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Elana Herzog on Plaid



Elana Herzog
Installation view of *Plaid* (2007)
Smack Mellon, Brooklyn

Each site has its challenges: formal, conceptual, and practical. Curiosity and desire confront the demands of the physical and institutional world—space, time, and resources. For me this relationship is crucial to the realization of a project. It's like a puzzle. What can I do with the time, space, money, and expertise available? Smack Mellon, located in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn, has a gigantic, elegant, and raw main gallery with large windows overlooking the East River and the two bridges crossing over it. Toward the back is a smaller gallery with no windows which, by comparison, feels small and dark—almost cave-like. Its 12' ceilings, perfectly adequate anywhere else, feel low by comparison. This is where my recent project, *Plaid*, is sited.

In planning *Plaid* I wanted to take both spaces into account. The project gallery felt like an appendage of a giant, so I treated it as an object rather than a miniature exhibition space. I didn't want the experience of walking into *Plaid* to be one of scaling down, although there are scale shifts within the piece. I wanted the room to *be* the piece, rather than to contain it. To one wall I've stapled an expanse of brown plaid wool fabric with hundreds of staples. Parts of the fabric and staples have been removed, leaving an image that reads as though submerged in the surface of the wall. The surface is abraded—scarred and tattooed—by the act of stapling. This is the only gallery wall that is “drawn” upon. Moving clockwise from this wall the drawing punctuates other surfaces that are connected to the gallery walls, but they remain

punctuates other surfaces that are connected to the gallery walls, but they remain stark and white.

Plaid aspires to both austerity and excess. It is simultaneously garish and restrained. It has a relationship to Modernism, both reverent and irreverent, as does much of my work. This is the language I grew up with, but have never felt ownership of. To the extent that I operate from a position of alienation, my relationship to both high and low culture remains vicarious. I've always thought of myself as a sculptor, and enjoy tinkering with that identity. My materials, often cheap, tacky, or discarded household items and fabric, challenge conventions of taste and beauty and draw attention to how art and design migrate throughout culture, from high to low and back again, reinterpreted by industry to meet the needs of different markets and trends. My work negotiates a thin line between attraction and repulsion, pain and pleasure, vulgar and sublime. I am fascinated by the way form is generated by growth and decay, construction and destruction. The late 1990s saw a gradual withering away of any independent structure in my pieces, until finally they became completely dependent upon their surroundings for support. I began working directly on the walls, embedding materials in drywall by channeling into it with screwdrivers and hammers, and by stapling fabric to its surface. Suddenly I was drawing, and the wall was an integral part of my pieces.

For some years I've been engrossed in a body of work in which I staple found textiles—usually bedspreads and carpets—to the walls using thousands of metal staples. Parts of the fabric and the staples are then removed and sometimes reapplied, leaving a residue of shredded fabric and perforated wall surface in some areas, and densely stapled and built-up areas elsewhere. In these “drawings” staples act as mark and material, penetrating, distressing, and ornamenting the skin of the wall. The progressively dematerialized image, articulated by metal staples and fabric residue, seems to be simultaneously emerging from and disappearing into the wall. The stapled “drawing” mimics the patterns and weave of the fabric, and a kind of binary language emerges—staple being analogous to stitch.



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As an act of making, the work takes place within the larger continuum of human

technology. It is process-based in the sense that it is a product of action and reaction—an act that generates form that generates another act, and so on. Both rational and irrational forces are in play, and the synapses between acts hold the key to meaning. New form emerges from the remains of old. Large bedspreads reference the monolithic rectangles of abstract painting as well as bed and body, and I find myself riffing off of artists like Frank Stella, Sol Lewitt, and Mark Rothko. A series of pieces made with Persian-type carpets speaks to my frustration with current geopolitical crisis as well as to issues of value and display, collection and loss.

Recently I've become interested in altering the spaces in which I work as well as their surfaces. I've been designing and building new walls on which to mount my panels. New challenges abound. How do I integrate the sculptural with the pictorial? What is the relationship between surface and mass? How will viewers move through the piece? In these works there is no one privileged view; vantage point shifts as the piece is traversed. How does meaning change when my work shifts from monolithic bedspreads posed almost as if paintings to an emphasis on surface as an aspect of architecture? *Plaid* is my most recent response to these questions.

Plaid continues an exploration of the relationship between built structures and their surfaces. In previous projects the constructions I've designed looked a lot like conventional walls, but *Plaid* departs from this with horizontal platforms, a square column and low partition-like forms. The simple forms are continuous, moving around the perimeter of the room and then into the center. There is an ambiguity as to what I've added and what was already there. The stapled areas are fragmented, traveling from vertical to horizontal surface and back again, twisting in and around the built forms. They creep like stains, seeping in and out, oozing, being absorbed. The dark plaid reads graphically on the expanses of stark white wall. The shifting surfaces seem to echo the plaid pattern.

I'm making an explicit reference to sculpture here by using freestanding and architecturally eccentric forms and by the way the fabric and staples operate on them. Most of the forms were fabricated in my studio and their surfaces worked on "in the round." Made with the most pedestrian of means—studs and drywall, mud and paint—the piece participates in the language of interior renovation that we live with every day; Richard Serra and Lewitt (again) meet office partition. The plaid fabric creeps organically around the room, still dominated by a pervasive Modernist grid. Without the defining rectangle of bedspread or carpet, the reference to painting disappears. *Plaid* is made from yardage of fabric—straight off the bolt, potentially endless—but was actually bought from a store that was making its last sale before going out of business. In some fashion it heralds its own obsolescence.

Elana Herzog's exhibition Plaid will be on view at Smack Mellon until November 11. Her work is also currently included in a two-person exhibition at LMAK Projects in New York and in Material Pursuits at the University of Vermont's Fleming Museum. Herzog, a two-time NYFA Sculpture Fellow, recently completed a project for the Zurich-based artist-run space K3.

For more information on Elana Herzog, visit:
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