

Spence



Kathryn Spence: Dirty and Clean

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



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San Francisco-based artist Kathryn Spence is an avid birder and a nature lover. One of the foremost characteristics of those who like to unobtrusively observe animals in their natural habitats is that they place incredible value in something found, fleeting, or incidental. Spence finds a parallel merit in her art through the discarded and “fleeting” materials she finds for her sculptures, which also portray particular and incidental moments in time.

For this exhibition, Spence predominantly presents two different types of sculpture. One body of work brings to mind zoology, as it captures an instant in the life of an animal she has observed in nature, re-creating it with incredible veracity from cast-off materials. The other, reminiscent of archeology, deals with humans and the material remains of our culture; it is presented through wooden, architectural-like structures that organize and display, with almost scientific exactitude, the discarded materials of our time. And some sculptures combine the two tendencies: they look like miniature skylines, inhabited by life-size animals.

Spence is also inspired by the dichotomy of “dirty and clean” in the production of her sculptures and installations. Using found, conventionally wasted materials, she re-creates lifelike animals and intriguing structures that scrupulously pile, layer, and transform the cast-off materials. Spence’s nuanced, obsessive, and busy gathering of seemingly “dirty” used materials has its counterpart in the way she impeccably reorganizes them in the studio. Eventually her pristine order and intense transformation renders them into unique creatures and structures ready to inhabit the “clean” space of the museum gallery. Paradoxically, the artist considers that on occasion her work has the opposite effect: she dirties the gathered materials because the dirt distances them from “consumer” sensibility; in those cases it is the dirt that “cleans” the sculptures.

By freeing her materials from foreign and extraneous matter (either dirt or consumerism) and making this process the basis for her practice, Spence is appealing to the notion of cleansing—and, perhaps, grooming—as a means to find a common ground between the realms of nature, animals, and humans. Social grooming in animals, for example, is an activity by which they strengthen family links and build relationships. In some species it has been known to be a form of reconciliation, an activity that helps in conflict resolution. Scientists have observed that this socially performed activity creates bonds and builds trust amongst the members of a community. In Spence’s work, perhaps the back and forth between “dirty and clean” and “clean and dirty” is an exercise of communion that challenges the various barriers between nature and human, animal and human, self-sufficiency and consumerism. It also points to the unfortunate invasion of the natural environment by human-produced garbage, the result of uncontrolled mass production and disregard for our own habitat.

Resourcefulness and self-sufficiency are also at the core of Spence’s work. The use of neglected and abandoned materials ensures that she always has prime matter for her art and also attests to her ability to weave discarded objects together with her own reconciliatory narratives. She learned to be resourceful from her grandparents, who lived during the depression era and had drawers of saved, previously mailed envelopes, rubber band balls, aluminum foil balls, and wads of fabric scraps—all

tied together. If they needed any of these items in the future, they could rely on their own stockpiles.

Paradoxically, with today's abundance of consumer goods and an aggressive culture of consumerism, a misinterpreted resourcefulness has for some found its evil twin in the unquenched desire for accumulation and pathological hoarding. Hoarding has become common to the point of being featured on a popular TV series: *Hoarding: Buried Alive* explores the psychology behind compulsive storing. Spence's accumulations participate in this notion of hoarding, yet are overtaken by the greater compulsion of organization.

When seen from afar, works such as *Untitled* (2011) may perhaps bring to mind a cart containing the belongings of a homeless person or a "bag lady." However, on closer inspection, the obsessive ordering of the materials in stacks, piles, and bundles, and the balanced composition of the overall cluster, allows us to find relationships and commonalities amongst all the parts. It is my belief that we may feel attraction and repulsion in the realization that some of the portions of the sculpture look like that drawer where we store things we don't know what else to do with. We feel embarrassed at recognizing similarities with our personal and chaotic accumulations, yet we are relieved to identify with the work and the feeling that someone understands our dark little secret: Spence's work speaks of reconciliation. And if we spend time admiring the colors and textures, and are captured by the sheer fascination of the materiality of the piece, we may find ourselves broadening our own definition of beauty.



Red Fox, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco



Short sharp notes, a long whistled trill on one pitch, clear phrases (detail), 2010–11
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

If we find beauty in nature, we will see it in Spence’s recreations of wild animals. From afar, her animals hold an uncanny resemblance to the attitude, posture, and spatial location they would have if they were real and outdoors. As a result of years of dedicated birding, Spence is capable of distinguishing particular species from a great distance and is able to portray clear, distinct personalities and identities with incredible exactitude. Under close scrutiny, her owls, foxes, butterflies, and birds—made of discarded scraps—and bunnies crafted from mud become almost abstract bundles of stuff. At this proximity, the illusion of reality disappears and we are left wondering how she can convey so many animated characteristics through piles of fabric, pieces of old stuffed animals, scraps of paper, wire and string. Spence excels at straddling the worlds of figuration and abstraction. In our appreciation of her work, we are forced to go back and forth between the two, and so we halt one type of perception in order to give in to another.

Similar discontinuity appears in the floor piece titled *Short sharp notes, a long whistled trill, clear phrases* (2010–11). This long sculpture/installation suggests a narrative comprised of “chapters,” of displays and accumulations of related materials placed on varied wooden structures. The structures break up the way the objects are used and arranged, and also play with scale: for instance, when a life-size animal whose physical presence resonates with reality is placed next to a magazine cut-out showing a tiny representation of that same animal, at a great distance, in the landscape. The space is broken between these two notions of distance and their representation: up close and present, and far away and represented. Both are simultaneously available in this one piece. Spence explains: “The space in this work

Untitled (Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, Monarch, Red Admiral, Duskywing, American Lady, Mourning Cloak, Common Buckeye), 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco



is broken up by going from things that fit into a sort of ‘landscape,’ but then it is interrupted by things that are more immediate, of the scale related to your body. Once you perceive the latter, that cancels out the notion of landscape.”

Visual and tactile properties are not the only ones to inhabit Spence’s work. Dr. Stephanie Hanor, director of Mills College Art Museum,¹ is keen to point out another important aspect of Spence’s work: sound. “Kathryn Spence spends a lot of time listening and looking ... she has trained her eyes and ears to bring the visual and aural chaos of her surroundings into recognizable order.”² Regarding the accumulations, Hanor adds they bring together Spence’s own way of “seeing and hearing nature with her interest in the way we typically experience it in the ‘real’ world.”³ In the real world we are bombarded with an endless array of visual and aural details that we have to simplify and organize in our minds in order to properly function. The title *short sharp notes, rolling or churring whistles, clear phrases* comes from Spence’s listening to bird vocalizations. “The visual rhythms and pauses in her work relate as much to listening to nature as they do to looking at nature,” explains Hanor. She adds, “Through her work, she invites us all to surrender to the natural properties of sound and sight.”⁴

I would like to add that Spence also invites us to remove ourselves from consumerism, and to find—through awareness of our own excessive waste production and a “dirty/clean/grooming” process—a common ground for the communion of all of us: plants, animals, and humans.

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, curator

1 Kathryn Spence’s exhibition at The Aldrich was originally conceived in partnership with Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, CA, and consequently much of the work shown here was first featured at Mills. Spence has reconfigured some pieces in order to better respond to the architecture of the gallery at The Aldrich.

2 Dr. Stephanie Hanor, *Kathryn Spence: short sharp notes, rolling or churring whistles, clear phrases*, exhibition catalogue (Oakland: Mills College Art Museum, 2010), p. 9.

3 Hanor, p. 9.

4 Hanor, p. 11.



Barred Owl and Object, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

look. look again.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Short sharp notes, a long whistled trill on one pitch, clear phrases (detail), 2010–11
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco



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