

Spatial Entanglements

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<https://susanyelavich.com/2019/09/20/caught-in-a-spell/>

“...in my work a frame can be both a way of focusing, or one of obfuscating.”

So says Diana Cooper about her work on the occasion of Sightings, her current exhibition at [Postmasters Gallery](#). I say focusing obfuscates and therein lies the fascination. The closer you get to one of her pieces the more pieces you see. The experience is akin to staring at a tree and trying to make out each individual leaf, or trying to trace the path of a single yarn in a complex weave – pleurably futile and spellbinding exercises.

This isn't fair, I suppose. Projection is hardly the respectful response that Cooper or any artist's work deserves. (I can all but hear literary critic George Steiner's strenuous objection to not “answering” the work on its own terms.¹) This is not a question of ignoring the source material for the work, only to say that I think of Cooper's surveillance cameras, LEDs, bar codes, halogen lights, electronic equipment, and construction fencing not as finite subjects, but as triggers for seeing. The exhibition is called Sightings, after all.

Cooper is testing our vision. But instead of eye charts, she uses the analog form of digital easter eggs. Of course, the first use of the term was analog, synonymous with candy hidden on suburban lawns. So the artist brings us full circle, back to art of looking-for. (She's even hidden a Lilliputian security camera – faux, of course – in one of the gallery's passages.)

But even more than looking-for, the sculpture demands to be looked-at with eyes willing to snake around corners, over protrusions, through irregular apertures, and in between the narrowest of gaps. Cooper's tangled lines and planes would seem to be in a state of perpetual reconfiguration when, in fact, it is we who are reassembling them with the slightest shift of a gaze, or a step to the left or to the right. Since the pieces don't allow for viewing in the round, contortions are practically requisite – especially with Slide Rule, a latter-day Broadway Boogie Woogie on steroids.

Other pieces like Scrim and Screen are more insistently frontal but no less spatial in their warpage. Their off-kilter enfilades of openwork are, however, less about optical illusions than physics. The jump cuts and overlays are not the kind that will induce a spell of vertigo, they are far too subtle for that. The force fields at work are centripetal, compelling closer and closer looking.

All of this isn't to say that I'm immune to the narrative speculation the work invites about the condition of being watched and watching, of allowing surveillance to confirm our existence in the media-saturated 21st century. Those are definitely there. But more profound for this viewer was the power of the work to call attention to how spaces feel – the sensations of constrained spaces, shallow spaces, high spaces, deep spaces.

We may not feel claustrophobic or agoraphobic in their presence, but they do have the power to trigger fleeting sensations of disorientation that we've felt before – sensations that control our

actions as much as any piece of technology. Diana Cooper reveals those trepidations and tempers them with wit – materials like pom-poms and cheesy plastic take care of that quite nicely. We can then revisit the dizzying chasm or the scary bridge with no end in sight and recall it with, if not quite pleasure, then surely fascination. I, for one, was mesmerized. Isn't that what happens when you're spellbound and fall, however momentarily, into another space?

1. In Steiner's call for "a politics of the primary; of immediacies in respect of texts, works of art, and musical compositions," he eschews "talk about the aesthetic" for direct experience. I can only defend my thoughts on Diana Cooper's work as my experience of it, even if it doesn't conform to hers. Not being an artist myself, I am always at a distance, a distance which I try to bridge. I own my formalism but don't expect that others will see the work the same. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 6.