Sarah Burns

The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world.

—Michel Foucault
Hypnagogia is the transition to and from sleep, that sensory borderland that everyone experiences but for some people can be disorienting. Afterwards, they can recall a heightened sense of touch, sound, and sight, but the specifics are difficult to pluck from the fog of wakefulness turning to sleep and then dreaming. For multi-media artist Sarah Burns, these half-awake images, so frustratingly diffuse, are part of the creative grist that became her MAEP exhibition *midday*.

The inspiration for her most recent sculptures began with research on European gardens, landscape architecture, and intricately detailed topiary art. She is interested in how nature as well as how gardens organize space. Her practice is infused with an architectural discipline and earnestness, in the same way that Steen Eiler Rasmussen meant when he said of architecture, “No other art employs a colder, more abstract form, but at the same time no other art is more intimately connected with man’s daily life from the cradle to the grave.” Burns’s sculptures and room-sized installations create experiences that oscillate between intimately constructed details and evocations of domestic environments—our recurring memories of personal spaces.

Over the past few years, Burns has been making expertly refined abstract shapes and sculptural forms with pre-fabricated building materials: drywall, lumber, carpet, plaster, wallpaper, trim. Her diverse
practice, which includes sculpture, painting, and installation begins with an openness to materials, such that a single piece can take a long time to develop as she discovers the ideal material. For her newest sculptures, she used materials such as vinyl tile flooring that have a strange sense of familiarity, recalling the domestic details of so many formative life experiences.

Burns’s work demonstrates spontaneity and deliberate compositions. Her sculpture entitled speedboat is confidently composed of contrasting textures between hard and soft materials, with repeated symmetrical patterns. It’s a fascinating construction of horizontals and verticals but also a study in proportional relationships between the aesthetics of fastidiously fabricated carpentry and mass-produced designs. Resting flat on the floor, the sculpture’s thin sponge rubber is covered with a Delftware porcelain pattern instantly recognizable from sundry faux and echt home decor. What may not be immediately visible is her genuine interest in the inner lives of these materials, like relics that stop short of being metaphors for private human dramas.

All of Sarah Burns’s works sit right on the floor without a pedestal, patiently standing their ground. They have a gravity from their weight as well as the sheer attention to details and delicacy of finish. Another piece, the sun kings, is a series of five twelve-foot panels of polystyrene that have been sprayed with a popcorn ceiling material, which is almost impossible to remove without destroying the substrate. They were then painted with a gradient of green paint, like a piece of flat geometric topiary art. Being the largest piece in midday, it creates an orbit around which the rest of the pieces are installed.

Those familiar with her work will be interested in the bent pipe shapes of jambes and agnes that recall the human form. The gesture they make by leaning against the wall and resting on the floor are “more poses and movements” than responses. So when Burns uses “gesture” to describe the formal and conceptual facets of these newest pieces she doesn’t think of them as slight and almost imperceptible movements in response to another body. She uses gesture as a much broader term; midday is a gathering of gestures that create multiple sets of relations that echo between the pieces.

It has been said that gardens “draw us into intimate views, encouraging us to make a reciprocal contribution through our movement and change of location and vantage.” Burns’s midday, which is an object as well as a space, is similarly situated between intimate miniatue and undistorted wide-angle perspective. It’s the forest and the trees.
This exhibition is presented by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, a curatorial program of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which features work selected by Minnesota artists. MAEP is made possible in part by generous support from the Jerome Foundation and the McKnight Foundation.

RELATED EVENTS
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