

Nature on a path of no return

Text von Anna Szaflarski

The Acme corporation, is a fictional corporation which produces products that violate the laws of physics and are often depicted in American cartoons such as Roger Rabbit, or Wile E. Coyote. One of these objects is known as the "Portable Hole." Roger Rabbit would take this product out of its packing, a slippery and flexible disk, and when applied to a physical surface it would create an instantaneous opening. The integrity of the object that it came into contact with would come into question. The hole could then be removed and applied elsewhere and the same would happen. But these products of logic-defying abilities have their own sense of humor and at the most inopportune moment, would fail resulting in a 'pulling-the-chair-from-underneath-you' slap-stick catastrophic result.

Nature, un-affected by Acme, commands certain rules of laws, and all of its subjects must abide. For instance, gravity is reigned by mass which all objects coincidentally have, and light by energy and geometry which no object in space can debate. These are not options, they are demands. And every variation of form that nature creates plays within the limitations of these laws, which dictate certain energies and movements that leave traces and transformations behind. This is just the kind of positivist logic that Verena Schmidt deals with ironically and from which her objects are yanked away from, but nonetheless can never completely let go of.

In her own words, a stone will be rubbed away by water or its form will change when eroded by the wind, but it remains a part of nature and unlike objects that are transformed in the world of production, which become often trash and worthless, it will generally be perceived as beautiful and hold a legitimate role in the order of things. Schmidt is fascinated by transformations in material that natural phenomena create. She mimics her findings not only by documenting samples but by laboriously imitating them and manipulating materials such as stone, rubber, wood, glass, paper etc. Schmidt purposely chooses to apply these forms to materials which do not necessarily naturally accept them. For instance, the shapes found in a small stone, can be magnified and transferred to wood, and vice versa. By changing a material against its nature (or function, in the case of a found cultural object) into something it is not, she comes to better understand its form, purpose and perhaps even history, but also tears it away from its habitat and forever installing it as an object in the realm of culture and invention, never again to return to a state of nature or its unquestioned beauty.

Instead, disconnected from its habitat the stone becomes a mockery. Its existence is no longer justified simply by the vaster logic of nature, but becomes a prop in an experimental game. When the stone is brought into the studio, it is a single entity that will undergo a concentrated individual transformation. As the chisel is dug into the various facets of the stone the natural forces that have shaped it are acknowledged. But its new form will not follow the laws of those forces and instead is prepared for a new world. Each piece in Schmidt's exhibition is prepared and engaged with in such a fashion: individually provoked, manipulated and given various options of possible behavior.

The real Acme-effect happens when the elements meet. The coral-shaped rock and the charred wood are given new behavioral capabilities and are confronted with manipulated found objects or various materials such as wooden palettes, manufactured tiles, bricks and their cardboard version.

These objects some emerging more recently from a state of nature, others existing longer in the realm of culture now exist on the same plane and need to ultimately negotiate with each other in their new environment where nature does not apply. When the sculptures confront each other, they are introduced to the tricks of the comic world. Paint and printmaking are Schmidt's portable holes. They can collapse three dimensional spaces into flat silhouettes. The surfaces of some sculptures become printing blocks, leaving what she calls 'portable shadows' around. Like Roger Rabbit's Acme holes these shadows are movable and defy the rules of physicality and light. Simultaneously, blocks of bright paint ignore the boundaries of objects and flatten certain perspectives in her exhibition. Bright colors of signal red, yellow, blue, and orange contrast various shades of pastel tones creating bouquets of carefully composed arrangements. When moving through an installation it perpetually fluctuates between three and two-dimensional planes: at one moment exposing you to a world that you can enter, at another confronting you with a closed painting.

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Acme products are transportable, can be reapplied, and open possibilities in what we assumed to be closed circumstances. A marble sculpture, for instance installed as part of Schmidt's "Master Student Exhibition" (2014), was carved into a luscious coral that stood triumphantly on top of another rough marble block. On its second appearance, however, it was placed inside an empty tightly fitting glass aquarium. The sculpture transitioned from an installation that hinted to its past to one that humorously amplified its current form, which only emphasizes that the sculptures are never meant to stop redefining their behavior or story. When unpacked, her objects are constantly interchangeable, never static, never in a finished state and can be arranged into new constellations of behaviors in each exhibition, defying even the agreed-upon laws from previous installations. Schmidt takes on the challenge of the proverbial door-less room, or escape-less cliff. Her work tells a story of on the one side a fascination and respect for the power of a greater order, and on the other the refusal to accept that it has finite limitations. And her work will evade those limitations as there will always be a magical hole, an enterable landscape painting, or a gravity defying effect offering an escape plan to sculptures between a rock and a hard place.

Among the weightless cartoon bricks, the flowering coral marble, the traveling shadows, and colorful disappearing acts, is a honey comb attached to a charred sculpture. It is an artifact of an entire miniscule cosmos harkening back to the behavior of a world left behind. At closer inspection between the curves of the coral imitation, the marble's veins speak of formation under intense pressure, and a piece of wood's rings of years of little rain and years of abundance. These stories remain as an undercurrent throughout the exhibition. Beneath the louder and newer voices they remain like whispers of the preceding chapters of nature on a path of no return.