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Art



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.

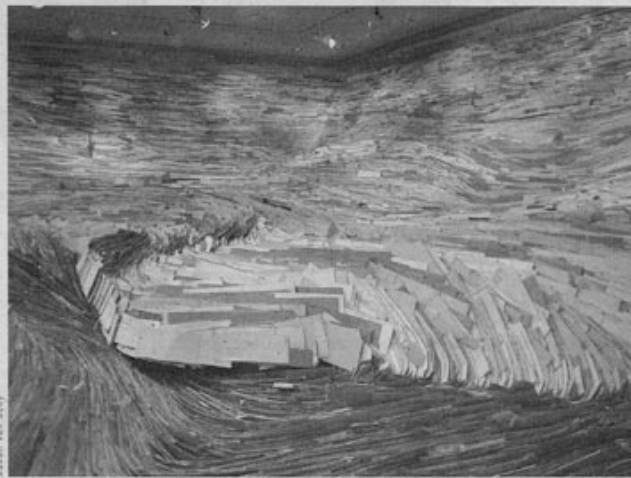
The 29-year-old, New York-based artist earned an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2002, the same year that she had a solo exhibition at LFL Gallery in Manhattan (a similar installation that threatened to overrun the reception desk and office). Cardboard first came to Washburn's attention 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

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

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

cardboard pressing against the wall. Standing there is like standing in your own private cathedral.



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

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, *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.

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 pro-



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

vides cover. Homelessness, consumption, habitation, exile, connection — Yahav-Brown's quirky models speak to the concerns of an increasingly complex, globalized, postmodern world. ●

