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Diana Cooper: Exuberant, Fragile Wonder

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LC: How did you develop your overarching concept of spatial exploration through such a distinctive artistic signature, characterized by aggressive geometries and vibrant colors?

DC: I think it partly comes from my interest in architecture, infrastructure and industrial design: geometry is everywhere, and yet most of the time we are not sensitive to it. For me a lot of the color developed when I moved from oil painting, with all its infinite nuances and possibilities, to ball point pens and sharpie markers, which are more direct – blue is blue, red is red – and more connected with things that everybody uses. Additionally, I am attracted to color-coding, the way color is used outside of art. Most recently, I went to CERN in Switzerland for a conference and to visit the Large Hadron Collider -- the biggest machine man ever made, and to find the smallest elementary particle, the Higgs boson. The machine is completely color-coded, like the largest fuse box you've ever seen with thousands if not millions of wires of different colors, mostly primary colors.

LC: The piece *Orange Alert* captured my attention, because it developed between 2003 and 2010 in different geographical locations between the US, England, Italy, and China. The piece takes different configurations, depending where it is exhibited. I wonder if there is an idea of dislocation developed in this piece?

DC: The piece was begun at a residency in London called The Center for Drawing. I was working on this piece by morphing, changing, or expanding it at the sites where it was being exhibited. So, in terms of the dislocation, this piece did not have a home base. There are only two distinctive pieces: *Orange Alert UK*, which was made in the United Kingdom, and *Orange Alert USA*, which was made in New York. The first time I ever heard about the orange alert system was after September 11, when I learnt that New York was permanently under orange alert. At the residency, I was talking to Londoners about that very fact: they looked at me completely perplexed, as if they had no idea what I was talking about, and they asked me how it was visually communicated. It was through these conversations that I realized that unlike a subway map or traffic lights for instance, it was a color-coded system that never visually represented colors. I was already fascinated by color-coding and how color is communicated. For instance, how do you describe red to a person who is blind? The other thing about this system was that, in a sense, it was color-coding fear. For this piece I restricted myself to red, orange, yellow, blue, and green, with orange and red being the ones most represented; if I was going high, the highest area of the work would always have to be red; if I started to descend, then it would have to go from orange to yellow... The *Orange Alert UK* traveled from Wimbledon (which was the place of my residency) to Paris, then to Turin, London, Leicester, Cardiff, Cleveland, and finally NYC. So the piece, and I, experienced forms of dislocation and relocation between urban and remote areas.

LC: Speaking about color-coding, *Silver City* in 2012-13 is not mute, but moves you into a different direction from primary colors. How did that happen?

DC: All the silver is from those rolls you get in a hardware store that are used for sealing air ducts. This is a gorgeous material, very seductive and reflective. At the same time, it is a nightmare to work with, because the adhesive sticks to itself: the second you touch it, it gets a crease. *Silver City* is a somewhat wistful piece. I lost most of my artwork in Hurricane Sandy, which was devastating for me, so perhaps the muted palette grows out of that experience. In the piece the city is miniaturized, it makes something that is really big into something really tiny. Also, for me, the piece is both sparkling and prickly, a little like how I experience (the) New York City.

LC: Perhaps that silver capturing everything around you as reflections shows the fragility of trying to locate and rebuild someone's identity after losing it on a hurricane? That work was fairly recent. But then you also have *Constellation Vanity*, 2010-2013, which has all those mirrors. I connect these pieces with an artistic tradition of *vanitas*, in the reflection of existential fragility. Lilly Wei also saw that much earlier, when in 2008 she wrote in *Art in America* about the "contingent, precarious look" of your structures. Do you see that as well?

DC: I like very much the association you make between *Constellation Vanity* and the tradition of *vanitas*; though there is no visual similarity, it shares the idea. I also agree with what Lilly Wei said. It's something that runs through my work and also comes from my own life experience: as mortal creatures we live with incredible impermanence. Most of things we make will outlive us. I want the art to be this exuberant wonder, but also for it to give a sense that this is flickering, that this won't always be here. I am attracted to how strength and fragility are related, like a thin spider's web or a parasitic plant that has no roots, but coils around others. What you see in *Constellation Vanity* are wooden dowels of different sizes and different diameters that I painted red, adding mirrors also in different diameters. This is the first time that I used mirrors. Since most of these mirrors are very small, if you are in front of the piece

DIANA COOPER

EXUBERANT, FRAGILE WONDER

interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
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you and all the other pieces behind you in the room look fractured. I like the spatial play that happens: the piece is looking back, it's looking at you looking at the piece. This piece also relates to color-coding. When I exhibited it in 2013 in an industrial space in Sunset Park Brooklyn as part of the exhibition "Come Together: Surviving Sandy" organized by the Dedalus Foundation and the Brooklyn Rail, it was in direct communication with the bright red pipes running all along the ceiling, in this instance red means water, these pipes are used in the case of a fire. I think the piece is also humorous. These red probes are quite Phallic and lipsticklike, and the mirrors play with our self-centeredness. Interestingly, a lot of people took selfies in front of that piece (laughter). At the same time, think of the ubiquity of surveillance: there are cameras everywhere, recording everything all the time; after the initial shock, this has become part of how we live now.

"Proposal for permanent installation *Double Take*" (2014). © Diana Cooper. Roosevelt Island Ventilation Structure. Commissioned and owned by MTA Arts & Design. Design courtesy the artist (Installation Date, Spring 2015. Materials to be used: mosaic, ceramic, granite and steel. Art Wall Dimensions (including gate), 8 feet (height) x 96 feet (length))

