

C o n t i n g e n t R e a l m s

Four Contemporary Sculptors

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Adam D. Weinberg, former Branch Director,
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Gallery Coordinator.

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Cover:

Lisa Hoke, *Plexus*, 1988

Contingent Realms

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In the wake of the recent explosion of appropriation art — the quotation and cooption of existing imagery and objects, particularly from the media and industry — new stylistic and conceptual forms have arisen. These forms, represented by the artists in “Contingent Realms,” are neither purely appropriational nor purely invented. Linda Roush lifts manufactured domestic objects and found photographs, altering their color and original use and recontextualizing them within compositions of her own devising; Jessica Stockholder combines secondhand clothing, appliances, street detritus, personal items, and construction materials — much of which she paints. Sarah Seager appropriates utilitarian items such as ax handles and furniture legs and minimizes their original purpose by isolating them and using monochrome white elements; and Lisa Hoke has made casts from vegetables and recently has begun to incorporate inexpensive commercial items into her abstract linear structures. But to confuse resemblance with dependence would be a mistake. In the very process of appropriating, these artists depart from appropriation art.

With much appropriated art there is a sense of futility, a belief that originality is extremely limited, if not altogether impossible. These artists acknowledge that reference to preexisting cultural manifestations is both inescapable and even desirable. However, for them, the potential of creation itself is real: not through a romantic belief in the discovery of entirely new forms, but through hybridization, that is, the selective, strategic, and unabashed amalgamation of what already exists with elements drawn from the imagination. As Jessica Stockholder has written, “It is exciting to realize that meaning is of our own making both collectively and individually. . . . The knowledge that we have invented our own world does not erase the possibility that we might believe in it.”

The work of these four artists is hybrid in form no less than in content. Although their art seems to be sculptural, it resists such a definitive label, for it addresses issues akin to two-dimensional media — painting, drawing, and photography — as well as to sculpture itself. Two of the artists, Sarah Seager and Jessica Stockholder, began their careers as painters and currently use paint as an integral aspect of their constructions.



Linda Roush, who began as a weaver, is now most concerned with the use of light, reflection, shadow, transparency, and other two-dimensional effects. Lisa Hoke, the most classic sculptor of the group, creates objects that allude as much to drawing as to three-dimensionality.

Most important, the work of these artists is architecturally based because it encompasses or impinges on its environment. This is not, however, environmental or installation art, which is primarily concerned with the transformation of space, often through an overt theatricality. Hoke's wire sculptures could not exist without the ceiling and wall through which they are threaded; objects in Stockholder's site-specific "installations" frequently lean against, are anchored in, or are attached to the walls. Roush is often inspired by "utopian" architects, such as Mies van der Rohe, and their use of glass; and Sarah Seager's objects, though intrinsically less architectural because of their spareness, fragility, and the way they rely on the walls and floor, are more dependent on and call attention to the architecture of the gallery itself. The modification of space, although purposeful, seems to be an almost casual consequence of their specific interest in object making. In the end, the significance of each work resides in how and what it reveals about the conventions of the gallery.

Generally speaking, these artists attempt to maintain a critical, sometimes uneasy, balance among the pictorial, the sculptural, and the architectural. These are conditional works: if you read them as paintings you draw certain conclusions; if you read them sculpturally or architecturally you draw others. Their success in large measure lies in their indefinable state, their unstable relationship to the world at large, and the disorienting psychological, perceptual, and physical effect they have on the viewer.

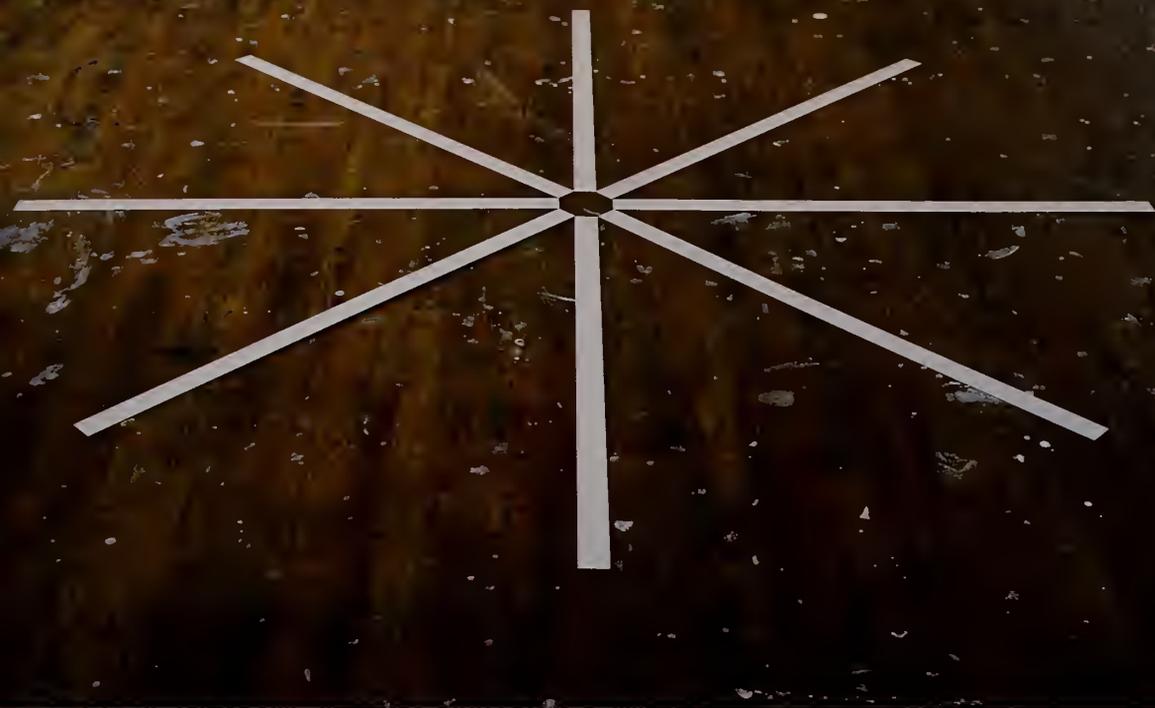
Lisa Hoke's organic and technological forms are precarious in more sense than one. Works such as *Levet* (1987) and *Equilibrium* (1989) are carefully but dangerously balanced. The latter is a cyclonic mass of pendulous wire scribbles perilously held above the viewer's head by the weight of a compact, solitary torpedo shape. *Levet* consists of a large metal hoop anchored fast to the wall by the pressure of a gourdlike element. The dramatic gestural qualities of the wire in *Equilibrium* and the restrained linearity of *Levet* suggest drawings in space. The delicate tension between their two- and three-dimensionality is as crucial as the weights that keep them suspended. Each work also has abstract qualities that are offset by referential elements. The torpedo form of

Equilibrium recalls the artist's childhood as the daughter of a Navy test pilot, while in *Levee* the fleshy, waggish vegetable, an archetypal, organic form, compensates for the severe geometric linearity and impersonality of the wire and hoop. In such works, the anecdotal is balanced with the universal, the severe with the humorous.

Plexus (1988) is an unassuming, intimate, but absorbing work. A pair of circular metal plates is asymmetrically affixed to adjacent corners of a wall; between the plates, on a web of four wires, are suspended three lozenge shapes that look more like smooth pebbles than metal. The circular forms themselves are two-dimensional, quasi-pictorial compositions of scratched lines. The network of steel gray wires is reminiscent of Richard Tuttle's wire pieces; when seen in relationship to the off-center line of the corner, the aspect of three-dimensional drawing in space is emphasized, further sustaining a pictorial reading. At the same time, the structural emplacements and connections in *Plexus* heighten the viewer's awareness of the architecture. The supporting wall structure is as important as the work itself.

Hoke's aptly named *Malaprop* (1990) is a jocular composition of dark, loosely coiled wire and a clear plastic, striated, and polka-dot shower curtain. The emphatic circular form of the wire is whimsically echoed by the colorful spots on the curtain. Although the work permits and even beckons us to move around it, it is essentially a two-dimensional piece that defeats a purely sculptural reading because it can be seen at once from a single point of view. The polka dots playfully suggest the optical configurations painted in the early 1960s by artists such as Larry Poons, while the ponderous, horizontal metal bar and the title itself pun on Richard Serra's lead sculpture *Prop* (1968). Like Serra's work, many of Hoke's sculptures are precariously balanced but, unlike *Prop*, they remain stable and vivacious rather than treacherous.

Sarah Seager continues to create and exhibit drawings and paintings. Other works, however, move out of the realm of painting and into a wider arena. Here it is not merely the fact that she fabricates, finds, and alters objects, but that the work is conditional and provocative. The monochromatic use of white joins the disparate forms. As Gaston Bachelard has written in his *Poetics of Space*, "A single value suffices to coordinate any number of dreams. And it is always like that, the poetic image is under the domination of a heightened quality." So it is with white in Seager's work: it coordinates but does not fix forms and meanings. It is against this field of potentiality and diminished distractions that Seager quietly provokes our fancy.



Sarah Seager, *Octagon*, 1990

Handles (1990) is a grouping of seven handles of various tools — axes, mallets, and hammers. They lean, rhythmically arranged in a symmetrical sequence against a white wall. Six of the handles have a single, narrow band of industrial white enamel. Seager's alterations are so slight; the bands themselves look almost as if they were original to the handles. They intensify our awareness of the grain of the wood, the variations of shape, and the angle of display.

Other works by Seager propose that they might be thought of in terms of painting as much as sculpture. The *Rail* (1990) is a spare, 8-foot strip of folded steel that rests ever so gingerly on two brown, somewhat decorative metal feet. The rail looks specially fabricated while the feet have the appearance of found and transplanted objects. The steel bar, graceful, ethereal, and the epitome of whiteness, like a single, isolated stroke of paint, could be interpreted as a metaphor for the relationship of paint, or painting, to its physical support. Is the difference between a painting and a sculpture the difference between fusion and separation?

Untitled (Lean) (1990) — a painted white canvas resting against the wall — seems to ask, at what point does a painting become a sculpture or vice versa? The paint is



Sarah Seager, *Handles*, 1990

contingent on the support of the canvas, the canvas is contingent on the wall, the wall is contingent on the architecture, and we the viewers are part of this uncertain relationship. The symmetrical arrangement of *Octagon* (1990), with its eight thin strips of steel, painted with white enamel, constitutes a two-dimensional composition. Seen from a short distance, the strips illusionistically recede into space. The white metal lines virtually adhere to the floor and seem as if they could or should extend, thus implicating the architecture itself. The floor becomes the canvas for the sculpture. The intrinsically sculptural aspect of this work is subtle indeed: the triangular segments of the octagon are shallow, low-relief voids created by the nexus of the bars.

Works such as *A Record of 100,000 Sighs* (1989) and *Song for the Participation of Letters* (1990), by virtue of their whiteness, are connected to Seager's preoccupation with pigment and surface. They also accentuate her concern for the aural connotations of visual forms, for the ephemerality of music. *Record* consists of ten stacks of ten white

vinyl records resting on a white base and ensconced in a hermetic plexiglass case. Seager recorded the sound of a single sigh, which was reproduced on each record, presumably a thousand times. Despite the muteness of the records on display and the stability and deadpan monotony of their geometric forms, the work is provocative. What would these records sound like? Why look at something you can't hear? Like the infamous Venetian Bridge of Sighs over which many doomed souls passed on their way to execution, what matters is not actuality but the potency that such a metaphor holds for the imagination.

Song is a silent song. Two thin, illuminated fluorescent tubes are placed end to end — extending 11 feet in length — and fastened to the wall. The electric wires are exposed to view and drop perfunctorily to the floor socket. Silkscreened at discrete intervals on the wall just above the tube are a series of letters and symbols which suggest a musical or literary form of notation. The letters beckon a silent recitation and the sounds of the repeated syllables are reminiscent of a nonsensical children's rhyme that might accompany hopscotch or jump rope. The composition of the linear sculptural forms of the tubes and the white wires combines with the diagrammed letters to create a pictorial effect. Despite its unassuming modesty, *Song*, with its fluorescent glow, casts the architecture under its long, silent spell.

Jessica Stockholder creates conditions and sets up situations using recognizable forms and materials, which she combines in a novel way so as to give rise to a hybrid vocabulary. This she accomplishes by playing various aspects of the work against one another: the original function of the found forms against her alteration of them; preexisting colors and tones against applied colors; the literal three-dimensionality of the work against the imposition of a painterly two-dimensional structure; and free-standing, sculptural independence against a forceful relationship to the architecture. Through these oppositional modes, Stockholder incubates chaos, which in turn gives birth to something unknown.

Untitled (1989) is a freestanding object that looks like a sandwich board advertisement seated on the floor. Although it can be readily viewed as a sculpture in the round, it can also be interpreted as a double-sided painting. And each side is radically different from the other. From one angle the viewer sees a rather minimal composition: a large white rectangle of sheetrock dominates, counterbalanced by the off-white and black elements of the car door, the almost incidental element of the electric light, and the

seemingly indiscriminate swath of yellow oil paint on the door and on the window frame. On the other side, there is a surprising jumble of colliding forms and materials. Closer observation reveals that Stockholder has cleverly used color and shape to unify what at first looks disparate. The black paint on the car window and its frame continues into the wood so as to create a square, which in turn repeats the square form painted on the sheetrock; the yellow paint on the sheetrock is extended to the car door and is also picked up by the color of the electric cord that meanders unceremoniously to the socket. *Untitled* can also be considered in architectonic terms as a wall that partitions space. One side may be interpreted as an interior, the other as an exterior. Ultimately, what is so compelling is the work's indeterminate nature. Although the materials themselves are not unfamiliar as objects or, for that matter as art materials, we are perplexed as to the rules of Stockholder's visual game. The work remains somewhat disconcerting, yet there is something comfortable, something human about it.

This vaguely familiar element, while present in much of Stockholder's work, is never sentimental. In *Kissing the Wall #5 with Yellow* (1990), the title even suggests human activity. The work is effectively and affectively connected to the architecture by a patch of plastic painted yellow, affixed in a seemingly nonchalant manner to the adjacent wall, and by the light reflecting off it. The superabundant spools of thread encrusted by cloth and newspaper and the old chair, whose frame is partially painted to promote a pictorial reading, have associational qualities of warmth, of an interior setting, and of the homemade and handmade. The overall form even has anthropomorphic allusions. One is almost tempted to see such a work in narrative terms. However, the bright colors, prosaic materials, and the emphasis on pictorial, sculptural, and architectural interplay ultimately lend the work a cool impersonality and an insistent materiality that negates a purely fictional reading.

A work such as *Kissing the Wall #2* (1988), carefully balanced on its three thin legs, seems a bit more vulnerable. It is relatively spare: white predominates, and the painted palette is limited to three colors, while the "natural" palette of the found objects adds several more neutral tones. The single isolated band of color on the wall and the puny fluorescent light fixture tentatively connected to the socket by a thin white wire seem to be in conversation with this inanimate, three-legged creature. The work is also a wry comment on the objects themselves and their original use. The screen not only has light projected onto it, but it also reflects colored light back onto the wall. In the final





Jessica Stockholder, *Untitled*, 1989

analysis, this work too, despite its vulnerability and humor, is dispassionately detached and artificial. Paradoxically, it is through the balance of such opposites — human and artificial, fictional and factual, pictorial and sculptural — that Stockholder not only expands what viewers see but what they feel.

Linda Roush's works often begin with or include vessels of various sorts — bowls, vases, and dishes — used for their surface and their spatial qualities. But, most significant, these receptacles may be seen as metaphors for the gallery architecture itself: they allude to issues of interior and exterior space, solid and void, light and darkness. In *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Brian O'Doherty wrote: "A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically. . . . In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred

object.” Roush takes full advantage of this situation to comment on the process of aestheticization, to call attention to and subtly subvert the conditions and conventions of viewing art, and to push the limits of two- and three-dimensional representation.

Projector (1989), for example, consists of an ornate, wrought-iron lamp placed on a pedestal which projects from the wall. The lamp has two bulbs, masked so as to “project” rectangles of light onto two photographic transparencies of a man spraying water with a hose, which are set into a construction of mirrors and plexiglass. The lamp seems as if it might be projecting the image while the “spray of light” is a visual pun on the activity depicted in the photograph. Furthermore, because each photograph is transparent and repeated in the mirror, the two-dimensional image appears to be three-dimensional and the spray seems to be not water but light. The mantle-shaped pedestal in combination with the lamp and photograph echoes a domestic interior and alters the character of the space from that of a gallery to that of a living room, consequently causing the viewer to consider the whole assemblage in terms of a private display as much as a public one. The way in which the pedestal hovers above the floor and the shadows and reflections that play across the wall make us cognizant of the incidental, seemingly extra-aesthetic details of display itself. In the typical viewing experience, light is reflected off the glass covering a painting — a reflection we try to ignore but which remains an unavoidable part of the experience. Roush makes what is usually thought of as a detriment into a focal point. *Everything* is under consideration, even our own responses: what do we “project” on the work?

In *Point of Origin* (1989), Roush also poses a question about the artificial and arbitrary limitations of the gallery space. There are two elements in the work. The first is a photographic view of a mountain inset into the wall, which suggests a window to the outside, to the space beyond the confines of the gallery. The caption under the photograph reads “Mount Ararat, where rested Noah’s Ark,” and the mountain itself has been airbrushed a phosphorescent green. Standing several feet in front of the photograph is the second element, a strange unidentifiable object that from the exterior looks like a rectilinear pedestal and on the interior is a sensuous concave green form — in fact a mold made from the outside of a piece of Red Wing pottery. The color inside the mold matches the green of the photograph and the curvature of the top of the mold reflects the shape of the mountain. Together, mountain and mold propose a male-female relationship. Both, in effect, represent concepts of birth: the photographed



mountain depicts the place where Noah and his wife, his children, and the animals emerged from the ark to repopulate the world; the mold is a symbolic womblike form. Is the point of origin literally or metaphorically somewhere outside the gallery as the picture-window suggests? Is it somewhere below in the interior space of the cast? Is history, as represented by the photograph, neutralized by the aesthetics of the gallery?

Like *Projector*, *Point of Origin* also poses questions about what the viewer brings to the experience of an art work. The viewpoint from which the work can be comprehended is as ambiguous as the work's "origin": you have to look down to inspect the vase and up to see the photograph. The conceptual and physical space between the objects is as much a part of *Point of Origin* as are the objects themselves. The only place where space and objects coincide is in the mind of the viewer — which thereby becomes an equally valid "point of origin."

Roush's emphasis on the viewer and the act of seeing and perceiving is even more evident in *Green Canon* (1989). The sculptural substance of this work — a table, a transparent green glass bowl, a colorless plexiglass dome surmounting a piece of silk, and an eyeglass lens containing ground pigment — is disembodied by the transmission and refraction of light. The word canon suggests a schematic set of principles, but also has religious overtones that parallel the almost spiritual qualities of the wondrous shadows and brilliant light, evocative of light passing through a stained-glass window. The process of sight may be magical, but optics and the banal objects which constitute the "real" *Green Canon* are not.

Although a work such as *Green Canon* has transcendental qualities, it goes beyond O'Doherty's "ashtray as sacred object." It refers back to the real world, with its ordinary activities and objects. With its light, apertures, and lenses, *Green Canon* may be seen as an analogy for the eye itself. It is a reminder of what is physiologically happening to the viewer: a simple, common act of visual perception, one that is not unique to the gallery experience. The commonplace bowl and table, with a few minor alterations, look much like the average side table in the typical home; thus art also is potentially everywhere. Roush succeeds, as do the other artists in the exhibition, because she relies on her ability to make the aesthetic — the pictorial, the sculptural, and the architectural — contingent on the real.

Adam D. Weinberg



Works in the Exhibition

Dimension are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Lisa Hoke (b. 1952)

Levit, 1987

Cast iron, steel, and wire, 108 x 60 x 60
Collection of Jeffrey and Melanie Ambinder and Marc and Livia Straus

Plexus, 1988

Cast iron, steel, and wire, 10 x 48 x 10
Collection of the artist

Equilibrium, 1989

Cast iron, steel, and wire, 120 x 216 x 60
Collection of the artist

Malaprop, 1990

Pipe, plastic, steel, and wire, 108 x 60 x 12
Collection of the artist

Linda Roush (b. 1955)

Green Canon, 1989

Halogen light with green lens, glass, plexiglass, silk, wood table, pigment, and plastic lens.
28½ x 18½ x 18½
Private collection

Point of Origin, 1989

Photographic transparency, mirror, hydrostone, wood pedestal, and acrylic paint, 12 x 19 (photograph); 31 x 24½ x 6½ (mold on pedestal)
Collection of the artist

Projector, 1989

Lamp, photographic transparency, plexiglass, mirror, wood pedestal, and latex paint, 64 x 48 x 6
Collection of the artist

Resonance, 1990

Copper tray, Flashé paint, silk, and plaster, 10 x 14½ x 3½
Collection of the artist

Tower, 1990

Silk, wood, plexiglass, anodized aluminum, and glue, 132 x 110 x 19
Site-specific installation

Sarah Seager (b. 1958)

A Record of 100,000 Sighs, 1989

Recorded sound on vinyl, latex, wood, and plexiglass, 30 x 144 x 12
Collection of Jay Chiat

Handles, 1990

Wood and enamel, 32 x 26 x 3
Collection of Sidra Stich

Octagon, 1990

Enamel on steel, 72 x 72 x ½
Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles

Rail, 1990

Enamel on steel, 9 x 96 x 3½
Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles

Song for the Participation of Letters, 1990

Fluorescent tubes, electrical cord, and enamel,
62 x 128 x 4
Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles

Untitled (Lean), 1990

Latex and enamel on canvas, 96 x 72 x 1½
Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles

2 x 4 Plus, 1990

Ironing board, two-by-four garment bag, hanger,
hardware, cloth, paper, acrylic, enamel, oil paint,
newspaper, glue, and carpet, 65 x 32, depth
variable
American Fine Arts, Co., New York

Untitled, 1990

Part of metal chair, wool blanket, cardboard,
metal studs hinged to wall, paint, stuffed animal,
29 high, width and depth variable
Dannheisser Foundation, New York

Jessica Stockholder (b. 1959)

Kissing the Wall #2, 1988

Slide projector screen, newspaper, plaster, oil and
acrylic paint, fluorescent tube with gelatin sleeve,
and wall paper, 51 high, width and depth variable
American Fine Arts, Co., New York

Untitled, 1989

Car door, sheetrock, cloth, oil, acrylic and latex
paint, incandescent light, electrical cord, wood,
and hardware, 42 high, width and depth variable
Collection of Alice and Marvin Kosmin

Kissing the Wall #5 with Yellow, 1990

Spools of thread and wool, metal strapping,
plastic cord, cloth, wood, chair, oil, latex and
acrylic paint, fluorescent light, paper, and glue,
30 x 36 x 54
Collection of Carol and Arthur Goldberg

Whitney Museum of American Art

at Equitable Center

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New York, New York 10019

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