

Sonya Blesofsky: Introduced by Christopher Y. Lew



Sonya Blesofsky
Cinderblock Study (Dieu Donne Configuration) (2007)
Abaca paper and archival tape
All images courtesy the artist

A work of art is generally assumed to be destined for permanence, something to be valued and handled gently so as to survive successive generations. Sonya Blesofsky's work, on the other hand, is literally built *not* to last. Generally site-specific in nature, Blesofsky's work transforms everyday materials into architectural forms—her staircases are made from glassine, her construction studs from pressed and folded Reynolds Wrap, her iron columns cast from wax. Lacking sturdy materiality, the structures sag under their own weight like Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures. The impact of Blesofsky's art, unlike the work of the Pop artist, does not reside in ironic humor, but rather its inherent tension and fragility. Conscious of the literary tropes at play, her installations really do “hang by a thread” and feature “paper thin walls.” The Brooklyn-based artist says, “I use everyday materials to bring the work down from an inaccessible art level so that I can put the viewer in a place where they empathize with the idea that things around them might not be what they seem—that the world is much more fragile than we like to think.”

During a 2005 residency at Plane Space in New York, Blesofsky created a world that threatened to come apart at a mere touch. Meticulously crafted to evoke a basement, *Study for City I (Underground)* featured rows of shiny metal columns, low-hanging fluorescent lights, and a maze of pipes that sprouted from the ceiling, walls, and floor. A completely immersive environment, what seems to be a forgotten subterranean space is actually a construction that suggests a world about to fall to pieces. The foil columns are aligned in imperfect rows and their surfaces are dimpled and wrinkled. Cardboard pipes bare spiraling seams and would not hold water if put to the task. Blesofsky's installation highlights the guts of New York buildings, the tenuous and essential supports and conduits that keep urban life running.

In a shift from complete environments to discrete objects, Blesofsky recently created a series of cinderblocks out of paper pulp. Produced in collaboration with New York's Dieu Donn  Papermill, where she was an artist in residence, *Cinderblock Study* is a ghostly sibling to an actual cinder block. Sitting alone on the floor or piled one on top of the other, Blesofsky's blocks barely hold themselves together, with edges that do not completely touch and corners that peel back on themselves.

To take something so indestructible and render it delicate suggests a process of alchemy and magic. For Blesofsky, however, it highlights more fact than illusion. The Minneapolis bridge collapse in August 2007 and the much more catastrophic failure of the New Orleans levees during Hurricane Katrina are just two recent examples of the truly frail nature of heavy infrastructure. The issues and concerns of physics are shared by artist and engineers alike. While the two roles may differ in size and scale, Blesofsky's trial and error approach to forming foil trusses and glassine fire escapes negotiates the same problems engineers do—weight and gravity as well as knowledge of the materials at hand. Like Blesofsky's art, real-world structures fall into disrepair. Bridges must be repainted and shored up, foundations stabilized, columns mended or replaced.



Sonya Blesofsky
Uptown Station: Study for 116th St. (2007)
Vellum, glue, tape, string

This confused state of construction and deconstruction recalls Robert Smithson's slideshow lecture *Hotel Palenque*. Examined as if it were an archeological site, Smithson points out the bizarre yet poetic confluences of repair and destruction at the Mexican hotel where he stayed during a 1969 trip. Only half-built (the hotel had a dismantled roof and improvised supports made from tree branches) it is difficult to tell if the building is in a state of renovation or demolition. Similarly, Blesofsky's 2007 installation, *Uptown Station: Study for 116 St.*, combined elements of use and disrepair. A full-scale New York City subway entrance made from vellum, the sculpture includes a paper version of a subway trademark: an illuminated green orb denoting 24-hour access. Exhibited in an empty Harlem storefront, when viewed from across the street it offered an uncanny resemblance to an actual train entrance, as if one had sprouted within the store. The second orb was missing save for a bare bulb suspended over the lamppost. A number of vellum 2x4s, wedged against the wall and floor, shored up the gates and railings. The intentionally sad state of the station is emblematic of an overburdened transportation system as well as a neighborhood that has known both neglect and revitalization.

With the housing market now under intense national scrutiny, Blesofsky's work is especially topical. Not only has the subprime mortgage crisis affected thousands of homeowners, it has brought construction to a standstill throughout the nation. Developers have halted work on new buildings as demand has disappeared, leaving half-built structures and abandoned lots—Smithson-esque “nonsites” rather than homes. Speaking of her experience with the ups and downs of real estate, Blesofsky says, “I first became interested in development booms when I moved to San Francisco at the tail end of the dot-com boom and many artists and arts organizations were being evicted. After that all went bust, I lived in the Western Addition in San Francisco, a neighborhood that has a history of aggressive urban renewal. I also had a studio that was on the outskirts of the city, an area that was undergoing major development with a new rail line and ‘artists’ lofts’ being built right and left—all of them too expensive for artists to live in.”

Currently Blesofsky is investigating the changing nature of New York's waterfront, specifically Brooklyn's DUMBO district. For an exhibition at Smack Mellon, where she is an artist in residence, Blesofsky has created a boiler from cardboard and brown packing paper. Inspired by the turn-of-the-century coal burning machines that once occupied the current galleries of the nonprofit organization, *Study for Gair Boiler* evokes DUMBO's industrial past and connects it with its gentrified present. Bridging the early 20th century with the 21st, the installation reminds the viewer how no neighborhood is ever fixed in its use or identity, but constantly responds to the city and its inhabitants. And like the ever changing cityscape, Blesofsky's art is not permanent. After the exhibition run, each piece is taken down and destroyed, and the materials are intentionally trashed or recycled. “It's important to me that the pieces don't live for longer than each show lasts,” she says. “We put so much effort into relationships, careers, family, and everything will eventually come to an end. It sounds really sad. It is. Every piece takes so long for me to make and will get trashed after a month exhibition. Each is a huge exercise in loss for me...I usually have a really good cry every time I take a piece down.”

Sonya Blesofsky is featured in Site 92: Phase II on view at Smack Mellon from January 12 through February 24, 2008. For more information on her work, visit: www.sonyablesofsky.com. Christopher Y. Lew is Manager of Curatorial Affairs at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center.