

Sunday, April 15th, 2018

Mappa Mundi: Diana Cooper at the Studio School

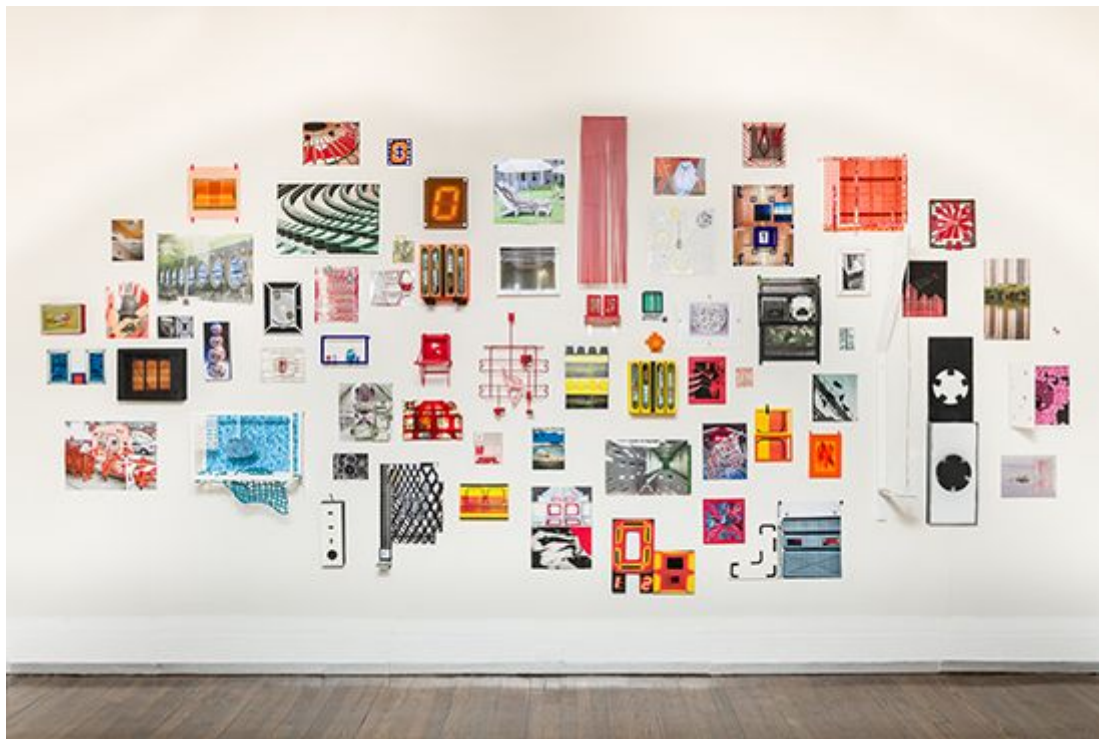
by David Cohen

Diana Cooper: Gleanings (1997-2018) at the New York Studio School

March 9 to April 15, 2018

8 West 8th Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues

New York City, nyss.org



Diana Cooper, Wall Piece, 2018. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery

“BICYCLE LANE CLOSED PROCEED WITH CAUTION” is emblazoned on a firehouse red police placard flexible enough to buckle slightly at the point at which it’s fastened to a similarly hued plastic barricade. The signage and street furniture are off duty, variously nested, falling over each other or willy-nilly abandoned, cordoned off by more orange in the form of trestles and cones. Huddling up to this scrum is an alien, though still color coordinated object that takes its chances in the street like a parked vehicle. It is, in fact, something familiar to aficionados of the author of the photograph being described, Diana Cooper: one of her few freestanding sculptures, *Speedway* (2000-03). At its reverse the sculpture is also furniture-like, albeit with warped functionality, exposing a dollhouse grid of cubbyholes,

but on the side visible in this photograph it is a veritable Mappa Mundi of circuitry and squiggles that encourages the illusion of a vortex at its center. As if all this perspectival overload were not enough, in the distance a fantastical mural can be spied in which gnarled tree roots frame a naively rendered cityscape intimating streets beyond the street.

Packing a semiotic punch, this photograph marks the bottom right corner of a salon hang of over four dozen disparate smallish pieces in two and three dimensions (vents and meshes being popular starting points for the sculptural objects) to constitute *Wall Piece* (2018). This show-within-a-show aggregate (something Cooper has done before, incidentally, in an accumulator piece titled “Watch Your Step,” 2012) *Wall Piece* is the most recent of the 13 works in “Gleanings”, a 21-year overview of this intrepid “explorer of situational geometry,” as the critic Barbara Pollack has described the artist. Pulling back to reveal a contained scene that is, itself, but a microscopic detail of a larger picture could, indeed, be deemed Cooper’s trademark idiom. Such micro-macro progression, now familiar from the periodic repixilating of Google Maps, proceeds within and between works such that a given Diana Cooper exhibition is a teeming matrix of focal points, layers, associations.

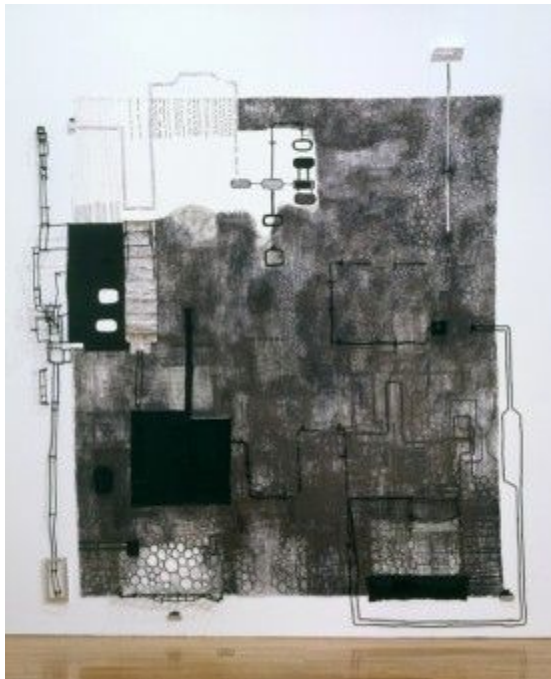


Diana Cooper, *Wall Piece*, 2018. Detail. Courtesy of the Artist and Postmasters Gallery

Photography, with its clean, mechanical precision, is very much in a minority among Cooper’s mediums: Most of her work, in this show and beyond, is resolutely handmade in a way that refuses to disguise the human agency of the maker, although there is no effort, either, to achieve expressivity or a projection of selfhood. Her touch has the casual obsessiveness of a visionary – nerdy, dutiful, sometimes urgent, other times repetitive, always matter of fact. Her vision, on the other hand, is systematizing, committed in earnest to taxonomies of form and function. There is something almost unnerving about the way the found and the fabricated cohabit within this artist’s soul: It is as if she

operates within one mode for organization and another for execution, to produce something simultaneously neat and ambiguous, clean cut and mushy, scientific and crafty.

She is not alone in the contemporary landscape in the pursuit of either mode. Born in 1964, she is five years junior to Jessica Stockholder, with whom she shares a formalist willingness to misread, color code and otherwise redesignate as raw things cooked already by the culture that produced them; and senior by the same number of years to Sarah Sze who plays similar games with scale within exquisitely precarious ecologies. Cooper stands alone, however, in the starkness of her split.



Diana Cooper, *The Black One*, 1997. Acrylic, felt tip markers, felt, aluminum tape, acetate, pipe cleaners, and pom poms on wall and canvas, 124 x 138 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery

One way of making sense of this divided sensibility is to think of everything she makes, regardless of size or resolution, as a sketch. It is as if she didn't get the memo that drawing has an end, in both the sense of a place where it ought to stop and in the sense of a preparatory function. Whatever medium a work of hers seems to inhabit – in terms of dimensions or impact or scale – it remains within the orbit of drawing. Recalling Jean Baudrillard's fable so popular at the time of Cooper's education, it is as if she is mapping the world to scale. Even in the earliest piece in the show, *The Black One* (1997), a painterly work executed on canvas, the support expressively activated in areas of tearing and lacing, with a metastasizing sculptural protrusion in black pipe cleaner, the quality of line is insistently

graphic. This is equally true of the cutout or taped lines in reduction works like *Façade* (2016) or *Silver City* (2010-13). Drawing, it would seem, is Cooper's way of being in the world.

But drawing would seem to occupy a spectrum in Cooper, the axes of which are collage and doodle. The street scene with which we started extends to photography a collage mentality, one that juxtaposes environmentally encountered banalities and personally generated marks in a string of associations. The doodle, on the other hand, pulls back – at least in its moment of becoming – from the clarity and purposiveness with which the artist organizes and orders materials, amongst which, ultimately, the doodle will be one more. Nonchalant, resigned to a state of semi-consciousness, fiddled but unfussed, the doodle is yarn from which imagery is spun.



Diana Cooper, *Overdrive*, 2007. Ink and Markers on paper 60 x 80 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery

Overdrive (2007) a mammoth double-sheeted framed drawing 80 inches wide in ink, colored pencil and marker, is a tour de force of doodling, reveling in the oxymoron of that designation. Recalling Mark Bradford in its cartographic density, it reads like a stack of maps on transparent pages where somehow lines and patches bleed between layers, the choice of red abetting such sanguinary, cellular associations. The drawing relates to an important sculpture/installation in Cooper's career, *All Our Wandering* (2007), a telescoping ziggurat of red cubes whose exposed interior physically literalizes the receding planes suggested by *Overdrive*. Addressing her love of maps, systems, color coding and the like, Cooper has said (in interview):

Systems are a way people try to make sense of things or create order. They also are all around us, in the natural world and in the man-made world, and I am intrigued by how they intersect, echo one another, or come into conflict. But I am less drawn to the specific content or narrative of a given system, which for me is just raw material. In fact, I am interested when something like a diagram or a graph disassociates itself from its origins and becomes something else entirely.

Some commentators have argued that, by hand rendering complex systems, Cooper re-humanizes them, both mitigating their oppressive impersonality and exposing their fragility, and thus the vulnerability of those who depend on them. This is a valid though somewhat reductive interpretation as it detracts from the inner logic of drawing. A more compelling way to view the relationship of the handmade and the systemic that incorporates the seismographic aspect of the artist's hand is to think of the doodling, sifting, categorizing artist as a cog within a bigger machine, a cell within a pulsating organism, a spider in her web.