

“Revolve’: Maxing Out Minimalism.”

Revolve at the Edmonton Art Gallery, April 7 to June 10, 2001. Catherine Burgess, Judith Schwartz and Martha Townsend curated by Catherine Crowston.
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As the Age of Irony scales to its baroque crescendo, there is a growing interest in the more contemplative close harmonies of the minimalist aesthetic. *Revolve* is an antidote to the clutter, flash and noise of so many recent exhibitions. The fourteen sculptures, and one large suite of drawings, generously spaced throughout five rooms lowers the heart rate and seduces the viewer into looking beyond language to the sensual realm of form and relationship.

The minimalism of Catherine Burgess (Edmonton), Judith Schwartz (Toronto) and Martha Townsend (New York) is not the aggressive, heavy metal formalism of Edmonton’s past, but an understated, Japanese garden aesthetic: simple objects carefully chosen or crafted and well placed.

A long rectangle of half-inch thick steel is a form Catherine Burgess repeats in several compositions. Like a recurrent note, it changes subtly with each new setting. In “Begin” it rests flat on the floor. At one end is a steel tube matching the rectangle’s width. A rock wedge prevents the tube from rolling. While most formalist sculpture is somber, this arrangement is almost cartoon-like: the wedge seems to be restraining a magic metal carpet from spinning out its endless roll. In “Remain” the rectangle leans against the wall like a figure. At its foot is a steel block with markings that resembles a book.

“Breathe” is a small aluminum sphere suspended like a plumb line from the ceiling. It hovers above a small, polished granite block with a void carved in through the top. The arrangement is mechanical and perhaps sexual. The ball may be a pendulum. Or, perhaps it has emerged from the hole or is about to descend into it. It may be that the ball’s repeated movements have worn the hole into the block. In any imaginative case, the work could be about tensions and the human desire to resolve them rather than to just breathe and endure the pleasure of suspense.

Unlike classical minimalism’s taboo against mimesis, many of these objects play between non-objectivity and representation. Martha Townsend’s “Cooking Place” consists of three large slate disks supported by river-smoothed rocks. The title may suggest that these are low tables, but they also resemble lily pads, black pools, or planets, or nothing specific at all. The perfection of the slate forms makes the viewer wonder at how they were made. There is also an interesting relationship between the naturally smoothed rocks and the human-fashioned slate. The slate is not polished into unrecognizability. In fact, the rough surfaces make the supporting stones look almost artificial. The stones also remind the viewer of the slate’s origin as unaltered rock.

Townsend’s sculptures look like concrete thoughts. She makes (or has manufactured) objects with such care and finish that however difficult the labour, the calm results appear effortless. Her works are forms of the mind as much as they are material forms.

Townsend's koan, "Listen," is a large, black velvet bell shape hung from the ceiling. It is impossible to resist the temptation to touch it (Is there a metal bell under the velvet? No). It invites us to duck under and up into the chamber. When you do this you notice that there is no clapper, or, your head stands in for the bell's tongue. Also, the velvet muffles the minor sounds of the gallery. Like Yoko Ono's wedding gift—an anniversary clock in a bell jar with the hands removed—"Listen" is about the need to figure a concept through its altered opposite: eternity through a ruined clock, sound through silenced bell, listening through a visual object.

In Burgess and Townsend's sculptures there is a pleasure in silence, calm, simplicity, craft and open metaphors. While there may be intentional meanings, the objects are available to be used as visual metaphors for whatever ends the viewer desires. Rather than create objects to illustrate words, they seem to be making things to be used when language fails.

A little more in line with classical minimalism's love of the latest in technological innovation, Judith Schwartz uses lasers and high-pressure water to cut steel and aluminum sheets into complex geometric forms that resemble doilies, spirograph and vaguely scientific designs. The filigreed metal hangs like a picture. Some emphasize their materiality, abstractness and flatness; others are illusionistic and look like skeins of wool or naked skyscrapers. It is as if Schwarz is revealing the underlying structures common to textiles, scribbles, microscopic nature, and architecture, as revealed by mathematics, advanced optics and computer modeling. She seems to be following Platonic or Zen metaphysics to find the pure, informing patterns behind the material world or the interconnectedness of all things.

As a counterpoint, Townsend's grid of sixty exquisite, small, graphite drawings featuring individual and pairs of solid organic shapes, seem to demonstrate the endless variety of possible shapes. "Like Nothing" is expansive, it looks for possibilities and permutations rather than commonalities—as if each instance of being were "like nothing" else. Or these may be philosophical objects of another sort. Each shape may be an attempt to shape nothing, give form to nothing. Like Schwarz's shapes, these drawings are Rorschach tests absorbing whatever we want to project onto them.

Taken as a whole, one of the exhibition's greatest strengths is the amount of space given to each piece—there are no more than three works in one room. Because there is no clutter, every element must work together, when they don't a dissonance is sounded in the close harmonies. The rich range of Townsend and Burgess's work can cause Schwarz's wall pieces to look repetitive and less inventive. Similarly, because most of the objects are manufactured, abstract, and occasionally natural, the few found objects—like the bowling ball in Townsend's "Cradle," and the spring in Burgess's "Touch," feel out of place—too bowling ballish or too springy. In this context they do not transcend their former lives. I have seen exhibitions of Townsend's bowling ball works and shows with more generous helpings of Burgess's found objects. In both cases they make more sense within similar company.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the minimalist revival is being encouraged by the Edmonton Art Gallery—the late, great bunker of Prairie formalism. While the EAG has become more eclectic since Catherine Crowston's arrival some five years ago, she has not buried but often, wisely, honored the city's important contributions to non-objectivity. But *Revolve* is no homage, it is a

challenge. It seeks to advance formalism beyond He-man aesthetics. It softens the edges, subtly re-introduces the world and humour, and is not afraid of metaphor or relationships. These works seem to be searching for a means to transcend materialism and the dead end of postmodern irony, not by reverting to a masculinist modernism but by making real things resonate beyond themselves.