

RACHEL FOULLON **BRAIDED SUN** UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY

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UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

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University Art Museum

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



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Foreword

Albany is a fitting place to present the work of Rachel Foullon, an artist most recently inspired by the early Dutch barns that still dot our rural upstate landscape. She finds inspiration in the simple elegance of these structures, threatened reminders of a pre-industrial agricultural society that once flourished here, as well as in the concepts they embody: home to family and farm animals, storage for food and fodder, literal warehouses for the tools to cultivate a land that was both rich and abundant. But Foullon shuns nostalgia; her sculptures conjure up a hard life, one that also serves as an arresting metaphor for the life of an artist in which the threads of life and work so often intertwine.

Generous grants from the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation and the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation have made this exhibition catalogue possible. We are indebted to both for understanding the role museum publications play in documenting an exhibition and illuminating the work presented. Additional support for the exhibition was provided by The University at Albany Foundation and University Auxiliary Services. Rachel Foullon was inspired by architect Edward Durell Stone's interior of the University Art Museum to adapt existing works and create new work for the exhibition space, and a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant supported her efforts.

I am deeply grateful to University at Albany President George M. Philip and to Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Susan D. Phillips for their ongoing support of the museum. Special thanks to Senior Vice Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs William B. Hedberg for his confidence and his guidance.

The museum staff brings to every project exacting standards, problem-solving skills, and enough hard work to make a Dutch farmer proud. Thanks go to Corinna Ripps Schaming for keen curatorial supervision, Zheng Hu for inspired exhibition and catalogue design, Jeffrey Wright-Sedam for meeting every installation challenge, Darcie Abbatiello for the exactitude required of a registrar, Ryan Parr for creative web design, Naomi Lewis for exceptional organizational and outreach oversight, and Joanne Lue for adept administrative support.

Sincere thanks go to essayists Todd Alden and Elizabeth A.T. Smith for their insights; to Susan Harris, Christine A. Zehner and one anonymous lender for generously making work available for the exhibition; to Shirley Morales for her enthusiastic support of Rachel and her work; and to Ian Cooper, Jeanne Finley, Charles Gehring, Gary David Gold, and Chloe Pfendler for exhibition and catalogue support.

Finally, I am grateful to Rachel Foullon for her tireless efforts and for caring so deeply about everything involved with this exhibition. But I am most thankful for the world of ideas she represents in work that is refined in form, yet speaks so eloquently about the stuff of life itself: all that is messy, unruly, and transitory.

Janet Riker
Director

There's No Place Like This Place: Rachel Foullon's Poetic Archeology

Todd Alden

I try to find an architecture that is hopefully timeless, free of the mannerisms of the moment.

—Edward Durell Stone¹



Inaugural exhibition, *Painting and Sculpture from the Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection*, October 5–November 17, 1967

Edward Durell Stone (1902–1978) was the design architect for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Opened in 1939, it was “the first museum in America to be built according to the stream-lined, ultra modern, ‘International Style’ of modern architecture.”² Stone’s later buildings, however, including the museum and uptown campus of the University at Albany (opened in 1966–67), eschewed the “mannerisms of the moment” and marked a sharp turn away from the modern “International Style” toward an evolving embrace of vernacular architectural forms. “I believe the inspiration for a building,” he wrote in 1962 “should be in the accumulation of history.”³ So much for the shock of the new.

Like Stone, Rachel Foullon’s work also embraces unexpected contradictions of form, material, and history. (Even her perplexing title of the exhibition, *Braided Sun*, would seem to announce this.) While she is clearly indebted to the process-oriented legacy of post-Minimalist sculpture, she also draws practical and architectural inspiration from the legacy of Dutch Barn architecture and the American “landscape of self-reliance”—real and imagined—of early rural people. The artist’s sources include discoveries at agrarian fairs, vintage tools and remnants found in New York State barns, and images gleaned from



1970s photographs of *hallenhaus* survey in Montgomery County, New York.
Courtesy of the New Netherland Research Center

Dust Bowl-era Sears catalogues. With these, Foullon repurposes her collection of barnyard detritus and pioneering oddments—leftover tools, rope, hoses, cut-and-sewn garments—into her floor-and wall-based installations, some of which consist of alterations of even her own prior work.⁴ Historical materials are deployed to resignify the objects of agrarian civilization as surprising hybrids and eccentric abstractions. To everything there is a season: turn, turn, turn.

Foullon’s system of wall-bound objects frequently incorporates carefully crafted cedar moldings fastened with blackened hardware and punctuated with oversized nails or pegs. Composed with a formal rigor and lyrical elegance, Foullon’s techniques are also reminiscent of the post-Minimalist strategies of, for example, Robert Morris (b. 1931) and Eva Hesse (1936–1970), due to their emphasis on uncanny materiality, process, and relationship to the body.

Along with most of Foullon’s work from the last few years, the work titled *Hallenhaus (and the severance of our own ties to the land)* (2008) draws particular inspiration from rural, vernacular Dutch barn architecture. Characteristically, Foullon’s environments do not aim to reconstruct the Dutch barn form with historical accuracy (as, for example, the New England museum at Colonial Williamsburg purports to do), but instead do *something else*. Before unpacking what makes Foullon’s gambit different—along with her abstracting forms—it is useful to consider the history and rhetoric of vernacular Dutch barns.

Distinct in type and history from their New England counterparts, most were located east of the Hudson River and built before the American Revolution. “Many of the early settlers of New York were from New England,” according to American essayist John Burroughs (1837–1921). “But the State (New York) early had one element introduced into its rural and farm life not found farther east, namely, the Holland Dutch. These gave features more or less picturesque to the country that are not observable in New England. The Dutch took roots at various points along the Hudson, and about Albany, and in the Mohawk Valley, and remnants of their rural and domestic architecture may still be seen in sections of the State. A Dutch barn became proverbial...The main feature of these barns was their enormous expansion of roof.”⁵ Superficially, the exterior of a Dutch barn is delineated by a steeply gabled roof and by non-structural, unpainted wooden walls. Just about the oldest and rarest architecture in America, only about 600 Dutch barns are said to exist today in varying states of decay, making it a disappearing vernacular.

Hallenhaus (and the severance of our own ties to the land) doesn’t suggest a historical reconstruction—the characteristic steeply gabled roof is entirely absent—as much as it suggests a vision of an inside-out dreamscape that incorporates Dutch barn elements. The finely hewn

walls—dramatically diminished in scale from that of a working barn—are composed of western red cedar planks, which are somehow both fitting and out of place. On the exterior side, a giant, nail-like piece of hardware extrudes from the wall—a hanging device for three sewn, stained, rolled, salted, and tied pieces of canvas, which suggest oversized, apparently “sweat-laden” bandanas (the “sweat” is suggested by the encrusted presence of sea salt). The work’s title *and the severance of our own ties to the land* references, and the work itself re-enacts, the dislocation of forms and functions: from barn to sculpture to museum. Darkly lyrical, Foullon’s sculptures also plumb psychological dislocation too, collapsing inside and outside, past and present, the real and the imaginary.

As it happens, New World Dutch barns are directly descended from *hallenhuis*—Old World Dutch barns in which living quarters for animals and humans are non-differentiated. This structural anomaly distinguishes this rural barn type from virtually every other form of Western architecture, in which humans and animals are otherwise quartered separately. With this history in mind, Foullon’s *Hallenhaus* might suggest for some viewers the presence of the uncanny, the disturbing province of aesthetics that is characterized by the destabilizing collapse of the strange and familiar. The artist’s use of surprising alterations of scale—making large objects unexpectedly small, or diminutive objects unexpectedly heroic—also serves to size up the uncanny effect.

What further distinguishes the vernacular *hallenhuis* structure from nearly all other pre-twentieth-century architecture is its otherwise “revealed structure”—its interior’s openly visible, unconcealed, supporting complex of wood beams and joints, along with its array of “unfinished” details that professional architecture always covers, hides, or paints. These functional elements belonging to the syntax of barn storage also frequently re-occur in Foullon’s display and cleating systems, which are painstakingly crafted with carefully selected woods and meticulously efficient, fully exposed hanging systems.⁶ To point to only the most obvious example, consider the artist’s *Cluster* series (begun in 2011), which consists of a barn-inspired storage system for supporting the hanging of rope, electrical cord, garden hoses, pants, gloves, or other bodily suggestions. Somewhat like sculptor Haim Steinbach’s (b. 1944) sculptural propositions, in which finely crafted shelves function as integral components of the work for the commodity objects they support,⁷ Foullon’s conditions, techniques, and systems of display become just as important—if not more so—than the objects resting on them.

Cruel Radiance (Seed Sower) (2012), *Cruel Radiance (Washboard)* (2012), and *Cruel Radiance (Buck Saw II)* (2012) all deploy found objects characteristic of farmstead experience and labor: the seed



Haim Steinbach
fresh, 1989
Plastic laminated wood shelf;
plastic bottle racks; metal and
wood shovels
78 x 96½ x 23¾ inches
The Menil Collection, Houston



Vija Celmins
Untitled (Comb), 1969-70
Enamel on wood, 77 x 24 inches
Collection of Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, Los Angeles

sower’s tool, a washboard, and an antique saw, respectively. All, however, are transformed into surprising material hybrids, supports, and shapes. The washboard in *Cruel Radiance (Washboard)*, affixed to polished nickel-plated brass, becomes a kind of eccentric abstraction below which canvas pokes disturbingly out of a small hole in the wooden handle: pinkish-dyed fabric that simulates the patina of the time-worn traces of the body. To this viewer, the hanging folds of fabric are polymorphic, conjuring up both female and male sexual organs. But fastened to the wall as sculpture, all these tools lose their functionality as both tool and body organ, becoming on-the-wall abstractions or fetishes suitable for collecting (more frequently than not these days, in art storage).

Sometimes Foullon’s objects proffer themselves as darkly suggestive gatherings of clues that evoke mysterious secrets and contradictory narratives gone seriously awry, as in the large-scale installation of *Cluster (the wrong place, the wrong time, in a sort of rapture)* (2012), consisting of rope, dyed apron, and a metal hoop hanging on cedar pegs fastened to wood molding. The viewer becomes detective, but the contradiction and narrative uncertainty are all: we assess the traces, the knotty clues, the old and the new, but we never conclusively tie down a decisive narrative; we imagine a variety of gender-twisting plots whose resolution remains always unknowable and hidden from view.⁸

But the sun also rises. The first work the viewer encounters upon entering *Braided Sun* at the University Art Museum at the University at Albany is *For Albany (Bandana)* (2012), an heroically scaled soft sculpture fabricated from sewn, dyed, salted, and tied canvas. As with the bandana-like fabrications in *Hallenhaus*, it is hung out to dry, as it were, at the top of a dramatic staircase the viewer must ascend to enter the exhibition. The distressed, amber-hued canvas is fastened under one of Edward Durell Stone’s groin vaulted archways by a giant nail and is hung on a joist-like expanse of molding that references the *hallenhuis*’s fully exposed wooden joining system, which is fashioned from vintage local wood—“vintage eastern white pine,” according to the museum label. Using surprising scale and site to subvert familiar expectations, Foullon’s heroic bandanas announce the collapse of the museum with barn storage display.

With perhaps a nod towards the overscaled sculptures of Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929), Foullon’s recasting of the familiar—a working man’s (or woman’s) handkerchief, an intimate accoutrement rendered as an unexpectedly large and functionless object—again evokes an uncanny materiality. In this sense, it is more comparable, perhaps, to Vija Celmins’s (b. 1938) *Comb* (1969–70), a sculptural translation of a pocket-sized comb into a human-scaled object. But what are we to make of this dramatically rescaled woven ovoid

covered with sea salt to simulate the sweat of a giant human brow? *For Albany (Bandana)* is an “epic symbol of sweat and labor,” says the artist, “as well as a portal through which the viewer can imagine passing.”⁹ Perhaps the bandana is more twisted than braided, but against the backdrop of the museum’s soaring windows it is easy to imagine that it also suggests the timeless “braided sun” of the exhibition’s title.

Collapsing the aesthetic space of the museum with the purportedly functional barn storage architecture and its accoutrements, Foullon turns the viewer’s expectations on their head. Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that the most frequently asked question of the artist is: “Did you grow up on a farm?” (She did not). I believe viewers ask this because her work (the materials, the historical referents, the shifting elements) defies expectations of professional art, but also because the material, historical, and narrative uncertainty that permeates her installations can also be unsettling: we are never quite sure which elements are “real” and vintage/authentic and which are ersatz/new. Perhaps it is in the narrative uncertainty and material vagaries of Foullon’s “romantic historicism” where our interest in the artist’s work is most piqued.

Although she frequently works in a studio in a Deposit, New York barn near the Catskills (at the farm formerly belonging to artist Frank Moore (1953–2002)), and draws some of her source materials from upstate barns, Foullon was raised in a family of architects and engineers in Los Angeles under the sign of Hollywood (and not too far from the Hollywood sign itself). The latter is reminiscent, in fact, of my favorite piece by Foullon. Diminutive in scale (as opposed to the overscaled Hollywood sign), this collaged paper sculpture comprises an approximately 4” x 6” sign hanging in two sections—one above the other—from miniature metal hooks attached to a paper-wrapped metal wire post driven into the wall.¹⁰ The larger sign on the top, with a red ground and white letters, reads: “THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE THIS PLACE ANYWHERE NEAR THIS PLACE SO THIS MUST BE,” while the smaller sign below is blue with white and slightly larger letters, and reads: “THE PLACE.” Particularly nifty about *There is No Place Like This Place Anywhere Near This Place So This Must Be the Place* (2001) is its crafty celebration of the rhetoric of homespun, vernacular signs—emphasized, of course, by its unfinished, hand-crafted elements but also by its peculiar miniaturization. But the *pièce de résistance* of Foullon’s vernacular transliteration is her ingenious rendering of the final exclamation point, the definitive point of arrival—“THE PLACE”—on a separate, differently colored, *detachable sign!* While Foullon’s work appears to point toward a desire for authenticity and particularity of place in an increasingly universal and homogeneous world, it also points out that even this definitive point of destination may always already be subject to shifting signs over time.



Rachel Foullon
There is No Place, 2001
Paper, chipboard, glue, and aluminum wire
5 x 3 x 4½ inches
Collection of Todd Alden

Foullon’s practice eschews “the mannerisms of the moment”; she prefers instead a kind of romantic historicism that might be described as a research-based poetic archeology. *Braided Sun* re-imagines hardships of the agrarian “landscape of self-reliance.” On the one hand, her work can be read as darkly ciphered parables: “There are specific periods of American history that haunt me,” she notes, “particularly instances of pioneering farmsteads: when adventurous, hard working people sought to carve out new and original lives for themselves, often in an inhospitable environment.”¹¹ But on the other hand, although they contain found elements and historical dimensions, all signs also point toward one ineluctable fact: Foullon’s installations are fictions, too. As the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) reminds us: “Fiction enables us to grasp reality and at the same time that which is veiled by reality.”¹²

Todd Alden is a writer living in New York City. His books include *Small Observations on the Small Tasks of the Bricoleur* (New York: Sperone Westwater, 2000), and his essays have been published by numerous museums. He is presently organizing an exhibition on the ephemera of the Leo Castelli and its satellite galleries for Alden Projects™, New York, a project-oriented venture of which he is also the director.

Thanks to Rachel Foullon for her challenging work and her grace in answering questions. Appreciation is also due Ian Cooper for sharing his particular insights and to Rebekah Tafel for reading a draft. Meep, meep!

- 1 Paul Heyer, *Architects on Architecture: New Directions in America* (New York: Walker and Company, 1966), p. 180.
- 2 “The Glass-Temple Museum: Modern Art Display Takes Over Own Building in New York,” *Newsweek*, May 2, 1939, p. 32.
- 3 Edward Durell Stone, *The Evolution of an Architect* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962), p. 143.
- 4 A number of “sculptural components,” as the artist refers to them—essentially cannibalized fragments of prior works—hang on storage display systems and have been previously exhibited in substantially different forms and manners.
- 5 John Burroughs, quoted by John Fitchen in *The New World Dutch Barn* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 71. I am grateful to Rachel Foullon for directing me to this reference.
- 6 While there is not space here for a longer discussion of the role that functionalist aesthetics, high-level craftsmanship, and furniture-making plays in Foullon’s approach to making sculpture, it is significant to note the hands-on influence that her father-in-law, James Cooper (b. 1949), has exerted on her approach to working with wood. It is worth noting that Cooper, the Soho-based master cabinet maker, played what remains an under-chronicled role as publisher/fabricator of furniture editions by Donald Judd (1928–1994), with whom he was associated from the mid-1970s through the early 1990s (first as Cooper/Williams, later as Cooper/Kato). The vast differences between the limited Judd editions originally published/produced by Cooper’s publishing/fabrication venture, Cooper/Kato, and the unlimited Judd editions fabricated later by others, remains a ripe subject for another occasion.
- 7 As a courtesy to the artist, I note Steinbach’s objection to my description here of elements of his work incorporating “commodity objects”; (he prefers “everyday objects” instead).
- 8 Another example is *Cemetery Ring (Oxford)* (2005), consisting of a life-size, finger-size sculptural ring constructed entirely of paper hanging on a three-inch nail in an unexpected nook of the exhibition and suggesting a darkly romantic narrative laid to rest on an uncertain plot.
- 9 Conversation with the artist at her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn on June 29, 2012.
- 10 Full disclosure: I own this work.
- 11 Rachel Foullon, as quoted by Paul Soto in “The Perfect Arrangement: Q & A with Rachel Foullon,” *Art in America*, May 5, 2012, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2012-05-09/rachel-foullon-ltd/print/>
- 12 Marcel Broodthaers, as quoted by Douglas Crimp in *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 200.



Commensurate with Modern Progress, 2010
Canvas, Inland red cedar, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
13 feet x 116 feet x 17 inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cluster XVI, 2012
Found garden hose and dyed vintage bag with stuffing on cedar
peg and molding, 27 x 20 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

LEFT: *Cluster (Commensurate with Modern Progress)*, 2012
Existing sculptural component (2010), dyed canvas, sea salt,
hardware, manila rope, plastic E-collar, on cedar peg and molding,
125 x 28 x 15 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cluster, 2012
Installation view
University Art Museum, University at Albany



Cluster IX, 2012
 Dyed vintage coverall, socks, and found rope on cedar peg and molding, 40 x 20 x 8 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



RIGHT: Cluster (the wrong place, the wrong time, in a sort of rapture), 2012
 Existing sculptural component (2009), manila rope, dyed vintage apron, and steel hoop on two cedar pegs and molding, 89 x 48 x 9 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cluster (Possession), 2012
Existing sculptural component (2009), wool cinch, aircraft cable,
and wreath form on cedar peg and molding, 44 x 22 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

LEFT: *Cluster VIII*, 2012
Dyed canvas, found garden hose, and gloves on three cedar pegs
and molding, 96 x 64 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cluster IV, 2012
Dyed cotton rope, dyed denim pant leg, and found lighting cord
on cedar peg and molding, 93 x 11 x 9½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

RIGHT: *Cluster (this façade the evil character of the farm would isolate and happiness and prosperity would bring [sic])*, 2012
Existing sculptural component (2009) and dyed canvas on cedar
peg and molding, 84 x 32 x 13 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cluster XXIII, 2012
Dyed canvas, cotton gloves, cotton rope, and found electrical cord
on cedar peg and molding, 54 x 23 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cruel Radiance (Buck Saw II), 2012
Antique buck saw, polished nickel-plated brass,
dyeed linen, and hardware, 25 x 21½ x 1½ inches
Collection of Susan Harris

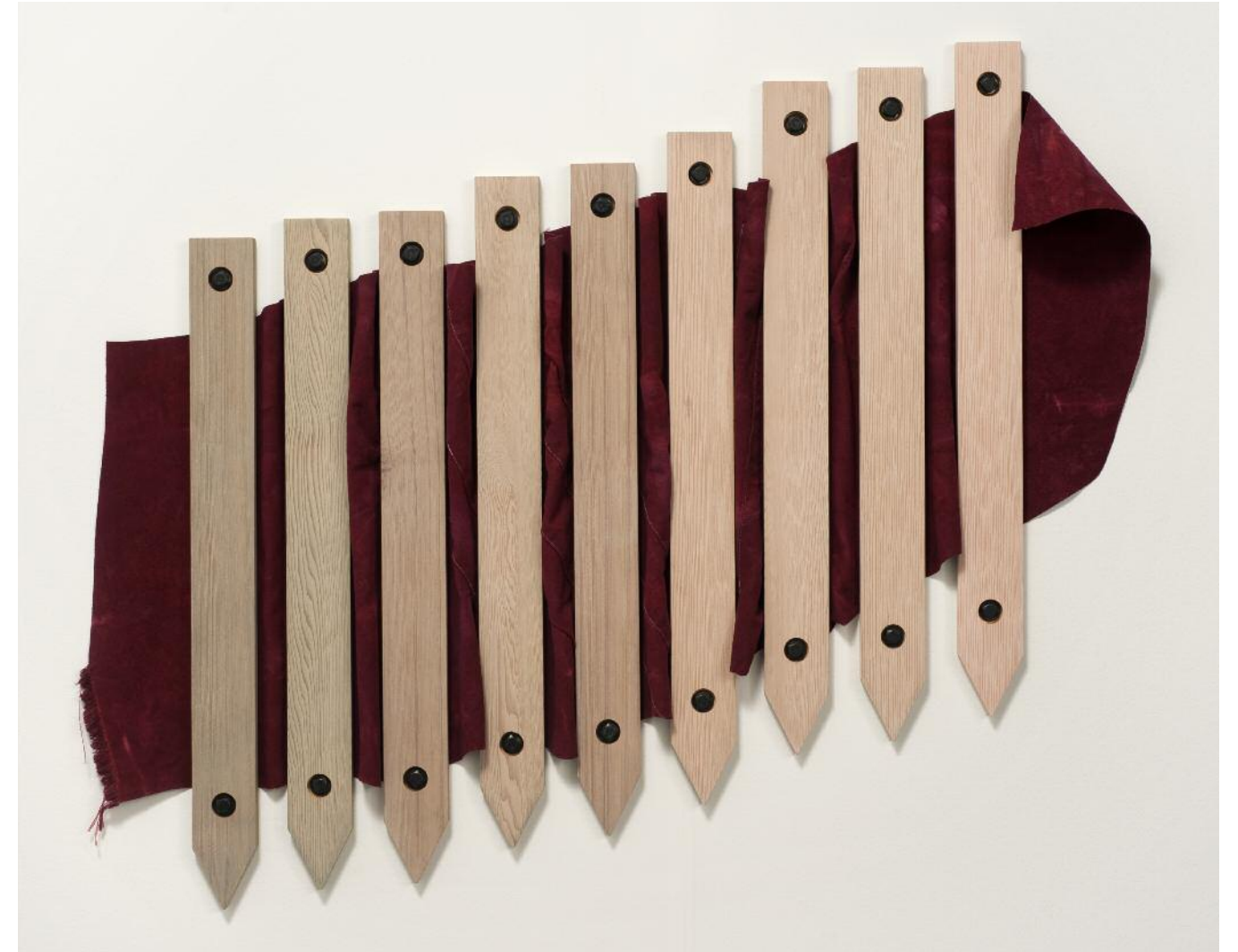




Cruel Radiance (Seed Sower), 2012
Antique seed sower, polished nickel-plated brass, dyed canvas,
and hardware, 35 x 28 x 7 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Cruel Radiance (Washboard), 2012
Antique washboard, polished nickel-plated brass, dyed canvas,
and hardware, 27 x 27 x 4½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California



Electric Fence, 2011
Stained cedar, dyed canvas, and hardware, 35 x 42 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

For Albany (Bandana), 2012
Canvas, vintage eastern white pine, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware, 22 feet x 18 feet x 16 inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California





There was at this time no specific room for sleeping in, 2009
Canvas, inland red cedar, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
89 x 70 x 6 inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California





Great Plains, gold dust, 2009
Canvas, inland red cedar, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
89 x 140 x 5½ inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles,
Los Angeles, California



For Albany (Dickie), 2012
Canvas, vintage eastern white pine, dye, stain, sea salt, and
hardware, 18 feet x 18 feet x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California





LEFT: *This is always there (near Jewett)*, 2003–06
Paper and glue, 36 x 9 x 2 inches. Private collection

RIGHT: *Cemetery Ring (Oxford)*, 2005
Paper, chipboard, and paper-wrapped nail, 3/4 inch diameter ring on
3 inch nail. Collection of Christine A. Zehner



Hallenhaus (and the severance of our own ties to the land), 2008
Western red cedar, canvas, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware,
84 x 48 x 144 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Itd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

In the American Grain: Rachel Foullon's Braided Sun

Elizabeth A. T. Smith

I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum...I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary...I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.

— Claes Oldenburg, 1961¹



Claes Oldenburg
Soft Ladder, Hammer, Saw and Bucket, 1967
Canvas filled with polyurethane foam, stiffened with glue and painted with acrylic, 7 feet 10 inches x 4 feet 6 inches x 2 feet. Collection of Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1968) © 1967 Claes Oldenburg

The exhibition *Braided Sun* presents almost a decade of work by California-born, New York-based artist Rachel Foullon, and represents the ongoing explorations of an artist whose work vigorously grapples with the expressive possibilities of form and its particularly American cultural significance. Freeform and buoyant, composed of sculptures that are discrete objects but which interrelate as installations, the works signal connections to one another, to the architecture of the museum space, and to American identity.

Foullon deftly orchestrates the formal attributes of scale, compositional relationships, texture, and color with a keen attention to the properties of gravity and balance. Through her recombinant objects, materials, and methods, she addresses the meaning and purpose of functionality, inventiveness, ingenuity, craftsmanship, and work ethic, simultaneously invigorating and interrogating these qualities. The largest and newest pieces in the exhibition, made in response to the

museum's architecture, expand these references in both their physical form and their emphatic evocation of social and cultural narratives.

Many of the sculptures in *Braided Sun*—made of fabric, tools, and objects such as rope, garden hoses, wire, work gloves, and a plethora of related items—are intertwined as loose configurations suggestive of the human body and attributes of physical labor. Most of the fabric elements, strongly tied to vernacular culture and to a folk sensibility, are designed and sewn in Foullon's studio and were inspired by historical patterns, photographs, or illustrations. Grouped within wood-worked moldings that form a framework, they resemble items that one might find hung by the doorway of a barn or left behind by workers who have gone home for the evening. Yet they resonate with an improvisatory, anticipatory air, as if they are also stand-ins for the artist's tools and processes.

Throughout her body of recent work, Foullon has directly engaged with the implications of several chapters in American social history and with the notion of what it means to make "American" art in the twenty-first century. She understands that a responsiveness to a particular arrangement of circumstances, a dependence upon infinite variables, and the dynamism generated from such constantly shifting relationships are inherently American attributes that have underpinned our national identity over time. Echoes of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl are present, and it is intriguing to observe how Foullon's work resonates with the figurative paintings of Thomas Hart Benton, whose Social Realism of the 1930s centered largely on images of small-town and rural life as embodied in people, labor, and rituals. Both artists also share a penchant for the dramatic and the heroic, as well as a hyper-rich palette that serves to electrify these narratives. Foullon has delved into a little-known episode of early American vernacular culture—a type of barn architecture imported by Dutch settlers in the seventeenth century to the east coast of North America—as an ongoing touchstone for her own artistic production. She explores the connections between the messy vitality of cohabitating humans and animals and the realities of contemporary "live-work" spaces such as the artist's studio, using sculptural production as a means to make her subject matter current and relevant.

Thus Foullon's work has larger implications for an evolving definition of American art's signs, symbols, and cultural significance. Her use of references to earlier episodes in the country's history, and her insistence on an impeccable craftsmanship, resonate with writer Louis Uchitelle's observation that "mastering tools and working with one's hands is receding in America as a hobby, as a valued skill, as a cultural influence that shaped thinking and behavior in vast sections of the country...craftsmanship is, if not a birthright, then a vital ingredient

of the American self-image as a can-do, inventive, we-can-make-any-thing-people."² Foullon's work spotlights this deeply ingrained aspect of American identity. The discipline inherent in many of her pieces, together with their often exuberant conjoining of objects that are seemingly casually assembled, speak to the transformation of materials through labor, the tradition of agrarian living, and the possibilities of an art that is broadly referential to other recent practices in multiple disciplines. For example, the garments she creates—meticulously researched, sewn from scratch, and hand-dyed—are evidence of her deliberate adoption of a thoughtful, calculated approach. The wood in her pieces is finely milled and stained; the hardware has been transformed by being stripped and blackened. She comments that her approach is like that of labor on a farm where "everything gets processed,"³ and in a recent essay on her work, Aram Moshayedi offers the evocative statement that "...you cannot trace the land with hands by wearing both body and mind of two tracks."⁴ The sculptures Foullon calls "Clusters," wherein carefully crafted wood moldings serve as framework for compositions of organic, anthropomorphic elements, are metaphors for the permeable interplay between body and mind that gives vitality to her work.⁵

A notable material element of Foullon's sculptures is the presence of utilitarian garments and accoutrements associated with workman-like yet gender-neutral labor, which offer protection from and barriers between worker, animal, natural elements, bodily fluids, etc. In the two new installation pieces created for *Braided Sun*, which Foullon has rendered in a less-detailed, more schematic way than previous pieces, she expands her vocabulary of forms and her use of scale. These new works are larger and more monumental than any of her earlier works, appearing heavy and almost perversely corporeal. Her use of the motifs of the bandana, associated with toil, and the collar-like dickie, with its more refined associations, speaks to the coexistence of the laborer and the "gentleman farmer"—both noble archetypes in American cultural history, but both also metaphors for the conflicting dual identities held by the contemporary artist as laborer and "high-society participant." In this context, it is instructive to consider the shared affinities of Foullon's explorations and those of painter Philip Guston, whose renditions of cartoonish human figures carry references to social forces as well as to the struggles of the artist, merging them in complex, contradictory ways.

Foullon's work reveals an attitude that seems closest in spirit to that of the early Claes Oldenburg, an artist she admires for his inventive mixture of materials, the animated theatricality of his work, and what she terms the "pathetic quality that speaks to the flaccid character of all heroes when their moment of agency has passed."⁶ Ephemerality,



Jerry Cooke
Martha Graham performing in
"Appalachian Spring," 1944
Black and white photograph
© Jerry Cooke/CORBIS



Sam Durant
Scaffold, 2012
Wood, metal,
33.73 x 47.47 x 51.77 feet
Commissioned and produced by
Documenta 13
Photo: Rosa Maria Ruehling
© Sam Durant

contingency, and precarious balance animate Foullon's work in ways that are akin to Oldenburg's experiments with the properties of gravity in his soft sculptures and suspended installations. In the implied presence of the body in motion, its sense of syncopation, and use of vernacular American references, Foullon's work additionally suggests relationships to dance and performance. For instance, choreographer Martha Graham's 1944 ballet, *Appalachian Spring*, with its lyrical exuberance and American folkloric inspiration, manifests a kinship of sensibility and imagery with Foullon's treatment of similar themes. Through movement, costumes, sets, and music, this tale of pioneer settlers portrays the sobriety of the Shakers as well as the intense fever-pitch of the revival tent, and evokes a gamut of emotions from quiet strength to passion—which resonates with the multifarious qualities and vibrancy of Foullon's work.

A younger generation of artists with whom Foullon's work shows affinities include Cady Noland and Sam Durant, although Foullon's approach is distinct from theirs. Noland transforms vernacular materials and lowbrow images of American culture into assemblages that convey an inchoate yet palpable undercurrent of violence, dejection, and loss. Her dark renditions of the American psyche, which sometimes use historical references or images and at other times are more open-ended, have numerous literary and cinematic counterparts. In contrast, Foullon's treatment of history as a starting point for subject matter is neither forlorn nor sinister, yet like Noland she employs the strategy of the *ad hoc* as a compositional device to manifest tenuous, contingent relationships. Sam Durant's sustained engagement with highly charged or contested episodes in American history springs from a consideration of their contradictions. His work offers forms and images removed from their original context that are either stripped to their essential details or recombined. In his recent piece *Scaffold*, presented at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, Durant recreated the actual dimensions of a series of gallows from historical executions into a large-scale construction that does not immediately reveal its sources. Like Durant, Foullon engages with passages of American history that manifest conflicting values or states of transition, yet her work avoids direct emphasis on violence, social injustice, or specific didactic commentary.⁷ Instead it grapples with the contested terrain of history in ways that are more open-ended and haptic.

Foullon's ongoing engagement with aspects of social history parallels current directions in the field of American cultural studies that concern interpretations of national identity. The American landscape as reality and myth is under investigation on many fronts; questions of whether or not this landscape and its abundance of natural resources

still embody hopefulness and the promise of the “good life” have great currency and urgency. Foullon has described her work over the past five years as being stimulated by an awareness of contemporary angst that began around 2008, and by the sobering recognition that hard work is not necessarily rewarded by prosperity; instead, as in the Great Depression, it may only bring about more hard work.⁸ Her tool renovation pieces in particular give form to her observations about the nature of labor and utility. In these pieces, she starts with old, outmoded tools and domestic objects ranging from buck saws to washboards, strips them down, and adapts them using new materials and functions—in effect, replacing their original values with new ones. In a published interview, she stated, “I collected pre-industrial vintage tools and stripped them of their romantic patina, effectively liberating them from their nostalgic aura and the lazy seduction of the found object...”⁹

Related to this, a recent distinctive feature of Foullon’s art practice lies in her repurposing of sculptures from one installation to the next, “regurgitated, re-employed, and used as raw material.”¹⁰ Her willingness to recombine elements used in earlier pieces to create alternate versions for different contexts manifests her strong interest in the permeability of the human body—and perhaps the American psyche. She asserts that the works retain their former identities but live double lives,

By tracing how the tool once worked in tandem with the body, I extract a geometry that echoes the contours of that movement...I see them as sirens: seductive, but also kicking you in the face a little. Within the exhibition, they do a very specific job, and that is to close down the aperture—narrowing the experience for the viewer. Making things one-on-one. But then they push you away.¹¹

Foullon demonstrates a fundamentally optimistic yet complex view of American identity characterized by ingenuity, reinvention, and malleability. The non-finite quality of the life of objects that she explores embodies these ideas with vigor and vitality, giving new significance and currency to ideas about American art in our own time.

Elizabeth Smith is Executive Director of Curatorial Affairs at Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Previously she was chief curator at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art and curator at MOCA, Los Angeles. She has curated solo exhibitions on the artists and architects Jenny Holzer, Lee Bontecou, Kerry James Marshall, Bertrand Goldberg, R.M. Schindler, Catherine Opie, Cindy Sherman, Uta Barth, Donald Moffett, and Toba Khedoori, as well as curated the group shows *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses* and *At the End of the Century: One Hundred Years of Architecture*.

The title of this essay was inspired by/borrowed from Barbara Rose’s book on Claes Oldenburg (referenced below), and is one of the chapter headings she uses to write about aspects of Oldenburg’s work. Rose was, in turn, inspired by the writings of American artist Robert Henri.

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- 1 Claes Oldenburg in *Environments, Situations, Spaces*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Martha Jackson Gallery, May 23–June 23, 1961). Reprinted in *Store Days* by Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967). Reprinted in *Claes Oldenburg* by Barbara Rose (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), p. 190.
 - 2 “A Nation That’s Losing Its Toolbox,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2012, business section, p. 1, 5. This theme has become an increasingly common refrain voiced by public intellectuals. In *That Used To Be Us* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), writers Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum argue that the loss of this sensibility on the part of Americans reflects a serious decline in the national consciousness that is playing out on the world stage as the United States becomes eclipsed by other countries with—if not more ingenuity—more discipline.
 - 3 Correspondence with the artist, August 20, 2012.
 - 4 Aram Moshayedi in *Rachel Foullon: Ruminant Recombinant*, exhibition text (Los Angeles: ltd los angeles, April 26–May 26, 2012). Moshayedi’s text is a reworking of an essay by Michael Ned Holte on the occasion of a 2010 exhibition by Foullon, also at ltd los angeles. Since Foullon’s intent in her 2012 show was to recombine and “scramble” some of the works from her earlier show, Moshayedi adopted a similar approach in his text, using only words from Holte’s earlier essay to create a new one.
 - 5 The “Cluster” works hang on a molding apparatus designed by Foullon to offer various possibilities for arrangement. This consists of two rows of milled and stained cedar molding on which hang sliding cleats with oversized pegs; these can be manipulated to contract or expand the overall installation.
 - 6 Conversation with the artist, August 19, 2012.
 - 7 Certain critics, however, have discerned references to lynching and butchery: see Sharon Mizota, “Hanging There at the Ready,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2012.
 - 8 Conversation with the artist, February 11, 2012.
 - 9 Rachel Foullon, interview by Paul Soto in *Art in America*, May 9, 2012, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2012-05-09/rachel-foullon-ltd/>
 - 10 Statement by the artist in Moshayedi’s *Rachel Foullon: Ruminant Recombinant*, *op. cit.*
 - 11 Foullon, *Art in America*, *op. cit.*

Exhibition Checklist

Cluster II, 2012

Dyed canvas, dyed linen aprons, and garden hose on cedar peg and molding
72 x 23 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster IV, 2012

Dyed cotton rope, dyed denim pant leg, and found lighting cord on cedar peg and molding
93 x 11 x 9½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster VIII, 2012

Dyed canvas, found garden hose, and gloves on three cedar pegs and molding
96 x 64 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster IX, 2012

Dyed vintage coverall, socks, and found rope on cedar peg and molding
40 x 20 x 8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster XVI, 2012

Found garden hose and dyed vintage bag with stuffing on cedar peg and molding
27 x 20 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster XXIII, 2012

Dyed canvas, cotton gloves, cotton rope, and found electrical cord on cedar peg and molding
54 x 23 x 10 inches

Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster (only 4° more than the temperature outside), 2012

Existing sculptural component (2009) and manila cotton ropes on cedar peg and molding
61 x 18 x 15 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster (Possession), 2012

Existing sculptural component (2009), wool cinch, aircraft cable, and wreath form on cedar peg and molding
44 x 22 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster (the wrong place, the wrong time, in a sort of rapture), 2012

Existing sculptural component (2009), manila rope, dyed vintage apron, and steel hoop on two cedar pegs and molding
89 x 48 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cluster (this façade the evil character of the farm would isolate and happiness and prosperity would bring (sic)), 2012

Existing sculptural component (2009) and dyed canvas on cedar peg and molding
84 x 32 x 13 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cruel Radiance (Buck Saw II), 2012

Antique buck saw, polished nickel-plated brass, dyed linen, and hardware
25 x 21½ x 1½ inches
Collection of Susan Harris

Cruel Radiance (Seed Sower), 2012

Antique seed sower, polished nickel-plated brass, dyed canvas, and hardware
35 x 28 x 7 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cruel Radiance (Washboard), 2012

Antique washboard, polished nickel-plated brass, dyed canvas, and hardware
27 x 27 x 4½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

For Albany (Bandana), 2012

Canvas, vintage eastern white pine, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
22 feet x 18 feet x 16 inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

For Albany (Dickie), 2012

Canvas, vintage eastern white pine, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
18 feet x 18 feet x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Electric Fence, 2011

Stained cedar, dyed canvas, and hardware
35 x 42 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Commensurate with Modern Progress, 2010

Canvas, inland red cedar, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
13 feet x 116 feet x 17 inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Great Plains, gold dust, 2009

Canvas, inland red cedar, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
89 x 140 x 5½ inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

There was at this time no specific room for sleeping in, 2009

Canvas, inland red cedar, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
89 x 70 x 6 inches (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Hallenhaus (and the severance of our own ties to the land), 2008

Western red cedar, canvas, dye, stain, sea salt, and hardware
84 x 48 x 144 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ltd los angeles, Los Angeles, California

Cemetery Ring (Oxford), 2005

Paper, chipboard, and paper-wrapped nail
¾-inch diameter ring on 3-inch nail
Collection of Christine A. Zehner

This is always there (near Jewett), 2003–06

Paper and glue
36 x 9 x 2 inches
Private collection

Biography

1978 Born in Glendale, California
Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

EDUCATION

2000 B.S., New York University, New York
2004 M.F.A., Columbia University, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012 *Present Future*, Artissima 19, Torino, Italy
Rachel Foullon: Braided Sun, University Art Museum, University at Albany, State University of New York, (catalogue)
Ruminant Recombinant, ltd los angeles, Los Angeles
2010 *An Accounting*, ltd los angeles, Los Angeles
2009 *Grab a Root and Grow!*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013 *In Practice*, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York
Remainder, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa
2011 *Raw Materials*, Greene Park Gallery, Los Angeles
Double, double, Workplace Gallery, Gateshead, Great Britain
Group Show: 7 Sculptors, Brennan & Griffin, New York
GREG WILKEN TORBJORN VEJVI LYNTON...., curated by Jesse Benson, Las Cienegas Projects, Los Angeles
Becoming Something Found, curated by Fabienne Laserre and Molly Smith, Jolie Laide Gallery, Philadelphia
The Light Show, Kate Werble Gallery, New York

2010 Outdoor Sculpture Garden, curated by New Art Dealers Association, Canyon Ranch, Miami Beach

Painting and Sculpture: To Benefit the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Lehman Maupin, New York

De-Nature, curated by Wendy White, Jolie Laide Gallery, Philadelphia

Curated Prints by ForthEstate, Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

2009 *Forth Estate Editions*, Rhode Island School of Design Memorial Hall Gallery, Providence

On From Here, Guild & Greyshkul, New York

2008 *Without Walls*, Museum 52, New York (catalogue)

Beyond a Memorable Fancy, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space, New York (catalogue)

what the midnight can show us, Museum 52, New York

Fresh Kills, curated by Dave Kennedy-Cutler, Dumbo Arts Center, Brooklyn

Unfurnished Rooms, curated by Jacob Robichaux, Unit B, San Antonio

2007 *Workspace Program 2001-07*, Dieu Donne Papermill, New York

Neointegrity, curated by Keith Mayerson, Derek Eller Gallery, New York

Sonotube, Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara

The Line of Time and the Plane of Now, curated by Jacob Dyrenforth, Ohad Meromi and Halsey Rodman, Wallspace, New York

2006 *Thin Walls*, curated by Sara Greenberger Rafferty, Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, Brooklyn

Bring the War Home, curated by Drew Heitzler, Q.E.D., Los Angeles

2005-2006 *Material World: New Sculpture for the Commons*, Public Art Fund, MetroTech Center, Brooklyn (catalogue)

2005 *Spectrum*, curated by Kate Shepherd, Galerie Lelong, New York

Talk to the Land, arranged by Matt Keegan, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York (catalogue)

Bucolica, Wallspace, New York

A Slower Time, Sandroni Rey, Los Angeles

Paper, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York

Drama, Romance, Loneliness, Narcissism and Many More Diseases of the Soul, Audiello Fine Art, New York

2004 *Wallpaper for the 21st Century*, Placemaker, Miami

Four-Ply, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Gypsies' Curse, curated by José Diaz, Buena Vista Building, Miami

M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition, curated by Ali Subotnick, Studebaker Building, Columbia University, New York

Art in the Office, curated by Matt Keegan, The Global Consulting Group, New York

2003 *Vivere Venezia II: Recycling the Future*, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice (catalogue)

Faking Real, curated by Stephen Hilger, LeRoy Neiman Center, Columbia University, New York

Shangri-la, curated by Michael St. John and Jason Duval, Islip Art Museum, East Islip, New York (catalogue)

2002 *Process/ion*, curated by Eva Respini, LeRoy Neiman Center and Low Memorial Library, Columbia University, New York (catalogue)

Tricky Adios: Hello to Handmade Words, organized by David Humphrey, K.S. Art, New York

2001 *The Worst of Gordon Pym Continued*, Printed Matter, New York

To Market To Market, curated by Robin Kahn, The Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn

White on White, Quality Gallery, Brooklyn

2001-2000 *Snapshot*, The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore; Beaver College Fine Arts Gallery, Glenside, Pennsylvania

2000 *Group Show*, Quality Gallery, Brooklyn

Sophie Spar Sale, Printed Matter, New York

Great America, Rosenberg Gallery, New York University, New York

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

2012 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant, New York

2011 Fellow in Craft/Sculpture, New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), New York

2005 Workspace Program, Dieu Donne Papermill, New York

Grizedale Arts/Wordsworth Trust Residency, Lakes District, Great Britain

2004 Caroline Newhouse Award for Sculpture, Columbia University, New York

2003 *Vivere Venezia 2: Recycling the Future*, International Residency and Workshop at IUAV, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice

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- 2011 Miller, Leigh Anne. "The Lookout," *ArtinAmerica.com*, July.
Veléz, Pedro. "L.A. Confidential," *artnet.com*, January
- 2010 Holte, Michael Ned. "Best of 2010," *Artforum*, December.
Gerwin, Daniel. "De-Nature," *artslant.com*, November.
Lehrer-Graiver, Sarah. "Rachel Foullon," *artillery*, May/June.
Schad, Ed. "A Meandering Reading of Rachel Foullon," *artslant.com*, March.
O'Neill-Butler, Lauren. "500 Words: Rachel Foullon," *artforum.com*, March.
Holte, Michael Ned. Text accompanying exhibition at ltd los angeles, March.
- 2009 Wolin, Joseph R. "Rachel Foullon," *artforum.com*, September.
Dault, Julia. "Rachel Foullon at Nicelle Beauchene," *www.akimbo.ca*, September.
- 2008 Plunkett, Megan. "Rachel Foullon," interview, *The Kingsboro Press*, Fall.
Sussler, Betsy. "Artists on Artists," *BOMB Magazine*, Spring.
Artist contribution, *Transatlantico 2, SITE Magazine*, Spring.
Artist contribution, *-ship*, collected by Lauren Mackler, Spring.
- 2007 Keeley, Amanda. "S for Summer in the City, 2007," *White Walls*, Summer.
- 2006 "The AI Eye: Editors' Picks of Art for Sale," *www.artinfo.com*, January.
Material World, exhibition catalogue, Public Art Fund, New York.
ETC., exhibition catalogue, published by Matt Keegan, New York.
- 2005 Smith, Roberta. "Robert Melee/Talk to the Land," *New York Times*, November 11.
Cotter, Holland. "Justin Lowe" (including paragraph on *North Drive Press*), *New York Times*, August 5.
Kramer, Louise. "Youngbloods," *Crain's New York Business*, June 6-12.
Artist's multiple included in a publication assembled by Matt Keegan, *North Drive Press #2*, June.
- 2004 Jana, Reena. "Four-Ply," *Time Out New York*, August 26-September 2.
Johnson, Ken. "Four-Ply," *New York Times*, August 6.
Ammirati, Domenick. "Art in the Office," *artforum.com*, April 17.
- 2003 Krudy, Catherine. "Artists at the Neiman Gallery Show Us How To Fake It," *Columbia Spectator*, April 30.
"Vivere Venezia 2: Recycling the Future," exhibition catalogue, *Marsilio Editori*, Venice, Italy.
- 2002 Respini, Eva. "Process/ion," exhibition catalogue, Columbia University, New York.
- 2001 Smith, Roberta. "The Worst of Gordon Pym Continued," *New York Times*, November 16.
Yablonsky, Linda. "To Market To Market," *Time Out New York*, October 18-25.

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