

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 Stone ¹



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

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



1970s photographs of *hallenhaus* survey in Montgomery County, New York.

Courtesy of the New Netherland Research Center

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 23⅞ 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, rolled, 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 up-state 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!

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- 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 in 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.