

DESIRE LINES

by

ELIZABETH BROWN

B.F.A., School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2006



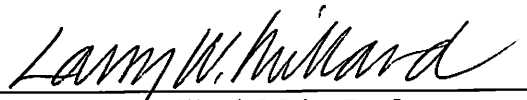
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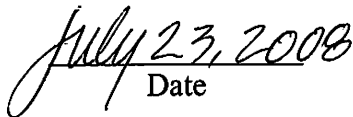
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Approved:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Larry W. Millard".

Larry Millard, Major Professor

A handwritten date in cursive script, reading "July 23, 2008".

Date



Figure 1

Introduction

Desire lines are the paths created by humans or animals moving through a space that get them to a desired location. These lines do not necessarily correspond to the paths created by architects and designers and are usually the most direct path to a destination. They can be seen as tramped down grass, snow or dirt where the number of footfalls determine their definition as a path and show the amount of traffic on them. Thoughtful designers often let desire lines form before setting down designated pathways in an outdoor space. Desire lines are thus a means of mapping with individual desire as opposed to a proscribed path laid down by an authority.

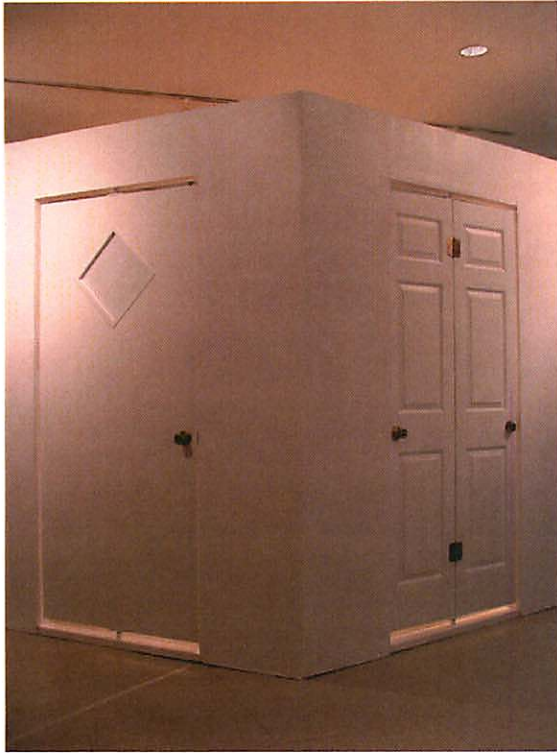


Figure 2



Figure 3

My MFA final exhibition, “Desire Lines,” is an installation consisting of an 8ft tall honeycomb cell constructed out of wood studs, drywall, and doors. Each wall is 6’5” in width. The exterior is painted white for a more finished look (see Figure 2). The interior is left unfinished to show the structure of the walls and to make the process of its creation more apparent (see Figure 3). This also reveals a relationship of frontstage to backstage where the viewer can share in a “behind the scenes” look at the work.

In the center of the hexagonal structure is a white pedestal upon which a Polyphemous moth, native to Georgia, is placed (see Figure 4). It is encased in a stained wood and glass box and is pinned upon a red satin lining in the bottom of the box. This gives the moth a sense of preciousness and the accompanying placard recalls the display style of natural history museums.



Figure 4

On each of the six walls is a door that spins on a metal bracket on its center. Hardware, such as hinges and doorknobs, used to mount or use the door conventionally, are included but are useless in this configuration. While similar in size, all of the doors are different in style and painted white to match the finished exterior of the cell. The uniformity of color also emphasizes the different types of doors.

Entry to the show (see Figure 1) displays a door mounted on the front wall. It is a standard height but only 12" wide thus playing off of assumptions of scale. Halfway down its length is a paper data scroll with moth images cut out and drawn on it. This piece was from "Transitional Objects" my 30-hour review exhibition where I explored the personal in the public sphere. In this context the scroll recalls that work and ties into the idea of the visual collection of information in "Desire Lines." The idea of scrolls breaks down the western idea of chronology and linear logic embodied by books. Scrolls can be viewed at any point and can be continually rolled and unrolled from either end. They have been used since ancient times in non-Western art, and more recently, by

feminist artist Carolee Schneemann in “Interior Scroll.” (1975). The door also plays with the idea of “pinning down” objects as a means to make sense of them while simultaneously rendering them useless.

On the other side of this partition wall facing the honeycomb structure is a wall detailing the process of making the main piece. It includes sketches on graph paper as well as diagrams of the waggle dance performed by scout honeybees that map out a route to food sources through dance. This phenomenon is one of the most documented and studied forms of animal communication. Additionally there are images of the Polyphemous moth and a chart of its life cycle. Printed images documenting the process of creating, making and installing the honeycomb are pinned up with map pins. These are similar to those I fill my sketchbook with. All of these documents are layered on top of a dance pattern (of human feet) instructing how to perform the bee waggle dance (See Figure 5). Through this display wall, I provide cues to reveal the thought process and creation of the installation.



Figure 5



Figure 6

On the opposite wall, on the other side of the cell structure, is a clear plastic cocoon of my body. Over time, the plastic has shrunk and deformed and hangs on a gold colored coat hook recalling the hardware on the main structure (See Figure 6).

Instead of showing the internal structure of form, like the exposed studs on the main honeycomb cell, it reveals a mapping of the external form. It is an empty skin or shell – a trace of the body. It also hints at the process of metamorphosis performed by moths thus linking the human and insect worlds.

Influences and Inspirations

Influences for this installation, as well as my other work, include study of the natural world, ideas of worldmaking, different mythologies, personal experiences, and the work of other artists.

Nature and Culture

The relationship of nature and culture, human and insect, reveals relationships of control, fear, work, and desire. Insects are so ubiquitous in our world. For example, there are more species of beetles alone than all of the types of plants put together. For many humans they are a major daily reminder of our link to nature. While many people do not have pets or plants in their home, we all experience insects on a fairly frequent basis. As humans we often assert control over the natural world by killing insects and other “pests”. In truth, only about one percent of insects are actually harmful to humans, but, even so, many of us have a primal fear of insects.

Moths, in particular, interest me due to the fact that they are often ignored. They evoke imagery of the nocturnal, solitary, attraction to light, and metamorphosis of form. Their patterns can be just as beautiful as the diurnal butterflies, but moths are mysterious, ghostlike and often elusive. As an artist, I also am intrigued by their attraction to light. We commonly hear the phrase “like a moth to a flame.” In reality, moths are drawn to the moon and stars for navigation, and artificial

light throws their natural instincts into a tailspin. Once caught in the trance of an artificial bulb, moths will circle endlessly, even until they die. Interactions, such as this example, of humans with nature are of particular interest to me.

In my studies of moths at the Georgia Natural History Museum and the Chicago Nature Museum, it was both fascinating and sad to see moths categorized in scientific nomenclature and pinned down as specimens. It was beautiful and informative to see all the different types of moths so clearly delineated, but at the same time I hate that I am looking at a dead creature. Our intense desire to categorize and understand phenomena can render it dead.

Bees, on the other hand, particularly honeybees, are diurnal and associated with industry, efficiency and social order. The waggle dance that the scout bees perform alerts the entire hive to the location of food. The pecking order of bees is also strictly followed. Drones and workers serve the queen bee and everything that occurs in the hive aids the production of food, procreation, and protection of the queen. Humans take advantage of the production of bee honey and wax and benefit from bee pollination. In turn, humans may be affecting decline of bees due to climate change presumably caused by our interactions with the environment.



Figure 7

The Trickster

In The Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art, Lewis Hyde discusses the character of the trickster through mythologies from various cultural traditions. From Native American Coyote, to the Chinese Monkey King, to Hermes from Greek mythology, trickster characters illuminate and question the societal systems in which they live. While they may seem like charlatans, liars, or thieves, society needs these tricksters to shake up everyday patterns of living in the world that may not work anymore (or may not have worked in the first place). Their actions precede shifts in beliefs and subsequent behavior. If we are dissatisfied with conventional, boring predictable patterns, it is trickster who brings about the transformation into new worlds.

The Polyphemous moth in “Desire Lines” is a trickster of sorts. Its eyespot pattern tricks predators by either deflecting their attention completely away or at least from the vital organs of its body. These “eyes” may mimic the predator’s enemies or just be novel enough to render them unrecognizable to prey.

Worldmaking

Nelson Goodman, in his book Ways of Worldmaking, discusses the phenomenon of different worlds existing simultaneously. Each world has its own set of assumptions and language to describe them. This is in contrast to the idea of multiple interpretations of one actual world. In his view, each world is equally real and valid. I wanted to explore this visually by combining the worlds of art and science/natural history as well as that of humans and insects. Additionally, the premise of desire lines implies the option of creating one’s own reality that may be shared with others.

In the earlier “Trickster” (see Figure 7) installation, I only gave four options (north, south, east, and west) whereas the six doors of the hexagon structure open up this idea further.

Additionally I omitted the wobble foot pattern on the floor in “Desire Lines” to give a feel of infinite possibilities for moving through the space. In other words, there is no set way to move, merely suggestions and the viewer can choose to move “outside the lines.”

To further the idea of an alternate world, in both “Trickster” and “Desire Lines,” I chose a color palette of mostly white with gold to create the dreamlike feel of a fantasy world. This palette also responds to the mostly white interior of the gallery space. There are many equally valid truths - the trickster shows us this. Also tied to this is the idea of ambiguity. As a culture we are not comfortable with ambiguity – we want things tied down and neatly compartmentalized, even when they very obviously are not.



Figure 8



Figure 9

Personal Narrative

In two earlier projects, “Variations on a Theme” (see Figure 8) and “Random Narrative Experiments” (see Figure 9), I explored the relevance and relationship of personal narrative to artmaking. In “Variations,” I based the visual experience on the physical experience of walking through a revolving door in an urban context. The idea of an intermediary space between two vastly different spaces is intriguing. One moves from the frenetic movement and noise of the city into a space that is often quieter, less frenzied and climate-controlled by way of this object. The person moves through the revolving door alone and usually controls the movement of the door (either alone or with occupants of other compartments). I wanted to recreate the movement of this intermediary space by focusing on its objectness. I further wanted to explore the reaction of viewer to a work inspired by an actual event.

In contrast to this, in the same space I created a similar PVC pipe and fabric construction in the later group show, “Random Narrative Experiments.” This piece was based on spontaneous play with materials. It was not based on an actual experience. One goal of mine in this piece was to see which type of work viewers responded to more. My results were inconclusive. While viewers seemed to have more fun playing with this work, the novelty wore off after some time. Additionally, “Variations” was more minimal, so comparing it to the more convoluted “RNE” piece was like comparing apples and oranges. Ultimately I decided that drawing from personal experience was more successful, but I wanted to draw the viewer in more with layers of meaning.

In “Desire Lines,” I drew personal references into my imagery without telling a specific story. I am more interested in the relationship of visual metaphors that, while grounded in my own experiences, are open to viewer interpretation.

Other Artists

In “Desire Lines” I was influenced by the work of many other artists either directly or indirectly. I am especially drawn to the work of other sculptors and performance artists. In particular, I like the contemporary use of the figure in the installations of Kiki Smith, the poetic use of metaphor in the installations of Ann Hamilton, the haunting object-based installations of Anya Gallacio. Louise Nevelson’s uniformity of color to highlight form, and the large-scale, site-specific works of Mary Miss and Alice Aycock. Additionally, I enjoy the relationship of nature and culture in Meg Webster’s installations where she brings the outside indoors. I was also influenced by Catherine Chalmers’ painted cockroaches, the cocoon and hive shapes of Patrick Dougherty’s structures, and Louise Bourgeois’s object based works exploring fear and desire - especially with her large-scale spiders. The subtle color palette of Do-Ho-Su’s architectural structures made of fabric appeals to me as well as the sensual material-based objects of Catherine de Monchaux. Finally, I am drawn to the clean lines, geometric forms and use of new materials by minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris.

Conclusion

Moving from environments where many cultures and worlds intermingle to one that was much more conservative and based heavily on tradition made me very aware of my own existence in different worlds. I was also hyperaware of when I was stepping “outside of the lines”. “Desire Lines” is an exploration of individual identity in these different worlds. How do we assert our individuality in a world where many societal expectations are laid out so predictably? How do we change from one environment to the next? Is there a central identity that moves with us? The

trickster asks us to question the world around us, and where things cannot be easily changed, to play with those expectations to create another world. What is authentic experience? Is one way of living in the world better or more privileged than another? Through my work, I am exploring a collection of experiences not merely to tell stories but as a means of collecting information to make sense of, and often question, these events.