REVIEWS MAY 08, 2015

Claudia Comte

NEW YORK,
at Gladstone

by Tatiana Istomina

View of Claudia Comte's exhibition "No Melon No Lemon," 2015, at Gladstone.

For her first New York exhibition, Swiss artist Claudia Comte transformed Gladstone Gallery into a small museum of her own. Suggesting a curious blend of modern art, ethnography and natural history, the show contained a family of totemlike wooden sculptures and painted geometric abstractions, all living in symbiosis with each other and with their carefully designed habitat. Comte's immersive installation resembled a museum not only in its contents and layout, but also in its ability to create the impression of a separate universe regulated by a system of particular, if obscure, rules.

Comte's universe was composed of surprisingly few building blocks. Its two major structural elements were fields of vertical lemon-yellow stripes painted on the walls to a height of nearly 20 feet, and wooden panels charred to a deep black and featuring parallel grooves cut into them with a chainsaw. The wooden panels performed several functions: some were used to build freestanding walls dividing the space into four sections; others covered large portions of the gallery walls, producing a strong continuous rhythm with the yellow-striped areas. In addition, portions of the panels were cut out and used to build shelves of varying heights for Comte's sculptures and to open windows onto sections of the installation. Yellow-striped paintings were hung around the perimeter of the room, their bands paralleling or running perpendicular to those on the walls. Walking through the installation, observing its shifting patterns of crisscrossing lines and changing views framed by the cutout windows, was an amusing and slightly disorienting experience.

While Comte's canvases were as impersonal as the finest examples of reductive abstraction, each of her wooden sculptures had its own character. Modeled with a chainsaw out of tree logs, their surfaces sanded and oiled to a glossy polish, they were full of personality and gentle humor: an egg-shaped mass with a circular hole piercing its side, a couple of slightly bent cylinders hugging each other, a pole with two wooden donuts impaled on it. When looking closely at the various wood surfaces in Comte's installation, one saw the rational order of her universe dissolving, with a network of random, uncontrollable effects—cracks and textural variations; slight swerves in the panels' incised grooves—taking over.

Comte's influences are numerous and easily recognizable: Jean Arp and Constantin Brancusi, Bridget Riley and Daniel Buren, Isamu Noguchi and Barbara Hepworth, not to mention cartoons and comic books. What is most compelling about her art, however, is its impulse to impose its logic on the space it inhabits. Her paintings and sculptures generally employ bases or backdrops, which create display-type environments that demand more objects, her system of forms and relations spreading out like fungus, covering wider and wider territory. It is the same impulse that drove the utopian dream of Russian Constructivists, who attempted to create a visual language that would transform the world into a cosmos of ideal forms.

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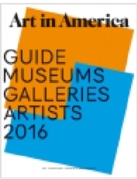

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