

## Drift: time in Fiona Connor's sculpture

Time is folded into sculptures, and it unfolds in our encounter with them. There's the time we take looking, as we stand in the gallery, and our gradual sense of the time the artist took, in making the object. In this case, that artist's time is hard to measure or guess, as the process of production is obscured by a material evocation of other times: the time of the original object's design, its manufacture, and the implied time of its use, the years of wear and tear and repair. Fiona Connor's *On What Remains (fountain)*<sup>1</sup> (2015) gives us what appears to be a New York City drinking fountain, as found in numerous playgrounds and parks, including Tompkins Square Park, nearby.<sup>2</sup> It is a history lesson, with all sorts of stories to tell: tales of design theory, the history of materials imitating other materials, urban planning, fresh air. And it's also a theatrical display: the object we encounter in the gallery is new—it only pretends to be old, or real. Still, it takes us in, luring us beyond the story of the artist's labor in producing it, towards another, grander history: stories of cities, municipal plumbing, social good. At the same time it is, finally, a sculpture, standing in a gallery. While it may point towards the history of parks and playgrounds, the history of the city, it also presents evidence of its own materiality, in its weight and heft, its *trompe l'oeil* surfaces, its geometric forms.

We look more closely, trying to pierce these narrative layers, to piece them together. It is then that the single brilliant droplet of water balanced on the spout appears, suddenly, although it was always there. Poised, filled with light, it enters our awareness, and the balance among the sculpture's multiple layers of connotation finds some kind of dynamic equilibrium. The drop of water transforms the sculpture, moving the object out of a space of thought and heightened awareness, into something more, something embodied and intensely present. It promises a drink on this hot afternoon. The brass button is incised with the word PUSH. You press and bingo! A jet of clear water appears, here and now, to quench our thirst.

The history of clean water freely provided by cities is a long one: Pompeii had water fountains every few blocks, fed by siphoned water from lead pipes running under the street. There were nine major aqueducts bringing water from the surrounding countryside to ancient Rome. Thirty-nine monumental fountains dispensed free water to the Romans, in addition to innumerable spouts in the streets, and each of these massive fountains was connected to two aqueducts, in case one was shut down for servicing or repair. In 16th century Provence, water from the town's fountains flowed into a series of basins, first for people to drink, then for

animals, then for laundry, and then on, to the communal kitchen gardens: an object lesson in frugal water use.

From 1934 to 1960, Robert Moses was New York City Commissioner for Parks. Very much in charge, he doubtless approved the prototype when this concrete drinking fountain was designed in 1939. Like so many of his contributions to the infrastructure of the city, it was designed to last. You can find it in numerous parks and playgrounds around New York, and Fiona's version is so lifelike, viewers may imagine she merely borrowed one from the city and repositioned it in the gallery. This illusion is undercut by the list of materials: concrete, expanded polystyrene foam, antique brass hardware, plumbing supplies, steel, plywood, paint, coatings, car battery, pump, water. Water? This sculpture is partly a functioning drinking fountain: push the button and a gush of clear water defies gravity, taking a little leap into the air. It's partly an intense exploration and investigation of material form; in re-making this object, we sense the artist's tenacity, her curiosity and persistence. It's also partly a trick: the fountain isn't plumbed in; it's a car battery that feeds the pump that impels the water towards our lips. In real life, the city's outdoor drinking fountains don't use electricity: water pressure in the municipal water supply presses the water up and out. So it's a prop, a stunt, a trick: the fountain that at first sight appears to have been borrowed from Tompkins Square Park (where its siblings can be found, upright, indefatigable, diligently doing their job) is in fact *faux*. It's part Hollywood, part concrete, part fiction, part as real as it gets: a hybrid formation that puts forward a series of propositions about artworks and how we make use of them.

That's the moment when the time of the artist's process takes center stage, so to speak. There's a haunting here, as we consider the artist's many visits to the drinking fountains in the park, in all weathers, at different times of day. We remember the artist's drawings and measurements and diagrams, although they are not present. And we contemplate her misremembering of form and texture. She's touched it a thousand times, this thing she's making a copy of, and still she knows her copy will drift; it will not be exact or perfect. Nevertheless, there's a dimension of reperformance here: she has to figure out how to make this thing; she consults with the supervisor of plumbers for the borough of Queens, Gus Menocal; she finds a deeper understanding of the form through replicating it. When you make a copy or a model of something, in some sense you become it, you immerse yourself in its forms. The time Fiona took to research and discuss and produce this object points towards the playground fountain's longevity, the countless repetitions that its design accommodates and invites. The sculpture placed in the gallery contains this impulse, materializing (among so many other things) the artist's compelling wish to look deeply at this familiar public object, to take possession of it.

We notice the painted surface, and think about the artist in the studio, building it up, to give an effect of being

worn down.<sup>3</sup> It's paradoxical: there are layers of paint here, making the surface thicken and blur, marks of time passing. The edges become indefinite, rough, as if the friction of weather and use has softened them. The paint is a kind of 'nothing' color, municipal grey, reiterating the color of concrete, which itself reiterates the color of stone. It proposes a series of displacements, a series of value systems: stone is better than concrete but it's expensive; concrete can make multiples, that's good, but it wears away in the weather and needs a coat of paint to keep it together over the long run. The fluted pattern on the side of the fountain recalls decorative carving in marble, Art Deco themes and variations. But there's also a 1950s Brutalism vibe echoing through these solid forms, a pre-echo maybe. There's something monumental about this object: it won't be pushed over; it's in for the long haul. That concrete step for the kids means something: kids running around will always need a drink. It's free, it's clean: it's a social good.

The design of the fountain points us back to the city, to Robert Moses and the 1930s, taking federal Works Progress Administration money and building playgrounds, swimming pools, parkways, apartment blocks. He evicted more than 500,000 people from their homes in the city, in order to realize his grand plans. He publicly supported Met Life's decision to exclude Black Americans from Stuyvesant Town, a massive low- and middle-income housing development on the Lower East Side. Moses was responsible for two World's Fairs, the Triborough Bridge, Shea Stadium, Lincoln Center: the list goes on. And he built 658 playgrounds in New York City.

In 1936 Robert Moses redesigned the layout of Tompkins Square Park to make public gatherings more difficult. The history of violent repression of political demonstrations taking place in Tompkins Square Park goes back to 1857, over 130 years before the notoriously brutal police evictions of homeless people in 1988. Today there's a concrete Ping-Pong table under the tall elm trees, a handball court, free Wi-Fi, kids running around.

There's a patina to this sculpture, not merely in the colors and textures the artist made, but a larger patina that envelops the entire object: a veiling or layering of history, of different uses over time. Fiona's work amplifies the differences between the manufactured object as initially designed and that object as used and worn through time. She uses new materials to replicate old materials, combining fabrication strategies (*faux* and real) to make something that looks right and yet functions (offering water), to push past mere representation into reperformance. She builds or buries two different time scales into the object: somewhere in there is the original design (although it is a multiple, and there's no original as such) and at the same time this object drifts, tracing the multiple ways it's been used and re-used. There's an accumulation of different uses, and an accumulation of signs of decay, signs of repair.

Fiona is interested in material infidelities: the ways something new transforms over time. Part of what's going on is displacement: you can't compare the Tompkins Square drinking fountain to the one standing in the gallery because they're a few blocks apart, one is outdoors in the sun, under moving shadows, one stands quiet in the gallery. Their forms shift as you hold them in your memory. And then it turns out there's more than one in the park, and they're different, because they're all different, in time, and space, so the ideal comes apart, and the concept of copying itself starts to blur and fade.

This work, like all of Fiona's work, opens up a space where we can be with time, in time, through the material presence of the sculpture and our embodied relation to it. It brings us back to our own bodies, as we lean forward to drink some water and laugh. In that present moment, we become aware of damage, a kind of scarring, a softening of the edges, and we also see signs of repair, and persistence. The water fountain speaks of time and loss, violence, and it speaks of shared space, in its openness to everyone who comes to drink. It pulls in both directions, like the cities where we live and move, together and apart.

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No sculpture subtitled (*fountain*) can sidestep associations with Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), yet Michael Asher's understated and untitled drinking fountain of 1991 is most pertinent here. A fully functioning replica of an ordinary indoor drinking fountain usually found in school hallways and administrative offices of a certain era, Asher's fountain is situated outside on the campus of the University of California at San Diego. It is free standing (thus exposing the side that usually rests against a wall) and (unlike the indoor versions) it is made of two types of granite; it stands in a sequential and symmetrical relation to a central flagpole (and its American flag) and a large stone monument commemorating the site of Fort Matthews, a military training base from 1917 to 1964 that became the campus of UCSD. It is figurative (a representation of a drinking fountain), monumental (pointing towards a specific history), and decorative (a water feature), while also passing as a drinking fountain, used by numerous students and others for a quick drink of cold, filtered water, often without any consciousness of its status as an artwork. In a sense it masquerades as a drinking fountain, while being a sculpture, or maybe it's the other way around. It's plumbed in.

A local mythology has grown up that students should take a drink from this fountain before an exam, to get better grades. In January 2015 a masked student smashed Asher's fountain with a sledgehammer. Maybe, of the three components of the central plaza (stone monument, flagpole, drinking fountain), this was simply the easiest to destroy. As the University possesses all the specifications for the fabrication of this work, they have reconstructed it. (Michael Asher died in 2012, so he is not in a position to approve this

reconstruction, and there is therefore some debate on the decision to rebuild it from scratch.)

In the context of Asher's address to the military site, Fiona's placement of her fountain within the Lisa Cooley Gallery on Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side of New York, a ten minute walk from Tompkins Square Park, emphasizes the status of the piece as an ambivalent monument to police brutality, progressive social movements, grandiose city planning, and larger themes of social exclusion and inclusion. At the same time it's a piece of theatre, a kind of prop, or fiction: it also belongs to Los Angeles, where Fiona lives. L.A. is a city known for the industrial production of fictions, and one of the drinking fountain's many functions is to tell stories.

Fiona's community notice boards<sup>5</sup> are also storytellers, collaging together contradictory elements that point to multiple possibilities and communities. The notice boards are based on actual ones encountered by the artist in many different locations—the health food store, the public library, the day care center, etc. At first glance, these works seem merely to be facsimiles of notice boards; however, the various business cards, photocopied homemade advertisements, and lost cat notices that are pinned up have been transformed. The artist silkscreened these notices onto aluminum sheets, thus giving them a different materiality and longevity. The boards themselves she aged and distressed, using various techniques to render the marks of time passing. She placed the cork bulletin boards on the roof of her apartment building in Los Angeles, so the sun would fade their surfaces, leaving darker areas where cards were pinned.<sup>6</sup> Signs of the passage of time emerged quickly, speeded up by weather.

Like Fiona's drinking fountain, the notice boards imply a number of different temporalities: we're aware of the time of the different individuals who made the notices, as well as their access to different printing technologies and more and less sophisticated advertising techniques. Then there's the implied community of people who check the notice boards, whose needs and desires may or may not coincide with whatever's on offer. The various notices imply a shared location: church meeting hall, preschool, or local café. There's the temporary quality of the notices themselves: once all the phone number tags have been torn off the bottom of the page, there's no phoning the seller. Many of the notices are obsolete, out of time, and the community notice board itself seems like a holdover from other times. Yet it persists, despite our shared digital communities, like a materialized website in real time and space.

There are incomplete traces of multiple narratives here and, perhaps most telling, there's a shift in value, as we spend time with that which is ordinarily overlooked. Like the drinking fountain, the notice board may be almost invisible, or merely useful (if we need a cat sitter or a drink of water), but we do not regard it as an object of contemplation, with meanings to interpret and unfold. An unlikely space opens

up, where the often overlooked comes forward, declining to explain itself yet making room for our imagination and surmise.

In the spring of 2015, Fiona decided to use her living space, a rented second floor apartment on Cloverdale Avenue in Los Angeles, as a gallery. She decided this project should last one year, and she named the gallery after a close family friend, Laurel Doody. She has presented a series of exhibitions there and soon (summer 2016) she will be moving out of the apartment, and Laurel Doody will find a new iteration. For a few days in 2015, Fiona showed a work that consisted of a repetition of part of the apartment's kitchen wall, titled *Wall Section (home)* (2015).<sup>7</sup> Here, the original kitchen wall stands in a parallel relation to the sculpture of the kitchen wall. Through the juxtaposition to the original wall, the fictional dimension of the sculpture was foregrounded, while at the same time original wall became something like a sculpture.

In *Wall Section (home)*, Fiona selected and copied and displaced part of the (often overlooked) domestic architecture, to make an artwork that was displayed within that same architectural space. The effect is to disrupt and conflate some fundamental spatial categories. These might distinguish between the artwork on display, as opposed to the space in which it is displayed; they might also distinguish between the artwork as a finished object for display, as opposed to the space of its making, the studio space. Most crucially, these categories would separate out the artist's living space (a space for sleeping, talking, thinking) from the space for display and the studio space. Here these different possibilities overlap and collide, in a reconsideration of the spatial and temporal boundaries that disconnect an artist's (private) life, and art making, from the social space of discussion and display.

While living at this apartment, Fiona used an old, oddly shaped, thick wooden chopping board to prepare food; it is now inserted into the wall in the bedroom of Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, a Los Angeles based writer and curator, and titled *Insert (chopping board)* (2016).<sup>8</sup> The insertion of the chopping board into the wall acknowledges its use for domestic and gallery-related food preparation, and removes it from either, in order to articulate the different ways that the labor (kitchen work) of the artist was a key component in the multi-layered project (living, making, and showing artwork) that was Laurel Doody. The worn chopping board was itself transformed through its displacement and removal from use in a vertical orientation: it becomes a wall work. The only access we have is visual, at this point, and then only when Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer invites us into her room.

There's a half-joke built into this work, because chopping boards are often hung on the wall (especially in a small kitchen) and this one has a hole in its handle, now filled with a beautiful circle of drywall. With the board inserted so precisely into its surface, the wall itself is transformed

into something that preserves these traces of labor, social exchange, enjoyment, and the endless discussions of life, love, art, and all the other things that take place when people cook and eat together. The shape of this chopping board is idiosyncratic and worn; it is a used object, and as such points to a valuation of the past, the anachronistic object. What comes through is a sense that the board is a small memorial (wall plaque?) to the unrecorded conversations, laughter, and forgotten encounters of these social situations, large and small.

It's clear that Fiona's sculpture of the drinking fountain is not an exact copy or facsimile, but more like a replica or a model. It relies on memory, which is always a process of remembering and misremembering. *Memories are always incomplete*. The object drifts, from one location to another, and its form drifts too, as Fiona's reconstruction makes a fiction of the drips of fat behind the stove, the dust on the electric socket. The chopping board is unusual in that it is the thing itself (it was not fabricated by the artist) and its insertion into the writer's wall insists on a specific site. I would suggest that the actual chopping board, however idiosyncratic, is always subordinated to its function as a surface on which to chop food. Fiona's interest in unremarkable design objects (cheaply printed notices, public drinking fountains, sinks, gallery benches, architectural forms) is located not only in their multiple implied temporalities and locations, but also in the multiple uses that haunt them, in the layering of histories and functions.

We think of decay and repair as the scars and traces of deterioration, but they are also merely the marks of time and the accumulation of stories that fuse with the object. Fiona's work points to an elsewhere (which in the case of the kitchen wall is very nearby, in the case of the drinking fountain a short walk down the street) and yet returns us to a present, a here and now, where we can unfold and open up possible readings and interpretations of the piece. This movement between spaces (actual and imaginary), and between and among different temporalities built into the work, structures her work and holds it in dynamic tension.

Contemplating the different times suspended in the object opens up a connection between the sculpture, a thing in the world, and an awareness of myself as a thing in the world, something that's been used and worn, something that holds many different stories. Time may be the deep link that connects us to the things of our world, and reading and re-reading the material signs of time passing allows these fictions and histories to resonate and echo within them.

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