

All Stuff Is Farce

In her recent sculptures, Maud Cotter essays a mode we might call the domestic surreal. She employs ordinary furniture and crockery, yet makes them appear wondrous—and slightly disconcerting; her strangely transformed homely objects seem to express latencies and desires we didn't know we—or the objects—had. We can discern hints of this predilection in her current work at least as far back as 2000; in the installation *Things of No Fixed Meaning*, she filled to overflowing a regular white bookcase with all manner of stuff, from photographic images to pieces of clear plastic sheeting, from bits of string to bolts of cloth. Fabricated elements, including some in her then signature medium of corrugated cardboard sliced thin and dipped in plaster to form ghostly and rigid white honeycombs, sat atop the bookshelves and amid the assembly of things that surrounded them on walls and floor. Only the bookshelves themselves constituted quotidian readymades, yet their central presence as a container for a myriad of articles, along with the materiality and palette—mostly white, brown, and gray—of the other items in the ensemble, ensured a sense of the familiar and the everyday.

Even this brief description of a precursor to her recent practice reveals certain ideas—verbally expressed in reaction to material instantiations—that resonate throughout Cotter's work. The phrase, “all manner of stuff,” characterizing the mélange of objects and materials that fill the shelves in *Things of No Fixed Meaning*, brings to mind Vilém Flusser's account of “stuff,” the things that make up the world. “The word *stuff* is both a noun and a verb (‘to stuff’),” he wrote in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, a text important to the artist in conceptualizing her own practice. “The material world is that which is stuffed into forms; it gives them a filling.”¹ By “forms,” Flusser means “neither discoveries nor inventions, neither Platonic Ideas nor fictions, but containers cobbled together for phenomena (‘models’).”² In *Things of No Fixed Meaning*, we might see Cotter's bookcase-*cum*-container, holding both found objects and abstract ones of her own manufacture, as exceeding its own physicality, and becoming literally and figuratively a “form.”

Crying Over Spilt Milk, 2006, represents an early example of Cotter fully teasing implications of “form” out of a piece of household furnishing by means of subtle alterations. An ordinary mahogany tea table has grown tall on its six spindly legs. Its piecrust top, now chest-high, supports a similarly scalloped mirror, which casts a mysteriously buoyant reflection on the ceiling. As well as in height, the table has grown in uncanniness; the familiar has become strange. The table seems, like the furniture in so many movies we watched as children, about to come to life and scuttle away, insect-like. In fact, Cotter's table bears more than a passing resemblance to Louise Bourgeois's series of great metal spiders, and, like them, inspires a sense of whimsical dread. Cotter transmutes the tea table with simple means—a mirror and stilt-like extensions below its pad feet—but, like the sorcerer's apprentice, succeeds in giving the dumb object almost animate life. And this alchemical mutation through the restrained manipulation of the table's physical characteristics—non-radically altering its form but endowing it with its own individuated persona, articulating what the artist has called “emotional residues”³—calls our attention to the way its material substance occupies the “form” of a table; in other words, we can imagine Flusser noting, Cotter's table seems to embody the way “stuff” fills “forms.”

More Than One Way Out, 2009, comprises a trio of wooden tables that similarly appears caught in the process of evolving into living beings. They have also grown leggy, but no two of their elaborately turned legs match; two of the tables have sprouted legs in excess of the expected standard four, and all the tabletops, raised to eye level, have morphed as well, curving in convoluted amoeboid arcs (à la Jean Arp) and even seeming ready to divide like cells undergoing mitosis. On the one hand, Cotter's interventions in woodworking here address our own stature, making us child-size once again, lost in a forest of table legs, eager to stand on tiptoes to see what's up top. (And when we do, we find an abstract geometric topography painted gray.) On the other hand, her efforts free the furnishings from our purview nearly altogether, and they take on a creaturely life of their own, recalling a family of mutant giraffes striding placidly across the savannah.

The slightly comic tone of Cotter's vivifications of domestic articles, as well as of Flusser's hypotheses about things and forms, finds a correspondence in the philosopher's playful observation that "The French word for filling is *farce*; this makes it possible to claim that, from a theoretical perspective, everything material in the world, everything made up of stuff, is a farce."⁴ All stuff is farce.

Two other works from 2006, *Soul Mates* and *So and So*, take flowered teacups and saucers as their point of departure, conjuring not only the domestic sphere, but the specific arena of the feminine. From the pair in the former, two stalagmites rise up to tower over their containing vessels, their rough, unruly contours that evoke natural processes of growth and accretion contrasting with the genteelness of the porcelain and its reduction of nature to a conventionalized image in the patterned flowers. The cup and its irregular saucer in *So and So* hang sideways from the wall, a shapeless white mass spilling out of the cup towards the floor below. In both dreamlike works, the ceramics seem to disgorge incongruous and incommensurate blobs of material, like ectoplasm at a séance. The modeling compound from which Cotter created the quasi-geologic mounds and spills approximates the appearance of the vitreous china of the cups and saucers, suggesting that what they vomit out comprises not their mere contents but their very essences. In this, we might again recall Flusser's notion of forms and stuff, and consider Cotter's sculptures as illustrations or literalizations of "how the amorphous phenomena flow into forms, occupy them in order to flow out into the amorphous once more."⁵

A Gesture of Belief in the Built World, 2009, features a ceramic sauceboat resting on a small bracket on the wall. A larger and more elaborate white stalagmite grows from it, the gravy—or the serving piece's own matter—it seems, having taken on an aggressively baroque character to evoke a turreted sandcastle. A twiggy matrix of epoxy-resin elements held together by magnets cages it in and hangs down past the sauceboat, creeping along the gallery wall, like a kind of schematic kudzu. The architectural allusions of the work's title ostensibly refer to the sculptor's structures growing out of the found gravy boat, but on reflection we might note that the sauceboat represents by far the more rational and designed element of the ensemble. Here, Cotter joins the domestic object and the *informe* mass it appears to have engendered to a third term, the linear net that seems somehow to measure and assess what it touches and delimits. That this network holds together by the unseen power of magnetism adds another kind of energy—invisible, but present nonetheless—and another kind of particularity, even "emotional residues," to the work.

A set of corner shelves displaying a service of nine sets of cups and garish patterned plates, far too large to be saucers, *Fallen*, 2009, looks familiarly normal, until we realize that none of the china sits on the shelves at all, hanging above or even below their supposed supports. Moreover, dribbling out from the teacups, mounted perpendicularly to the wall on their respective plates, a colorless, translucent substance falls toward the floor in branchy tendrils. And from the end of each tentacly appendage dangles, ensnared, a small plastic animal. As if the faintly hideous porcelain had just given birth to the beasts, each animal quivers slightly at the end of its umbilical extrusion. The various species of animals represented on their individual branches evoke a taxonomic spectacle. Yet, cast in stock poses, the bottoms of their feet unfinished, the animals can never transcend their literality as inexpensive collectible figurines; in conjunction with the shelves, dishes, and the extraterrestrial jellyfish that hold them fast, they move freely from kitsch object to metaphoric symbol and back again.

A recent work, *Rumpus Room*, 2009, occupies a position midway between sculpture and installation. We can think of it as a quasi-architectural *mise-en-scène*, a schematic stage-set on which sculptural objects act out interior dramas. A structure of wooden poles, painted a cold, bluish white and held together at angles by aluminum corner brackets, outlines a fragmentary cube, delineating a volume of space like an architect's cutaway rendering of a room. From one of its crossbars dangles a bent, rounded element made of Cotter's familiar stacked slices of corrugated cardboard that suggests a basketweave blob doing chin-ups. Within the broken cube of the poles, two balls of the same corrugated construction emanate from a glass creamer suspended in midair, as if the old-fashioned jug levitated while expressing thought bubbles. A mushroom-shaped cloud of lazer-cut, interlocking, paper-thin, identical wooden elements hovers overhead (Cotter had first manufactured these elements to her own design for an installation in 2004), recalling the canopy of the forest from which it was made, as well as the modularity

of so much of Modernist design. Counterweighted by a large wooden egg attached to the bottom of a steel cable, which hangs through a hole in a weathered handcrafted wooden stool, the wooden cloud also becomes an atomized echo of Marcel Duchamp's bicycle wheel. Another assembly of the modular pieces, this time fabricated of stained heavy cardstock, sits like a forlorn architectural model on the turquoise vinyl seat of a low-backed, white-painted wrought iron vanity chair, tipped up, with one leg balanced on another wooden egg. Several more eggs lie scattered on the ground. And garlands of scores of turned wooden spindles, each one unique, joined together, like the network in *A Gesture of Belief in the Built World*, by magnets embedded at either end, loll in catenaries from wall to wall on a diagonal through the entire ensemble, connecting the schematic room with the actual one that contains it and enmeshing its abstract theatricality within the matrix of the real.

An evolution beyond the transmogrification of domestic furnishings into entities endowed with personality and incipient animation, *Rumpus Room* casts an array of found objects and nonrepresentational forms as characters in a tableau that, if not exactly vivand, is nonetheless lively. Her sculptural personages seem to act out of inner necessity, thinking their private thoughts. And they seem to give access to our own reveries as well, less-than-conscious notions of which we may have been only dimly aware. In this, Cotter's work relates to Surrealism—Alberto Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.* provides an apt precedent for *Rumpus Room*—but her impeccable stage-management of materials, forms, and relationships raises the curtain on a playful new production, where our desires meet the object's in a place dedicated both to recreation and a kind of abandon. The title provides a clue to the character of the space. "This is the place where the house lets go," Vincent Abbott wrote about the new construct of a room for recreation in 1935,⁶ implying that the abandon could be ascribed to the house as much as to its inhabitants.

In *Rumpus Room*, emphatically specific found and fabricated objects share a theatricalized non-space, utterly imbricated with our own real space. Here, I think, Cotter makes it difficult to distinguish between Flusser's categories, between "forms" and "stuff" and the "amorphous phenomena" flowing between them. We can see *Rumpus Room* as synthesizing the artist's recent practice—appropriating real objects and using them as containers for stuff that throws into sharp relief their philosophical condition as "containers" for "stuff"—and her older mode, in which she utilized idiosyncratic materials to construct abstractions, thereby pointing to the way "forms" get filled by "the material world." Yet *Rumpus Room* also seems to synthesize Flusser's heady farce of words and ideas with Cotter's funny materialism, which arises from impeccable craftsmanship and a deftly strategic use of materials. Cotter endows her sculptures with remarkable humor and incisiveness, despite the fact that what her works express tends towards illustrations of the subconscious and irrational. Cotter's dishware, furniture, and nonrepresentational entities gathered in assemblies, in fact, seem to dream their own dreams, dreams of escape from quotidian usefulness, sterile domesticity, and inanimate lives as static objects. And they invite us to do the same.

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¹ Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ Maud Cotter, "Objects, Structures and Systems: New Works by Maud Cotter," *The Visual Artists' News Sheet* (Dublin) 3 (May–June 2005), p. 16.

⁴ Flusser, pp. 22–23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ Vincent Abbott, "Game Rooms," *House & Garden* 67, no. 5 (May 1935), p. 27; quoted in David A. Hanks and Anne Hoy, *American Streamlined Design: The World of Tomorrow* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2005), p. 188.