



A LETTER TO RAPHAEL RUBENSTEIN FROM DANIEL WIENER
JULIA KUNIN: KNIGHTWOOD

Dear Raphael,

I am addressing this letter to you in honor of the art criticism we wrote together in the 1980s, trading paper manuscripts back and forth with revisions long before the “convenience” of sending texts through the digital ether. I have been thinking about your recent writing on “provisional painting” and have seen the work of two sculptors whose current shows may present an alternative take on the provisional.

First is Jeanne Silverthorne’s exhibition at McKee Gallery. As is common in her work, the literal and thematic source for the sculpture is Silverthorne’s own studio. Yet the rubber replicas here do not document the studio space, but rather present vignettes from an ongoing and incomplete narrative. Silverthorne uses her studio like Faulkner uses Yoknapatawpha County or Thomas Hardy uses Wessex—made-up places that mirror where the writers actually lived, inhabited by fictional characters who mirror their actual neighbors. In this artist’s case, the borders of her fictional “county” are the walls of one room, which is inhabited by only one human character: Jeanne Silverthorne. And so, through this exhibition, I enter “Jeanne’s studio” and observe. A moth flies in and circles abare, compact fluorescent bulb (“Moth and Bulb,” 2010). An annoying intruder from the outsideworld, the moth disturbs the artist’s concentration. The creature navigates by keeping a constant angle to the moon, but its innate talent as an astronomer malfunctions when the light source is so close, and thus it progresses nowhere. I can picture “Jeanne,” like the moth, circling around and around the studio, trusting her inner compass and then pausing, with hands pressed up against the wall, looking down (“Untitled (Self Portrait),” 2011). Perhaps she wonders wearily whether her navigational system is as defective as the moth’s. Or maybe she notices a discarded fragment of plasticine, glimpsing therein a compelling accidental form that can be copied and enlarged as a sculpture (“Fragment,” 2011). And then she is off, circling her studio again. Fighting the good fight, if fatalistically, like her “Skeleton with Boxing Gloves” (2012). The moth is not the only intruder here. In “Studio Floor with Dandelions and Bee” (2010) we encounter dandelions growing through the floorboards. As a weed, the dandelion may be as exasperating an interloper as the moth, but it is also a sign of the vigorous life beyond the studio walls. Despite its references to tenacious natural growth, the dandelion is among the few plants that reproduce without fertilization (no sex) and do not require interchange with an outside source (a bee). The seeds are replicas of the parent plant, distributed by the wind or by a child exhaling on a parachute puff (“Dandelion Clock,” 2012).

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I wonder if I need to spell out the correlation between the dandelion's life cycle and "Jeanne's" life-sustaining yet almost airtight "studio."

Next is Nightwood, Julia Kunin's exhibition at Greenberg Van Doren (the title invokes Djuna Barnes's novel from 1936). Here the sculptures appear to be smaller, more traditional autonomous works on bases, yet together they form a fictive world of dense allusions that the viewer needs to unpack. "Janus of Flowers" (2010) is a vessel-like object made of a luminous, reflective clutter of cast petals. Like the two-faced Roman god, the piece looks both to the past and to the future. With luscious references made to the material culture of European nobility (the Pop of the past), Kunin's reverence for the artisans of history is palpable. I sense that her passion for the inventiveness of lesser-known decorative artists is, in turn, the wellspring of her own inventiveness as a sculptor. Since Kunin's work is notable for what it does not include from our present—no branding, no social media, no mass media, no Pop (what a relief)—it can be difficult to see how the sculpture engages with the future in turn. Yet without alluding to anything topical, "Janus of Flowers" embodies the anxiety of impending social dissolution; its luxurious exterior can barely contain the catastrophe within. Along the same line, "Nightshade" (2011) evokes a building in the process of a nervous breakdown. We feel as if we were privy to the poisoned life behind the red-brick facade. This building could be made from an imagined "nightwood," a type of lumber that is only used in the shade of the night, a timber for nocturnal terrors and insomnia. As I look at "Nightshade" more closely, I realize it also suggests a face with a wild architectonic hair-do. Bridging contradictory states and qualities, "Gargantua" (2011) and "Golden Grove" (2011) partake of the refined extravagance of gold Rococo dinnerware, yet at the same time seem to have been ravaged by engineered firepower. These clumps of half-molten indulgence are delicately balanced at a moment somewhere between their creation and destruction. Were they fired in a kiln or forged by nuclear holocaust? Love and fear of fire are united in every accumulated detail. Like a Chinese scholar's rock, "Butterfly Rock" (2011), assembled from casts of butterflies, is made the focus of prolonged reverie and meditation. It takes the shape of a bridge, spanning the chasm between the calm constancy of a stone and the erratic flight of countless butterflies. And it hints, finally, at a possible resolution between the slow activity of making sculpture and the restlessly inventive mind of the sculptor. Given their mastery of craft, Kunin and Silverthorne lend their sculptures none of the transient, makeshift formal qualities to which you, Raphael, have eloquently pointed in defining provisional painting. However, in both bodies of work a deep skepticism about the efficacy of cultural enterprise prevails. Like the ants marching over dynamite in one of Silverthorne's sculptures, we lack the tools to foretell our own annihilation. Perhaps it is not a particular style of painting that is provisional, but all human endeavor.

Yours,
Daniel