's hoarding instincts took root early on. She grew up in Philadelphia in a house stuffed with the books, animal skulls and bones collected by her father, a physical anthropologist who taught at Temple University. Her mother ran a hair salon, and Washburn learned to make pin curls on mannequin heads. But her keenest childhood memories, she says, are of the solitary hours she spent caring for the assorted newts, guinea pigs and fish she kept in cages and tanks in her bedroom.

These days Washburn lives with her husband, artist A.J. Bocchino, a fellow pack rat and New York Yankees fan. The pair have known each other since eighth grade and work in adjoining studios.

Lately Washburn has been incorporating snails and other living things into her work. For the Deutsche Guggenheim, she constructed an 80-foot sod factory out of plywood and conveyor belts, its roof covered with the quickly yellowing grass it produced.

Her next solo show opens this fall at the Feuer gallery. As the conversation turns to her extensive collection of baseball cards, she mentions that one of her fantasy art projects is to make a baseball stadium. "Some of my ideas are too ridiculous at this point," she says. "Now that I've ratcheted up their complexity and scale, I realize that some of them will sit in my sketchbook longer. So that's on the back burner."

She pauses, then adds, "For now." —**DIANE SOLWAY**

From top right: Installation view, *Regulated Fool's Milk Meadow,* 2007, a sod factory built with wood, motorized conveyor system, soil, seed, fish tanks, painted gravel and other mixed media; installation view, *Between Sweet and Low,* 2002, cardboard; detail of lily pads and duckweed floating in a pond in the artist's studio.

Solway, Diane. "Dumpster Diva: One man's trash is artist Phoebe Washburn's treasure." *W Magazine* February 2008: 166-168.

Burgeoning Geometries

Constructed Abstractions

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria
120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street
Through March 4

Slow is beautiful. That could be the motto of the six artists (Diana Cooper, Tara Donovan, Charles Goldman, Jason Rogenes, Jane South and Phoebe Washburn) in this spirited, if uneven, show organized by Apsara DiQuinzio, a curatorial associate at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. All favor a time-intensive, process-oriented approach in 10 hybrid works — 11, counting Mr. Goldman's MySpace page, cited on the checklist — that traverse painting, drawing, sculpture and installation.

The unifying thread is a kind of magpie postminimalism, which invigorates familiar abstract strategies — grids, serial repetition, reductive forms — using materials scavenged from everyday life. A short list includes woodchips, oil drums, straight pins, electrical cords and live snails. The best works rely on recycled ingredients, Dumpster-diving their way to a sustainable art.

The Whitney's Altria branch, a modest gallery and a sprawling public atrium, is an architectural Jekyll and Hyde. The maniacal side wins out here in a pair of visionary large-scale installations by Mr. Rogenes and Ms. Washburn that bookend the sculpture court. (An underwhelming selection of bucket-based objects by Mr. Goldman is also displayed.)

An ingenious composite of Brancusi's "Endless Column," Dan Flavin's fluorescence, and pyramid power, Mr. Rogenes's 40-foot-high construction pairs an illuminated totem pole of found polystyrene packaging with a cardboard construction that recalls the modular polygons of Buckminster Fuller. Ms. Washburn's ambitious structure, modestly titled "A Minor In-House Brain Storm," is a winningly ramshackle, self-contained ecosystem, complete with aquatic plants (and the snails).

By contrast, the sparse trio of works inside the gallery looks staid. Ms. Donovan's shimmering cube of straight pins lacks menace, and Ms. South's verdigris-colored cut-and-folded paper relief appears diagrammatic. Only Ms. Cooper's wall-work — a viral concoction of vinyl, paper, felt and ink — surprises as it sprouts from itself around a column like a cartoon spore. *ANDREA K. SCOTT*

Phoebe Washburn
"Art in Review"
New York Times, January 5, 2007
by Andrea K. Scott

Phoebe Washburn

Rubbish isn't always a dead-end – sometimes it's a beginning

by James Trainor

Left:
Nothing's Cutie
(detail)
2004
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

Right:
Seconds to Something
(detail)
2004
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

In Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) the character played by Richard Dreyfuss builds a mountain in his living-room. His wife and kids have long since abandoned him to his obsessions, and, fixated on the various permutations of an epic preternatural form, he is determined to recreate his vision with his bare hands. He eventually incorporates every useful piece of trash and bric-à-brac that he can dig up, until he finds himself standing in his re-landscaped sitting-room, surrounded by a towering mound of refuse. He knows it's exactly right, and he knows it is done.

The scene is one of the most singularly thrilling instances of everyday Sublime captured in American film. It was hard not to recall it when confronted by Phoebe Washburn's *Nothing's Cutie* in the Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL) in New York in 2004. Constructed from a small forest's worth of salvaged wood, props, splintered staves and wedges, the work was less sculpture than topography, rearing up in chaotic terraced heaps and crystalline extrusions that scraped the ceiling. The raw and multicoloured timber, painted with rejected customized house paints, was drawn into a teeming megalopolis of scraps that included woodscrew boxes, snowdrifts of sawdust, spent rolls of gaffer tape and pencils salvaged from a skip. Circling this mass was like peering from the window of a banking plane onto the kind of city where most inhabitants live, work and die in shanty towns where survival is about making something from nothing, or more precisely making complex *ad hoc* structures out of what other people have used and thrown away. This is what Washburn does in a gallery.

Yet Washburn isn't an architect or urbanist or a renewable resources advocate; she's a sculptor. And while she'd be the last to romanticize the global economic forces that result in people devising architectures of rubbish, she is attracted to the processes by which discarded materials can be given a second shot. Roaming Manhattan's streets, she likes the look of what many people might miss: dumpster dross; the way Chinatown sweatshop workers shuffle and replenish a sidewalk's reefs and outcroppings of waste; how rubbish seemingly has its own punctilious protocols of organization.

Washburn has spent a lot of time foraging for whatever happens to fit her specific criteria. For a long while this was cardboard, and she spent the better part of a year getting familiar with the alleys and loading docks that yielded the choicest cartons. Cutting them into manageable house-paint-daubed strips, in the summer of 2002 the artist schlepped her pack rat's hoard to the gallery and with the help of a few assistants and a lot of drywall screws began the laborious business of making *Between Sweet and Low*. Washburn starts out humbly: a slat of cardboard screwed into a room's highest corner, for example, to which another is added, and then another. Washburn likens her method to rolling a giant snowball in a field, and has referred to her process as 'dumb', 'stupid', 'goofy' and 'crude'. But the long hours of calculated accretion add up to something more complex than this. It's more like launching a complicated sentence with sub-clauses and parenthetical gullies and eddies of inspired digression, without having any idea how it will all finish; but she knows the syntax will find its way.

Between Sweet and Low ended up as a gingerly calibrated typhoon of swirling detritus engulfing the gallery without, despite its weight, ever touching the floor. The work even swallowed up the 2,000 gallery announcement cards that had arrived from the printers misprinted and unusable. Wallowing here and there in inviting swales, the structure stopped just short of swamping the gallery's reception desk. It was a perfect storm of trash. It was pointless and resisted reason and gravity, and there was nothing pretty about it.

Washburn is not just a salvager but a recycler of her own work: in 2003 the filleted cardboard from *Between Sweet and Low* was dismantled, packed up and transported to Rice University in Texas and refolded like cake batter into an even more ambitious four-ton work, *True, False, and Slightly Better*, which in turn was demolished and carted off to Grinnell College and reconfigured as a massive shingled wall of debris titled *Heavy Has Debt*, where the dead weight of exhausted, screw-riddled cardboard finally gave up the ghost. An acknowledgement of the messy 'backstage' necessity of the joists that kept *Between Sweet and Low* and other agglomerations of cardboard from collapsing under their own weight led to works that were all wood, all props, supports supporting nothing but their own titanic heft like *Nothing's Cutie*.

Bits and pieces of wood salvaged from *Nothing's Cutie* were, at the time of writing, insinuating their way into Washburn's new work, *It Makes for My Billionaire Status*, taking shape at Kantor/Feuer Gallery in Los Angeles. Washburn knew that composted soil would be involved, and common weeds transplanted from New York too. Beyond that, the final form was still up in the air. Call hers the 'butterfly effect' method of making art. Even the most minor decisions can, in the long run, make a world of difference. And as with the decision to build a mountain in your living-room, it's not really about the material after all. It's about needing to do it and the process of finding out how.

Trainor, James. "Rubbish isn't always a dead-end - sometimes it's a beginning". Frieze, October 2005, p 194.

Phoebe Washburn at LFL

Phoebe Washburn creates low-tech, room-size sculptures made up of a great many units of slightly varying appearance. Her rippling structures appear to be arrived at by chance but also rely on some tricky engineering. For her second New York solo, she offered *Nothing's Cutie* (2004), a mixed-medium work chiefly built up of vertically massed strips of wood often painted light pink, yellow, green, blue or orange.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors had the option to pass under one side of the structure. From this vantage point, much of the technique that went into the work was in evidence. Surprisingly, only a small percentage of the slender elements reached down to the floor, while the majority of the tightly bolted-together slats and planks held each other in place in midair. Entire clusters of painted wood strips were raised off the ground by a pair of precariously positioned folding tables. Eventually, viewers could discover that most of the structure, some of which reached almost to the ceiling, was anchored to the two piers in the main space of the gallery.

On the other side of the moderately dark and treacherous passageway underneath the sculpture, which featured simulacra of stalactites and makeshift implements left in plain sight, came a light-filled area—above ground, as it were. Here, the construction turned into steep, hilariously faceted hillsides and valleys punctuated with abstracted buildings. The effect was reminiscent of the haphazardly arranged, pastel colored houses that fill one's field of vision when driving into San Francisco from the south.

The illusion Washburn obtains through the abstract geometric means of painted wood slats, she also disrupts by incorporating into her sculpture large rolls of tape and containers filled with screws. In addition, pencils are wedged upright between bundles of slats. Two small fields of sawdust in the middle of the piece establish sandy beaches of sorts. Animated by Washburn's free-wheeling virtuosity and dreamy sense of play, this space-engulfing sculpture seemed arbitrarily contained by the walls of the gallery. Theoretically, it could have gone on and on.

—Michaël Amy

Phoebe Washburn: *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, painted wood, pencils, sawdust, nails, chairs, tables and mixed mediums; at LFL.

Amy, Michael, "Phoebe Washburn at LFL", Art in America, January 2005, p. 117

Art on Paper 2004

at the Weatherspoon Art Museum

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Susan Bocanegra, *Sketch Book*, gouache, watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper (19 x 50 x 60 in.), 2002. Courtesy Lucas Schoormans Gallery, New York.

In 1965, a museum director's vision and the philanthropy of a major local paper company (now xpedx, formerly Dillard's) inaugurated a long tradition of exhibiting art on paper in Greensboro, NC. Xpedx still provides funds for the purchase of works from each of the annual exhibitions (biennial since 2000) for the Dillard's Collection, which to date numbers 500 and includes many big names from the art world.

This year's installment—the 38th—includes 106 works: a juried selection of art by predominantly Southeastern artists, work by invited national artists, and, closer to home, work contributed by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro faculty. The strongest pieces in the show pioneer in engagement with materials. They transform paper products through artistic processes, and paper's versatile, fragile, and porous qualities become part of the works' subjects and physicalities. In *Cold Mountain* (2004), Kimowan McClain printed a photograph he took onto layers of watercolor paper that have been taped together. The work was visually aged with colorful rust and tobacco water stains. Enrique Chagoya's *Misadventures of the Liberating Savages* (2004) contemporizes the pre-Columbian codex—depictions of pre-conquest Mexican history and religion—in vertically arranged, mixed-media images that narrate Arabs' and Americans' views of each other. Chagoya draws his violent and satirical imagery from comic books and history texts. Howardina Pindell's *Untitled #3* (1973) and *Untitled #4* (1975) feature ink-marked, paper circles from a hole-puncher lined up with, caught in, or scattered on thread grids. Phoebe Washburn's installation, *Bored Buys Options* (2004), crafts newspapers that have been dyed and wrapped into flowering plants and resembles a three-dimensional Monet waterscape. This work sidelines the show and fills an adjacent room in the museum.

Susan Bocanegra's *Sketchbook* (2002) is a hallmark for the exhibit. Paper products—piles of used sketchbooks, doodles on torn pages, finished illustrations, among other items—are stacked, rolled, twisted, taped, tied, collaged, worn, and fragmented. This monument to artistic invention catalogs the practices, innovations, and ingenious messes displayed throughout the exhibition (on view through January 23).

—Ann Millett

Phoebe Washburn, *Bored Buys Options*, mixed-media site-specific installation at Weatherspoon Art Museum, 2004. Photo courtesy of Tim Barkley, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Millet, Ann, "Art on Paper 2004 at the Wetherspoon Art Museum", Art on Paper, January/February 2005, p. 76

Up and Coming

Phoebe Washburn, *Sculptor*

Daniel Strong/Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College

LAST FALL, in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, on some days a line stretched around the block to get into the Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL). Inside, filling almost every corner of the gallery, was "Nothing's Cutie," a huge installation by artist Phoebe Washburn. Nearly two stories high, the work looked like a vast mini-city of sawed wood pieces painted in pastels, over a valley of sawdust. Like other pieces Ms. Washburn has created, it envelops viewers in a variety of vistas, as they wend under or over the artist's constructions, made of recycled materials, such as newspapers, scraps of wood or metal. "What's most important for me is creating an experience," she says. "A playful experience."

Influential contemporary art collector Dean Valentine, who bought the piece based on a model even before it was made, is a patron of the rising young New York-based artist. "It was like Jackson Pollock meets 'Trading Spaces'; I found it ethereally beautiful," says the president of First Family Entertainment, and former president and chief executive of UPN. Ms. Washburn's work "punctures the pomposity of the minimalist artists," says Mr. Valentine, "the way that Pop Art punctured the abstractionists."

Ms. Washburn, 31 years old, currently has a work installed at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, in Greensboro, N.C. Made of used cardboard, it fills an entire gallery and, Ms. Washburn says, features scaffolding and ramps, allowing viewers "to meander" through the installation, coming upon a kind of landscape. "There's a payoff. And it's fun," she says.

Her installation will be on view at the Weatherspoon Art Museum through Feb. 20. Admission is free. Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday, 1 to 5 p.m. weekends. 336-334-5770; weatherspoon.uncg.edu

"Up and Coming: Phoebe Washburn", The Wall Street Journal, January 14, 2005, p. W2

Phoebe Washburn, *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, mixed media, dimensions variable.

PHOEBE WASHBURN

LFL GALLERY

Phoebe Washburn's undulating, room-sized sculptural installation, *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, looks at first like a colorful topographic model of a densely populated futuristic urban metropolis plunked down on a desert island: Rio meets Las Vegas meets Cancun, or maybe Kuala Lumpur. Hundreds of vertically inclined wooden planks of different lengths and dimensions, each briskly handpainted a pastel hue, have been screwed together, forming clusters (or neighborhoods) that open into little clearings of sawdust. Daintily punctuated with unsharpened pencils, packing tape, thumbtacks, and other stuff procured from office-supply stores, the installation stands on stilts and creeps up to the gallery's removed ceiling.

Like the Minimalist sculpture to which it alludes, the work provokes a particular kind of encounter with the viewer: It is both static object and unfolding environment. *Nothing's Cutie* involves ready-made materials—found, scavenged, and store-bought—but (unlike much of Minimalism) is massively, even obsessively, intricate. It is literal and, with its profusion of two-by-fours, in some ways geometrically based, but it is anything but inert: Pulsating, organic, and improvisational, it combines a whooshing painterly gesturality with blocky, quasi-institutional forms.

Washburn's installation bears the unusual distinction of connecting the otherwise obverse practices of Jessica Stockholder and Sarah Sze. As with Stockholder there's an everything-including-the-kitchen-sink quality to Washburn's work—*Nothing's Cutie* contains an apparently incidental box of screws that might have been left over from a recent gallery reconstruction—but each component seems carefully placed. Her use of construction materials, the way the work occupies the gallery's corners, and especially the element of color seem indebted to Sze, though, title aside, there's nothing particularly precious or "cute" about Washburn's much heavier-feeling sculpture. And yet the topographical sensibility in Washburn's practice, the way it seems to push and pull space, points to affinities with painting and drawing: Julie Mehretu's colorful, organic, but somehow cartographic work comes to mind. Even though Washburn's colors (of the Benjamin Moore interior type) seem hastily, almost serially added, they enliven the work and add dimension, calling attention to *this* piece of wood, *that* pool of sawdust.

In other recent exhibitions Washburn has demonstrated a fascination with reusable materials—her *Second to Something* installation at P.S. 1 this summer was a wooden ramplike structure paired with found newspaper formed into organic, cell-like shapes, displayed along with shipping crates and custom-made cardboard boxes. And for *Between Sweet and Low* at LFL in 2002, she created a giant whirlpool—colored an institutional light brown with sections in pink, green, and other pastel tints—made from thousands of flattened cardboard boxes. But her attachment to the recycling ethos (*pace* some still-practicing "Earth artists") seems less ideological critique and more simply a response to the mundane reality of life as a city-dwelling artist. Hers is the kind of material you might find behind a U-Haul lot or artist-supply store, or on a building site awaiting a permit. The rudimentary architectural structures that she fashions from those materials may not have much street cred, but in their own way they are undeniably a product of the streets.

—*Nico Israel*

Israel, Nico, "Phoebe Washburn", Artforum, November 2004, p. 227

LFL Gallery

Phoebe Washburn

For Phoebe Washburn's second solo show at LFL Gallery, the artist has created another site-specific assemblage, *Nothing's Cutie*. This time around, the materials she used seem homages to Home Depot and Staples: cut prepared lumber, pencils, packing tape, thumb tacks, and wood screws, all organized organically in undulating stacked and tacked bundles. Ms. Washburn wryly welcomes the viewer into the inner room of her fortress with a "hello" spelled out in orange masking tape on the undersides of the folding tables suspended in the cavernous antechamber. The work opens up onto more waves and walls of pastel-painted wood surrounding a sawdust centerpiece, inviting the viewer to imagine either a massive overbuilt cityscape in miniature or a *Fantastic Voyage*-like macro-version of some atom-sized hidden world. The space-filling sculpture recalls work of Sarah Sze (but less meticulous), Thomas Hirschhorn (but more stable), and Jason Rhoades (but less language-based). The piece is mesmerizingly beautiful, to be sure, but the choice of materials seems more arbitrary and less socially invested than the discarded and retrieved boxes used for her last effort at LFL. Nevertheless, Washburn's creative and critical promise is palpable in this newest work.

—*Melissa Pearl Friedling*

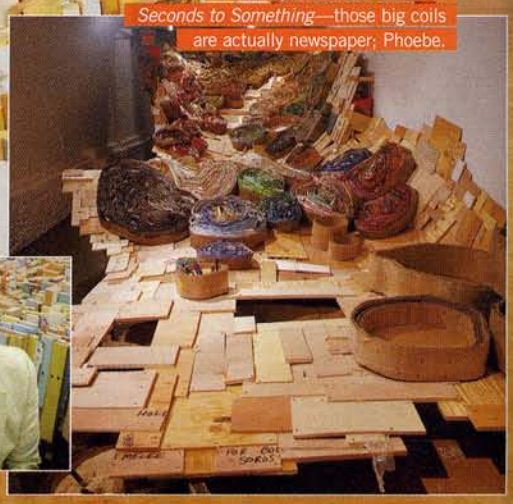
PHOEBE WASHBURN, Nothing's Cutie, 2004. Painted wood, screws, sawdust, and other mixed media.

Friedling, Melissa Pearl, "Phoebe Washburn", Flash Art, November-December 2004, p. 68

Love your work

Sculptor Phoebe Washburn, 31, doesn't let anything go to waste.

Phoebe Washburn is sort of like your high school friend who always crafted elaborate clothing out of three strips of denim, a broken television antenna and a ball of string. "I wasn't that girl, but I really did think that was cool," says Phoebe, who is making up for lost time by creating huge installations mostly out of scraps of wood and cardboard she scavenges from New York curbs and dumpsters. She organizes and paints each piece of refuse according to her own complex color-coding system. The finished product is the most elegant trash heap you've ever seen: gigantic, multicolored shapes assembled to fit their gallery space. When asked about her general process, Phoebe says, "I think that it is really important to never be afraid to try something really stupid." We couldn't agree more! Her next show, which re-recycles the same materials used in her installation at the relentlessly adventurous P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, N.Y. (inset), opens this month at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C.



From top: Phoebe's *Untitled; Seconds to Something*—those big coils are actually newspaper; Phoebe.

GOOFY TSUNAMI

"Fuckin' rad, man!" That's the sentiment I overheard from an enthusiastic patron of LFL Gallery in response to *Nothing's Cutie* (2004), a sprawling, site-specific installation by Phoebe Washburn. The primary media of Ms. Washburn's mixed-media extravaganza is wood—or, to be precise, innumerable lengths of wood painted Necco Wafer bright. Connected with drywall screws, they form a huge and rickety architectural tsunami; you have to walk under the thing to get inside the gallery. Propped up by a folding table, two-by-fours and some five-gallon buckets, *Nothing's Cutie* is populated by a lot of pencils, a lot of pencil boxes, a lot of rolls of four-inch-wide tape and an ocean of sawdust. Imagine the New York City diorama at the Queens Museum as built by a precocious child who's been locked inside the woodshed long enough to go a little batty. What makes this floor-to-ceiling tribute joyous excess work is its naturalism: *Nothing's Cutie* ebbs and flows with a compelling, unforced ease. The aforementioned gallery-goer was off in his critical assessment: Ms. Washburn's achievement isn't radical, it's ridiculous—that's why it's good.

Phoebe Washburn is at the LFL Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, until Oct. 2.

"Goofy Tsunami", New York Observer, October 4, 2004, p. 20

The New York Times

Phoebe Washburn
Simone Shubuck

LFL
530 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

For her second Manhattan solo, Phoebe Washburn has filled the main exhibition space with an undulating topography made of countless short, upright lengths of wood held together by zillions of drywall screws. Entering the gallery, you first pass under the massive structure, which is held aloft — rather precariously, it seems — by wooden studs anchored by plastic buckets full of leftover materials. Coming around to the front, you discover a mountainous, room-filling terrain sloping down from the far upper wall to below knee level.

All the short boards, each painted a pastel hue on one side, create a pixilated landscape. They also look like little buildings, and the whole resembles a vast city on a steep hillside. The tension between the raw materialism and the expansive miniaturist illusion is compelling, and the industry that evidently went into producing it is impressive. If you have seen Ms. Washburn's previous installations, you may worry that professional procedure might start to outweigh the zany or otherwise unpredictable invention, but for now that is a remote concern.

In the small rear gallery, Simone Shubuck's drawings display industrious zaniness on a more intimate scale. Working in graphite and colored pencil, Ms. Shubuck mixes gestural abstraction, calligraphy and finely rendered fragments of flowers, birds, feathers, jewelry and horseshoe magnets, producing layered, richly patterned, cheerfully visionary compositions.

KEN JOHNSON

Johnson, Ken, "Phoebe Washburn / Simone Shubuck", The New York Times, October 1, 2004, p. E31

Resurrection
by Ana Finel Honigman

Phoebe Washburn
Nothing's Cutie, installation view
2004
LFL Gallery

Nothing's Cutie, installation view
2004
LFL Gallery

Nothing's Cutie, installation view
2004
LFL Gallery

The New York artist Phoebe Washburn has quickly gain in the contemporary art world for room-filling installation cardboard boxes, old newspapers, odd lengths of lumbe cups and other marginal leftovers of social manufacture materials from loading docks, alleyways and recycling b organizes, stacks, binds and nails together these prosa organic and architecturally obsessive structures. Washb combines the fortitude of an urban pack-rat with the dec manager tidying up New Yorks civic mess.

After graduating from the School of Visual Arts MFA pro Washburn had her first solo show at New Yorks LFL gal There, she built *Between Sweet and Low*, a 25-by-17-fo vortex of cut cardboard screwed into form with 4-inch d PS 1 this past summer, Washburn amassed daily news pasted them together in tight sushi-like rolls. Like an an cataloguing valuable data, she color-coded the papers v house paint so that each hue identified the date when s bundles of discarded news.

Now, Washburn has installed *Nothings Cutie* at the LFL West 24th Street in Chelsea, Sept. 2- Oct. 2, 2004, a va sawed-off wood pieces painted in sugary pastels rising sawdust.

Ana Finel Honigman: Do you intend your work as a cri cultural or personal wastefulness?

Phoebe Washburn: People frequently ask me about th connotations of using recycled materials. While I recogn environmentalist aspect of the work, my choice of mate guided by convenience. I tend to use materials that I ca and carry to my studio. What I collect and use is determ desire to collapse the division between my time making daily routine.

AFH: Do you scavenge and hoard your materials or col

PW: I rarely plan to pile everything together at once. I ju build into my routine certain places to stop and collect s could rent a U-Haul and drive to a construction site to g need in one trip, but I prefer to only collect armloads of time.

AFH: Why is that? Is it that taking mass quantities of ma similar to shopping?

PW: Not exactly, but the actual accumulation of my mat the process. I consider the start of the piece to be when develop my routine of gathering materials.

Nothing's Cutie, installation view
2004
LFL Gallery

Phoebe Washburn working on her installation at Grinnell University in 2003

AFH: Do you set out to hunt down particular things, such as dozens of discarded #2 pencils, or do you just amass collections of random objects and use them once you feel you have a project in mind?

PW: I start when I see something that intrigues me. I accumulate materials slowly and prefer not to inundate my studio with a huge amount of materials gathered off the street.

AFH: What intrigues you about an object that other people ignore?

PW: I select objects that have already been used, already been worn, already been marked and already been discarded because then they are already in the state I want them to be in. They are what they are already. It cuts down on the decision-making process for me.

AFH: Do you have a pre-determined idea of how you want to arrange these objects or do you fit them together like pieces in a puzzle?

PW: Creating an installation where all aspects of the original space work with the inherent properties of the materials and my ideas for their use is a bit like puzzling the parts together. My sculptures depend a lot on the spaces were they are shown because they often are anchored into the wall but chance is definitely more of a factor in the final product than is any predetermined design. I just let the structures evolve by repeating the same action again and again. The process has a slightly neurotic element in that it involves adding little behavior habits. As silly as it sounds, I often feel as if my assistants and I are beavers building a dam. The shapes are less about form than they are about the activity involved in amassing and assembling the forms.

AFH: Because of the do-it-yourself aspect of your materials and the cheerful colors you often use, some of your pieces remind me of what would happen if kindergarteners were given unlimited time to work on their arts and crafts projects.

PW: It is a very playful process. I feel more comfortable describing what I do as a series of activities rather than notions about form or a process of problem solving, because defining the work through the action of making it expresses the playfulness more than if I were to just intellectualize the connotations of the finished product.

AFH: If the process is paramount, than why court potential political readings of your work by building structures that resemble organic shapes or cityscapes out of recycled materials?

PW: Often the layered surfaces appear to look topographical or like cities built into a cliff because when I am building, I am inspired by unusual architecture. I am particularly interested in the structure of buildings in shantytowns that are similarly constructed out of random materials put together in unconventional ways.

AFH: Can you really refer to buildings in shantytowns as a type of architecture, when those buildings are constructed as shelter only out of desperation?

PW: My goal is not to romanticize that use of materials or attach esthetic notions to the things people make out of need but I am drawn to these forms and there is a connection between those structures and my work. In both instances, something vital comes from of the use of materials that were previously discarded and ignored.

ANA FINEL HONIGMAN is a critic and PhD candidate in art history at Oxford University.

Honigman, Ana Finel. “Resurrection” Artnet September 2004.

Colored Layers of Wonder

Phoebe Washburn creates an installation both smart and spontaneous

BY FRANK HOLLIDAY

To peer into the LFL Gallery from 24th Street, you might think it is a construction site. There are 2 x 4's jutting down to the floor, holding up a precarious arching wooden structure in the way that a flying buttress supports a cathedral. Even with the threat of danger, our curiosity beckons us to wind our way deeper inside the gallery.

Like a Giacometti standing figure renewing itself around every turn, Phoebe Washburn's installation opens up and dazzles us, even taking us by surprise. Through a rambling terrain of color and a wave of rhythmic geometry, our eyes dance, discovering a wacky landscape made from painted wood fragments that create a modern topography of wonder.

In the tradition of Gaudi, Smithson and Serra, Washburn brings her world to life, transforming the gallery into a massive monumental construction. By changing our sense of scale with the repetitive use of multicolored joined strips of wood, Washburn made me feel as though I were flying into Rio de Janeiro, where buildings and apartments are stacked one on top of another, creating a steep Cubist mountain slope.

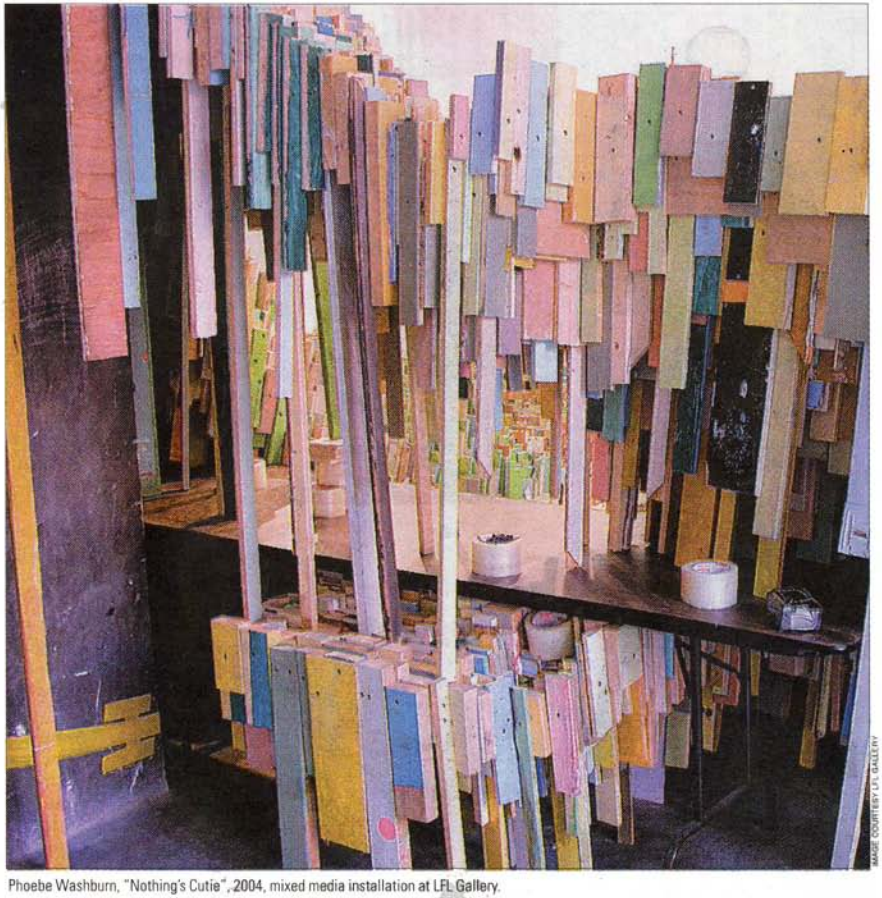


IMAGE COURTESY LFL GALLERY

Phoebe Washburn, "Nothing's Cutie", 2004, mixed media installation at LFL Gallery.

PHOEBE WASHBURN
LFL Gallery
530 W. 24TH St.
Tue.-Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
Through Oct. 2
212 989 7700

Sawdust, pencils, thumbtacks, and rolls of tape are randomly planted among the wave of brightly colored blocks, leaving clues to the creative process and the magic of transformation. Clearly notions of recycling and environmentalism are being raised, but these issues seem only a footnote to the overall pleasure, strength and gestalt of the experience. I hope that intellectual pressure won't hold Washburn back, but that instead she continues pushing her visual strengths over the top, creating some truly bizarre and inspired spectacles.

With strong formal concerns, heroic scale and obsessive desire, Washburn has managed to create an installation strong both visually and conceptually. By remaining playful, lyrical and intuitive, she avoids the pitfalls of dry heavy-handed "installation" art so common today, and demonstrates that art can still be smart, spontaneous and visually satisfying.

Holliday, Frank, "Colored Layers of Wonder", Gay City News, September 23-29, 2004

THE NEW YORKER

SEPTEMBER 13, 2004

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**Phoebe Washburn's** sprawling installations are composed of scavenged wood, newsprint, cardboard, and other materials, color-coded with hardware-store mis-tints (the custom-mixed paint colors rejected by customers as not quite right) and arranged into enormous topographies of piled, layered, and otherwise concatenated junk. Washburn's garbage-picking engenders surprisingly delicate sculpture; the work hovers between organized spatial elegance and just-dump-it-all trashiness. Through Sept. 26. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

"P.S. 1", The New Yorker, September 13, 2004, p. 19

A young artist working the gap between necessity, serendipity, impulse, and order

ADDING UP, LETTING GO

BY JERRY SALTZ

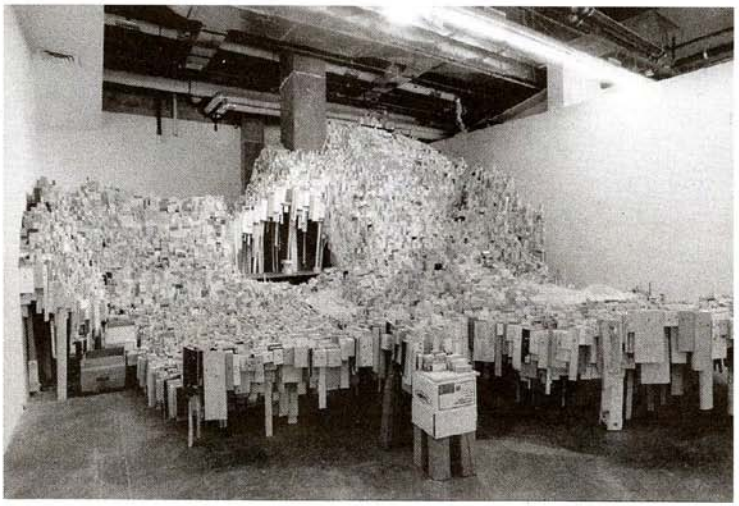
PHOEBE WASHBURN
LFL Gallery
530 West 24th Street
Through October 2

My initial thought on peering through LFL's glass door at Phoebe Washburn's psychedelic tsunami of an installation was that this promising young artist had bitten off more than she could chew and didn't finish on time. All I saw was a chaotic stand of wood. I remembered the invigorating buzz of walking into half-done Vito Acconci shows, incomplete exhibitions at American Fine Arts, and Cheyney Thompson's recent Andrew Kreps show, which, if memory serves, wasn't done until a week before it was over.

Washburn's piece begins just inside the door and echoes some of the uncanny passing-from-one-zone-to-another effect that Thomas Hirshhorn created at the entrance to his last Gladstone installation. Washburn has fastened together thousands of two-by-fours, all painted lovely pastel shades ("mistints," according to the gallery), into what looks like some upsweeping wooden grotto or a big rock-candy mountain on stilts. Cocooned within the piece, which seems to be levitating, are worktables; two of them have been attached to the wall just below the ceiling, forming a bridge that you pass under. The construction is makeshift yet solid, like some crazy structure fabricated out of whatever was at hand, haphazardly but with maniacal purpose.

Passing through a thicket of sticks and under the tables, look up and you'll see the word *hello* spelled out in gaffer's tape—Washburn's idea of a welcome mat and evidence of her goofball side ("the end" is spelled out in wood screws further along). When you finally round the corner, a steeply rising bleacher configuration in an irregular paisley shape comes into view. The whole thing, which owes much to process art, suggests a 24th-century Saõ Paulo, a multi-colored electromagnetic field of timber crystals, or a three-dimensional Amy Sillman painting. It is apparently based on some sort of squirrelly, self-replicating building system. The two-by-fours are arranged in rising waves; some of their tops are flat, others angled. Sawdust from the construction has been left between the slats in pools (Washburn calls them "beaches"). Loose screws, rolls of tape, pencils ("cousins of the wood," she says), and the boxes they came in are here and there. *Nothing's Cutie*, as the piece is titled—perhaps indicating that no part is superfluous—is a soup-to-nuts mega-structure in which nothing has been discarded: Everything that went into its making is part of the finished piece. The systematic progression, self-referring materials, and visual journey toward the center produce modernist flickers. Everything else is postmodern quirks.

The piece is a soup-to-nuts megastructure in which nothing's been discarded.



Photograph by Robin Holland

Sillman goes 3-D?: *Nothing's Cutie* (2004)

Although I consider Washburn one of the more interesting young installationists around and her visual algorithms mesmerize, after the alluring unpredictability of the entrance, *Nothing's Cutie* falls somewhat flat. It's impressive, but once you turn the corner, it's grasped too quickly. Ambiguity, anticipation, and apprehension wane; arbitrariness and tranciness set in. I found myself standing in one place and wishing that she had tinkered with the entry more, thought about the transitional space from outside to inside, dispensed with the pencil boxes (which fit but feel too clever), fussed less, and let go more. *Nothing's Cutie* is commanding, picturesque, fascinatingly functionless, and hulking. Washburn has a gift for ordering, omnivorousness, accretion, and color. But this piece isn't as good as her last installation at this gallery or her sundry out-of-town efforts.

How Washburn, 31, connects up to and diverges from some of her peers is telling. Unlike Sarah Sze, who is a space-destroying, anal-retentive, warrior-princess artist (owing to the amazing exactitude, ironic reuse of materials, and the spatial voraciousness in her work); Ann Hamilton, who's only a producer of photogenic New Agey sets; or Rachel Whiteread, who is a mummy maker by way of Nauman, a mortician, and a magician, Washburn is a pack rat, magpie, bag lady, mollusk artist. Pack rat because she scavenges for her materials; magpie for the way she piles them up (beaver would work, too); bag lady because of the eccentric order and compulsion at the core of her work; and mollusk because of the way she almost secretes things in sequential, sedimentary layers. These qualities, plus her ambitious whale scale and the way she plumbs the gap between necessity, serendipity, impulse, and order, make Washburn stand out.

How she will develop is unclear. After all, the number one sculptural trope of the moment is the room-filling installation made of stuff; museums, galleries, university foyers, and international festivals are wall-to-wall with them. I admire Washburn but can't help feeling that she's dogged by this convention. The thing that gives me hope is the sense that she has almost no idea what these structures will look like before she makes them. Washburn appears to be generating systems that generate formations she can't predict. This ties her to such seemingly unrelated artists as Sol LeWitt, Jackie Windsor, Barry Le Va, and Matthew Ritchie—four other systematizers who, despite seeming on top of everything, allow their art to take them in unexpected directions. When Washburn invents systems that surrender more while putting more information into play—when she lets go of some of the internal logic and gets in touch with her inner oddball—she'll be better than she is, which is already awfully good.

Saltz, Jerry, "Adding Up, Letting Go", The Village Voice, September 29 - October 5, 2004, p. 78

ARTFORUM

PICKS

New York

CRITICS' PICKS

Phoebe Washburn/Simone Shubuck

LFL GALLERY
530 W24th St
September 02–October 02

The recently expanded LFL has taken advantage of its extra space with a gallery-filling installation by Phoebe Washburn, who uses scavenged or recycled materials to make large-scale constructions that seem to take shape according to some organic logic of their own. Here she's outdone herself with a promontory of vertically aligned, pastel-painted wood scraps, held together with drywall screws and punctuated by pencils, empty Staples boxes, rolls of masking tape, and debris-strewn sand traps. With its antic yet imposing presence and implicit ecological ethos, the piece situates itself in the genealogy of environmental art by way of the crazed-Dumpster-diver sensibility of Jason Rhoades. In the gallery's back room, Simone Shubuck's solo debut features delicate mixed-media drawings whose flattened, obsessive compositions recall Adolf Wölfli's. Shubuck's recherché references—to Peter Beard, Egon Schiele, and *Method and Red,* among other things—bring a cultural insider's perspective to the visual conventions of "outsider" art.

—Elizabeth Schambelan

Phoebe Washburn, *Nothing's Cutie,* 2004. Installation view.

Muscular Installation of Emerging Artist

P.S. 1 again fulfills contemporary mission with unabashed physicality

BY ANDREW ROBINSON

PHOEBE WASHBURN
"Seconds of Something"
P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center
22-25 Jackson Avenue
Long Island City, Queens
Thu.-Mon., noon –6 p.m.
Through Sep. 26
$5, $2 for students and seniors
718 784 2084 or ps1.org

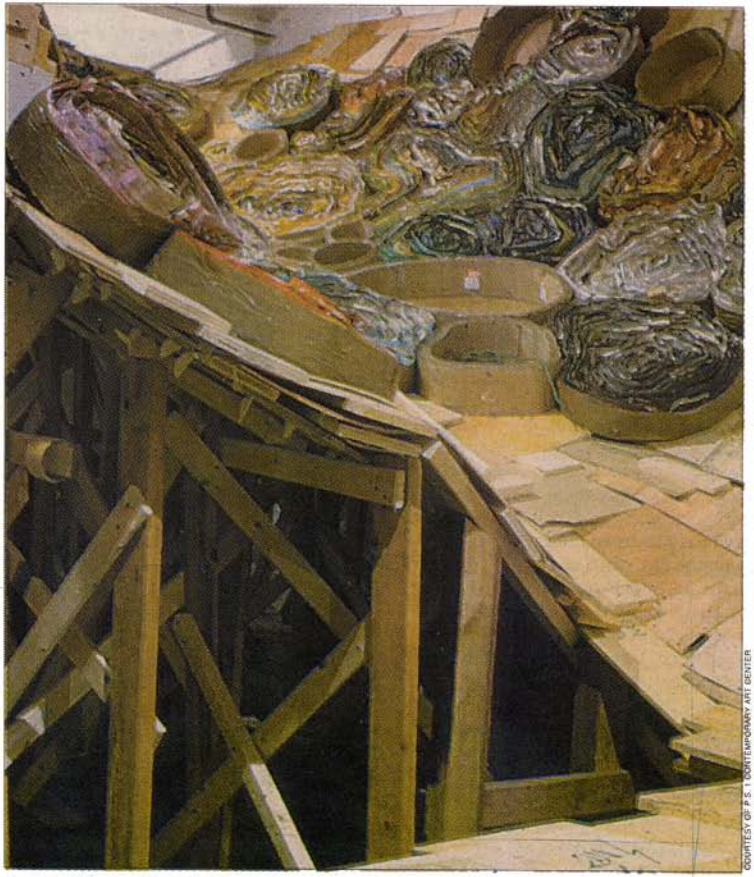
An afternoon at P.S.1 offers a panoramic view of the contemporary art landscape.

One artist to take note of is Phoebe Washburn, whose installation "Seconds of Something" is a sprawling morass of discarded wood remnants, newsprint, and custom paint rejected by customers. Unusable and tossed aside, these materials find their way into a wave of wood and scaffolding lunging from one end of the gallery to the other like a frightful roller coaster or a skateboard ramp.

Loose boards, protruding splinters, and screws provide the skin to the rickety wooden skeleton poking and prodding from below, creating the effect of ocean waves. Floating upon the surface are concentric shapes composed of old newsprint painted in a full spectrum of colors. Each cluster of colored paper is colored based on a relationship between time and consumption. The color association is not a particularly dominant idea and the color associations appear to be arbitrary; this is secondary to the installation's overall strong physicality.

This work, like others in this young artists' project, has a visual lineage to Judy Pfaff in the way she hijacks space with an excited mania of material and process and invades the environment without apology.

There is something unnerving about standing in the middle of Washburn's complex structure. Washburn refers to her work as "spontaneous architecture" and this idea is reinforced through a misleading, slap-dash appearance of effortlessness. Don't miss this ambitious wave of wood and clutter that seems on the edge of consuming the entire space and the viewer along with it.



COURTESY OF P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

A section of "Second of Something," an expansive complex installation by Phoebe Washburn on exhibit at P.S.1.

Robinson, Andrew. "Muscular Installation of Emerging Artist", Gay City News, July 8-14, 2004, p.25

Eva Heyd/P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center

Above, Phoebe Washburn's "Seconds of Something" (2004), a study in meticulously documented recycling.

The most imposing installation is Phoebe Washburn's "Seconds of Something," in which obsessive recycling is manifested by a room-size ramp cobbled from found wood scraps and huge but not thick rolls of pasted-together found newspaper painted different colors according to the day of collection. The work's hefty Conceptual framework, incessant track-keeping and color coding relates to the work of Danica Phelps and Michael Banicki. The totality suggests an abandoned and terraced work site, or the fragment of a crudely enlarged topographical map. Adding to the sense of irrational industriousness is the fact that everything used to transport and install the piece has stayed in it.

Smith, Roberta, "Summertime at P.S. 1...", The New York Times, July 16, 2004, p. E28

Phoebe Washburn

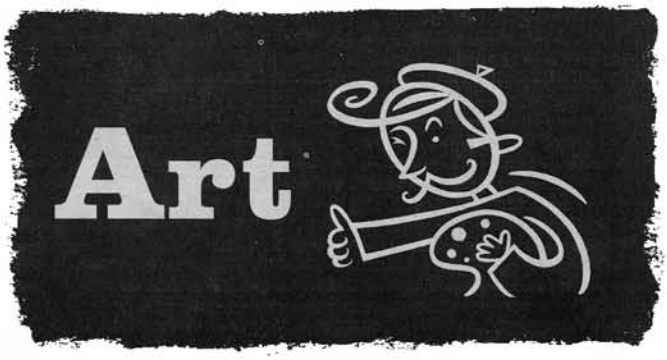
LFL
531 West 26th Street
Chelsea
Through July 26

Thousands of drywall screws and pieces of cardboard and a week's worth of 20-hour days for the artist and her assistants went into the creation of Phoebe Washburn's impressive site-specific installation, a Post-Minimalist construction that overwhelms the gallery like a small tidal wave of urban refuse.

Ms. Washburn begins her process by collecting cardboard boxes from loading docks and back alleys. In the gallery, she and her helpers use electric screwdrivers to laminate six-inch-wide lengths of cardboard into a thick, rough, undulating plane that slopes from an upper corner of the room across the space. Like a paper recycler's nightmare, it whirls around a hole near the center and engulfs the gallery desk.

No part of this structure touches the floor, but it is supported from below in a loose ad hoc way by 2-by-2 studs. Walking underneath is like being in a cave, and the slight threat of all that mass overhead calls to mind the unsettling precariousness some of Richard Serra's sculptures evoke. Besides the imposing physicality there is the idea of tension between uncontrolled growth and architectural containment, and between order and chaos. It all makes an exciting first New York solo effort for this young sculptor. *KEN JOHNSON*

Johnson, Ken "Art in Review", The New York Times, E36, June 28, 2002



Spontaneous Architecture

Phoebe Washburn rides into Rice Gallery on a cardboard wave

BY JOHN DEVINE

Phoebe Washburn likes looking at construction sites. But while most people watch the workmen on the girders, she takes in signs of the process: stacks of wood, cinderblocks or iron beams; piles of sand; bags of concrete. She's particularly intrigued by the little inventions rigged to solve immediate, practical problems — a plank pressed into service as a ramp or a bench, a lamp tied to scaffolding to provide light. She calls it spontaneous architecture. "Things that get rigged up, propped up, balanced over or weighted down in order to keep the whole process moving smoothly," she says, "are often ingenious, funny, desperate, stupid or a little of all of these things."

Ingenious and funny definitely come to mind on viewing Washburn's *True, False, and Slightly Better*, an astonishing installation that fills the 28,000 cubic feet of the Rice University Art Gallery with the dynamism of an ocean wave and the profundity of geological time. It begins in the back left corner, up where the 16-foot wall meets the ceiling, and runs along the left and back walls before cantilevering out and down toward (but never quite reaching) the floor. Composed entirely of scavenged cardboard — about 7,000 pounds of it — and held together by more than 70,000 drywall and decking screws, it's supported by a goofy array of materials: scaffolding, sacks of cement, two-by-fours, scrap wood, stacks of new, still-flattened cardboard boxes bound together with tape, all combined in ways that are less haphazard than they appear. Bands of color, mostly pastel, and little flags punctuate the surface of the sculpture. Some of the sources of the cardboard — Bonita Bananas, FedEx, Frito-Lay, Evian, Clorox — are also visible; one cardboard piece, near the top of the stair leading to a viewing platform, requests "Please Handle With Care — Fragile — Thank You."

True, False, and Slightly Better
Through February 23 at Rice University Art Gallery, 6100 Main Street, 713-348-6069. The Mixture Contemporary Art exhibit (1709 Westheimer, 713-520-6809) continues through February 22.

The 29-year-old, New York-based artist earned an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2002, the same year that she had a solo exhibition at LFL Gallery in Manhattan (a similar installation that threatened to overrun the reception desk and office). Cardboard first came to Washburn's attention when she needed to haul off 4,000 paperback books she had used for an installation. She breaks the boxes down flat and paints the interiors with "mistints," commercial paint blends that didn't quite match the color someone wanted for their room. The paint creates an A side and a B side for the cardboard, which she then cuts into strips approximately five inches wide.

Standing on the viewing platform can be a slightly vertiginous experience — the bands of color coursing through the layers of cardboard create a rhythm, a sort of swelling and ebbing. But for all its organic feel, you never forget that this is a construction site. The top of the scaffolding sticks up out of the cardboard, and the little flags, now an element of the sculpture, initially simply marked the day's progress. Cartons that contained the screws that hold the sculpture together are now supporting parts of it; six rolls of tape, still in their shrink-wrapping, shim up the piece where it meets the platform. The installation tells the story of its own making.

Underneath the work, however, there's a somewhat different sensation: quieter, more thoughtful. Here you can better see the process, the methodical layering of the cardboard. Above, you have a sense of motion — the sculpture feels like water; below, you become aware of the movement of time, and the piece seems more like a glacier. And there is one wonderful surprise: At the corner where the installation begins, a space opens up overhead. The only support for this 15-foot-high vaulted space is the tension of the initial layers of cardboard pressing against the wall. Standing there is like standing in your own private cathedral.

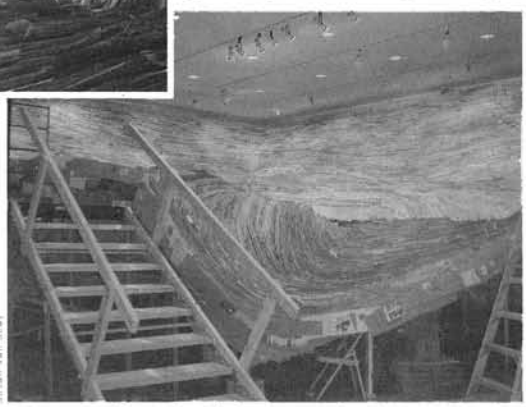
Standing in the vaulted space beneath the sculpture is like being in your own private cathedral.


Susan Van Sicky

The bands of color coursing through the layers of cardboard create a sort of organic ebb and flow.

Washburn is also half of a two-person show at Mixture Contemporary Art, where she's showing four large drawings and another, much smaller, sculptural installation. The drawings are spare and minimal, colored boxy shapes and lines of graphite, with correction tape obscuring a few marks. The title of the largest, *Slightly Better Study I* (2002), explains their relation to Washburn's installation work — they're comparable to architectural studies. The sculpture, *Paper Beats Rock* (2003), is an absurd conglomeration of stacks of painted newsprint squares balanced atop wooden poles (a couple of which are balanced on cement sacks). The whole thing is secured by tape to the ceiling and by clamps to a wall. It looks like a good stomp or two on the floor might topple the thing. But what's amazing is that the work is an almost total improvisation. The artist brought the newsprint with her, but everything else she found in the gallery owner's toolshed.

For all the wit in Washburn's work — the use of "poor" materials to construct monumental sculptures, the emphasis on process and its surprises (even the artist couldn't get over the vault effect in the rear corner), the inescapable sociological/ecological undercurrents implicit in making art out of trash — these sculptural installations would merely be ingeniously inventive without one other aspect. Underneath the Rice installation, along the left wall near the vaulted space, two lamps hang on a scaffold, their beams illuminating not some part of the sculpture but the blank wall. In *Paper Beats Rock*, a small clamp lies on a pile of newsprint just above eye level. These elements suggest that the process is not complete, that the artist will return to work in a moment. It's that human element, the sign of the artist's hand, that somehow gives these sculptures a sense of poignancy.


Susan Van Sicky

But you never forget that this is a construction site, propped up by all manner of silly structures.

The other half of the Mixture Contemporary Art show is **Danny Yahav-Brown**, a young Israeli artist who is a first-year Core fellow at the Glassell School of Art. He too is drawn to architecture and cast-off material, but his methodology couldn't be more different. He constructs small models of habitations, suggesting tents, lean-tos and other forms of temporary architecture, and then photographs them on a light table and displays them in light boxes. In the series *A Place Like Home* (2002), a Band-Aid box becomes a shelter, with a processed lunchmeat slice serving as a flap; a piece of knitted cotton is "tented" by used chewing gum "poles"; and the lengthwise half of a blue plastic cup balanced on sugar cubes provides cover. Homelessness, consumption, habitation, exile, connection — Yahav-Brown's quirky models speak to the concerns of an increasingly complex, globalized, postmodern world. ●

John Devine, "Spontaneous Architecture", Houston Press, 2/20/02, p.50