

sculpture

June 2012
Vol. 31 No. 3

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

Radcliffe Bailey

Process Into Form



reviews

WASHINGTON, DC

Joe Ovelman

Conner Contemporary

Clean-cut yet reclaimed, familiar yet odd, tectonic yet intimate—these were some of the contradictions at play in Joe Ovelman's recent exhibition. Seemingly a far cry from earlier work, these sculptures tackle similar issues of sexual identity and societal norms, but in a more subversive and, ultimately, more tantalizing way. As the title "Coming Home" suggests, Ovelman's re-entry from New York City into his native Philadelphia gave him space to rethink and recast his mode of expression. Street interventions, dead-pan phrases on post-it notes, and

explicit, figurative images of political and gay activism have now become highly designed and finely crafted anthropomorphic objects that rouse the viewer's body and imagination.

A confessional tone still pulses just beneath the surface, though the critical edge is found on the sides, the interior, and the top, not just the front. The sly secrets of these layered constructions are to be savored slowly as bits of fabric, leather, and wood yield clues. Once belonging to a beloved grandmother, these remnants offer a fresh twist on recycling, imparting tenderness and humanity to store-bought materials. The remaining principals

Right: Joe Ovelman, *Gettin' a Chubbie*, 2010. Wood, plastic, and reclaimed leather, 12 x 5.5 x 2.5 in. Below: Joe Ovelman, installation view of "Coming Home," 2011.



in this unfolding drama include a friend, Amy; Ovelman's unnamed lover; and the artist himself. We, the viewers, are left torn between upholding the work's pristine finish and partaking in its visceral corporeality.

In the canary yellow *Self-Portrait*, the link to tradition is elusive at first. Hovering a foot above the floor, a vinyl oblong replicates the artist's height and width, even as it fuses Minimalist form with '60s décor à la TVs "Mad Men." At its mid-section, two holes interrupt a band of double piping creasing the otherwise tautly stretched, fleshy surface. The piping's symmetry brings to mind a mirror and its reflected image, a common convention of self-portraiture. Inside, flashes of glitter taper downward on a deep purple field. All at once, the work assumes the presence of an abstracted reliquary, or even of Christ



Above: Joe Ovelman, *The Bowling Ball*, 2010. Wood, plastic, paper, and acrylic, 11.5 x 8 x 2 in. **Below:** Taraneh Hemami, *Free*, 2011. Neon and mirrored and translucent vinyl on glass, 27 x 54 ft.

on the cross. In Christianity, purple is associated with penitence and mourning; yellow with divinity (or conversely, degradation because it is not pure white). Rather than holes left by nails, Ovelman's orifices suggest not only eyes or sockets, but also sexual acts.

By contrast, the diminutive *Gettin' a Chubbie* makes an explicit link to a sexual act. Equally rich in metaphor, the wall-mounted sculpture features a small block of reclaimed wood attached to a larger one. On the left, a slight, arching protrusion hints at the shape of an erect, uncircumcised penis. On the verso, a blue plastic sheet emanates a heavenly aura of anticipated pleasure, while the worn surfaces allude to years of practice. The surprise,

however, lies at the top, where Ovelman has inserted a piece of gold leather taken from one of his grandmother's shoes. Like Arte Povera and the work of Richard Tuttle, this intimate sculpture charms with its subtle unassuming simplicity.

The scale jumps again in *Two Lovers* and *For Amy*, in which oversized proportions lend an Alice-in-Wonderland quality and draw attention to the works' fantastical purpose. In the former, patches of felt form a tent whose bold colors collide at all angles to create a tapestry with the festive feel of carnival or medieval pageantry. In the mid-section, apertures invite closer scrutiny and allude to a possible ritual: How many people could Ovelman and his lover pleasure if they stood inside? The query remains a fantasy since the housing would collapse under actual use.

For Amy deftly brings together the thematic threads of Ovelman's new body of work. An opening in the seat of a stylized potty-chair turns the towering structure into a device whereby an anonymous person crouched inside can pleasure both men and women. The soft white covering is made from his grandmother's undergarments, quilted together with pink hand-stitching and ties. Both surrogate and objectification, the sculpture feels vulnerable despite its imposing presence.

Like Italy's city-states during the Renaissance, each sculpture in "Coming Home" stands its ground, with a distinct character and look, though bonded by an allegiance to the entire body. As Ovelman continues to explore sexual norms and rules of engagement, it's telling that he now does so with works born of pleasure, that organically draw from a variety of art historical references while transcending marginalization and specificity to make gay issues universal concerns.

—Sarah Tanguy

SAN FRANCISCO

Taraneh Hemami

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Taraneh Hemami's elegant window installation at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts translated a contentious season of contemporary politics into a dazzling and contemplative work. An enormous radiating star of laser-cut patterning filled the window with the ebullient celebration of the Arab Spring. A neon sign at the center enclosed delicate Arabic script (in yellow) within a ring formed by the repeated English word, "Free" (in blinking blue). Hemami describes this movement as a chant—Free, Free, Free—echoing the message of demonstrators throughout the Middle East. For those who could read it, the Arabic text was legible from the outside looking in; the English text, in reverse, was legible from the inside looking out. The English-speaking world was the implied insider, while the Arab-speaking world remained excluded, outside gazing in.

The window on which *Free* was installed stretches nearly the full length of the center's entrance. The work fronted on Yerba Buena Gardens, a quiet oasis of a park, just steps away from the busy commerce of the city but separated by a change in level and a fortress of

buildings. As visitors crossed the park to approach the entrance, *Free*'s star patterns magically transformed into a three-dimensional dome curving up into space, the neon circle taking the place of the dome's central oculus (the all-seeing eye). The use of several different line widths heightened the illusion of depth. The mirrored surface of the primary patterns reflected the garden and sky while blending into the metallic surface of the façade; the double-thick translucent blue line presented a bold graphic to the plaza. Though a Middle Eastern stylistic idiom was instantly recognizable, it was more evocative than literal. At a time when a country based on spiritual freedom hotly debates a proposed mosque at the World Trade Center site, it was reassuring to see the quiet beauty of Hemami's installation stake a claim in the public sphere.

Inside, the patterns flattened into a two-dimensional screen that cast a dizzying display of shadow, light, and color into the lobby. The thinnest mirrored lines became a delicate lace through which to view the gardens beyond. The double blue lines formed larger blocks of color, which traveled across furniture, stairs, and people. The shadows moved as the day passed, as

