

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,

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.



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

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.



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

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.*