

RACHEL HARRISON



## Rachel Harrison, Trick and Treat

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Recently, photography has enjoyed an unparalleled amount of critical attention and public interest, not to mention economic activity. Evidence of this interest might be seen in the establishment of a photography department at the Whitney Museum of American Art, as late as 1998, the spectacular prices that certain photographers have received for their work at auction, and the swarm of young photographers, graduates of various MFA photography programs, who have been voraciously exhibited and acquired throughout the '90s.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the majority of the attention that this medium has enjoyed has done little to question the value or place for photography and done much to glorify and highlight its most suspect qualities: its ability to create a fantasy space, to glide over complex questions, to reassure. Photography, more than any other medium, has driven the present economic boom that the art world is enjoying. Possibly because it has been such a strong engine, few people have been willing to ask why, after so much critical and intellectual effort over the past forty years has gone into exploring and destabilizing the value of mediums as interpretive structures, an understanding of contemporary art through a medium-specific lens has once again surfaced.

While much of this attention has been focused on artists whose work remains within the traditional boundaries of photography, there has also been a great deal of activity by artists whose use of photography is heterogeneous and piecemeal. Rachel Harrison, whose hybrid works incorporate photographs, found objects, and sculptural elements, highlights photography's interdependence with and conceptual nondistinction from other mediums: in particular, sculpture. While Harrison's work is not intended as an explicit critique of the current reception and institutionalization of photography as described above, her purposeful and repeated conflation of the mediums of sculpture and photography is neither accidental nor fortuitous, but rather is due to a sophisticated reading of both mediums' historical specificity. By choosing the two mediums the art world once considered its poor relations—at least in comparison with painting's *Enron-like* ability to make you believe in its economic dominance and therefore importance—she has created a body of work whose only allegiance to medium is the medium's historical condition.

Historically, both photography and sculpture were understood to have direct transparent access to the real, the latter because it is a three-dimensional thing existing in actual space as opposed to a two-dimensional illusion of the world as in painting. Photography, on the other hand, was thought to capture only what already exists and not to invent as in painting. This relationship to the real, though different for each medium, is why

historically these arts were once thought to be less important, raising suspicions about both the creativity and inventiveness of the artist.

In the photo series *Untitled (Perth Amboy)*, Harrison flips the traditional uses and arguments of the mediums of photography and sculpture and shows how their coupling reveals a common area of concern. In so doing, she challenges the validity—or certainly the usefulness—of the notion of medium for the understanding of any artwork produced in what may be termed the “postmodern” era. While this challenge is hardly new, there is an extraordinary resistance to it, as exemplified by the continual (and illogical) organization of the museum by distinct departments devoted to specific mediums.<sup>2</sup>

The catalyst for Harrison’s *Untitled (Perth Amboy)* series was the supposed sighting of the Madonna by Ramona Collado in the window of her home in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in September of 2000: an event that spurred an ensuing pilgrimage of believers. The people who went to see the window in Mrs. Collado’s home came to verify what she had seen: the image of the Madonna in her window. In *Untitled (Perth Amboy)*, the image of two windows (one open and one closed) on the side of a house covered in beige vinyl siding fills the picture. Reflected in the windows are clouds, making the interior of the house hard to see. Barely visible through the glass is a sky-blue checked curtain and to the left, a man’s hand pressed against the upper section of the sash window. Harrison’s camera captures the evidence of the pilgrims’ belief, not the evidence of their faith: namely, the image of the Madonna, which remains unpictured.

But what is most striking about almost all of the photographs in the *Untitled (Perth Amboy)* series is that the window in question is being *touch*ed, not *look*ed at. While this may seem to be an unremarkable observation, it is significant in that since this event was spurred by a *vision*, the believers have an unusual way of “seeing” that vision. In fact, they don’t see it at all; rather their belief is expressed through touching. Whether it’s a mother’s hand reaching from inside the house to touch the outside of the window while holding her baby, and thereby physically transmitting the evidence she is absorbing; or the family snapshots pressed up against the inside of the glass; or the two hands appearing from the darkness within to press against the window with enough pressure that you can see the palms of both hands flatten against the windowpane as their fingers bend outward: all of these images demonstrate belief or faith through tactility. Much like how a blind person gets to know something, in Harrison’s *Untitled (Perth Amboy)* series, touching replaces the sense of sight.

In essence, Harrison links the traditional concerns of photography and sculpture in such a way that she renders the chicken-and-egg question often asked by critics of her work—“Which came first, the photograph or the sculpture?”—mute. Through the coupling of photography and sculpture, Harrison calls attention to and undermines the traditional division in art history between the haptic (touch) and the optic (sight)—and specifically the isolation of the optical in modernism.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Perth Amboy series constituted only one part of an exhibition Harrison mounted in 2001, in which photographs were integrated into an elaborate sculptural installation. In it, each sculpture depicted a little vignette of vision where various figurines sitting on pedestals are presented in



LEFT  
*Untitled (Scholar's Rock)*  
 (detail), 2001.

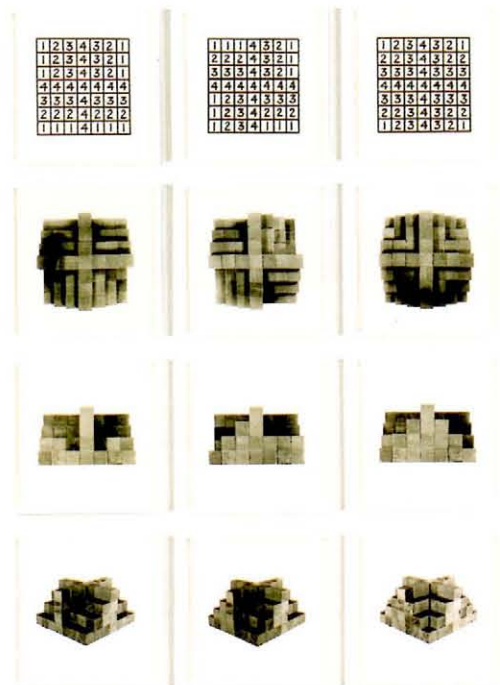
BOTTOM  
 Mel Bochner, *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams* (detail),  
 1966/2001. 48 photographs.  
 103½ x 78". Courtesy of  
 Sonnabend Gallery.

OPPOSITE  
*Sunset Series*, 2000.

the act of looking at a specific object. In *Scholar Rock's*, for example, a pedestal is overlaid with black Formica, the surface of which is still covered by its protective plastic film, some of it ripped away from the corners. Placed on top is a ceramic figurine of an ancient Chinese scholar, replete with beard and topknot, who peers inquisitively at a free-form purple blob. The ceramic figure holds his hands behind his back, rendering them useless, while his head leans toward the blob, allowing his eyes to get closer to the surface of the form. In this sculpture, Harrison illustrates a vignette of knowledge being acquired through sight.

In the *Sunset Series*, Harrison further explores three-dimensional space through the photographic, a putatively two-dimensional phenomenon, without resorting to illusionism, as is the case with representational painting. The basis of the series is a found photograph of a picturesque sunset over a tranquil sea: the type of ubiquitous image that essentially has become a "readymade." Each individual photograph presents the same rephotographed snapshot, but in every instance, variations occur. In some examples Harrison's camera roams over the surface of the image, capturing it in its entirety, revealing the ragged edges and creases of the original snapshot. In other cases only a single detail is rephotographed. In *Sunset Series* (opposite, top left), the effect of the light source used to illuminate the snapshot and the angle created by Harrison's camera conspire to create a halo-like effect that appears to result from the photographing of the original sunset, as opposed to the circumstances in which the snapshot was rephotographed. In *Sunset Series* (opposite, top right), however, our point of view has shifted. The picture seems to have been taken from the water, with the camera barely above it. A strange haze obscures our view of the sun as it sets in the sea. At times it is easy to see what manipulation the snapshot has undergone, and at others the effect is dominant, and the cause is buried. Regardless of whether the snapshot is shown as a whole or as a part, it is always shown in space. In rephotographing an image of light and space—the sunset, which thus also acts as an analogue for photography itself—Harrison is careful to also incorporate the real light and space in which it exists. In other words, this is a photograph as sculpture: affected by light and pictured in a real, not illusionistic, space.

The *Sunset Series* touches upon issues regarding the possibilities and limitations of photographic representations that were explored by Mel Bochner in his photographs from the mid- to late '60s. As Scott Rothkopf writes in a recent essay on Bochner's photographs (an often neglected subject), the artist "developed a subtle understanding of the photograph itself as an object, precariously poised between the world it describes and the one it inhabits."<sup>4</sup> For example, Bochner's *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams*, a series of thirty-six photographs of wooden





LEFT  
Sunset Series, 2000.

BOTTOM  
Richard Artschwager, *Table with Pink Tablecloth*, 1964, Formica on wood, 25½ x 44 x 44". Gift of Lannan Foundation. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

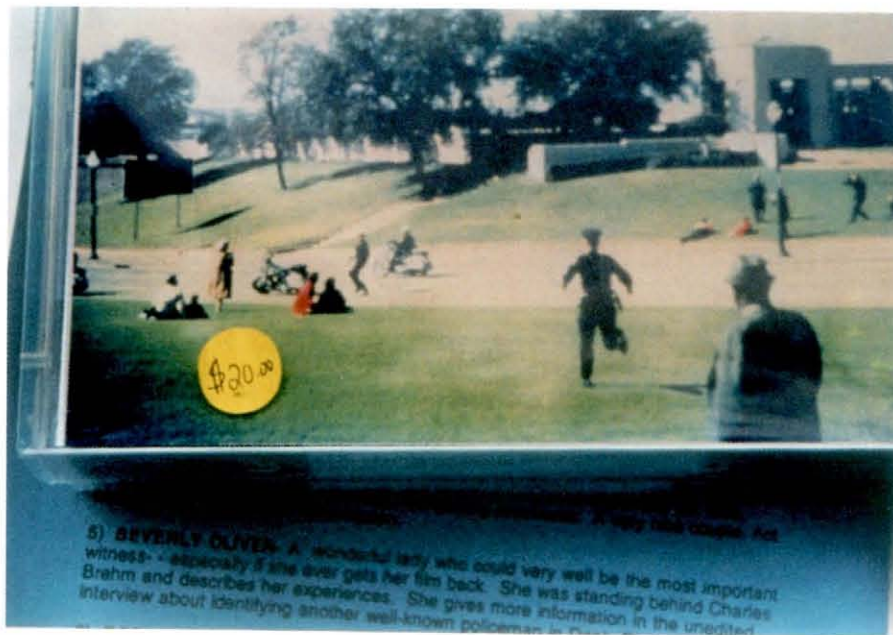
OPPOSITE  
*Twenty Dollars*, 1996.

blocks that are variously arranged according to twelve diagrams, raises issues about both the temporal nature of sculpture and the indeterminate value of information that photography provides. Similarly, Harrison's photographs frequently play between the limits of two kinds of space: actual and illusionistic. The 1996 photograph *Twenty Dollars* (which was itself part of a sprawling installation, in 1997, titled *Snake in the Grass*) is an image of a framed poster resting on a mimeographed text panel. Affixed on the poster, and explicitly evident, is a round yellow sticker listing the poster's sales price: \$20. While the poster itself is a banal object—the type of secondhand item sold at a flea market—its image is anything but, as it depicts the moment after the shots were fired on the grassy knoll in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Barely visible is the car carrying the body of John F. Kennedy, while a policeman is seen running toward the car, his movements forever frozen in midstride. The subject matter of *Twenty Dollars*, as in many of Harrison's projects, is particularly loaded and culturally resonant, thus making any single reading insufficient by definition. In fact, even her most innocent-looking subjects—like a sunset—are loaded. After all, a photograph of a sunset is a cliché of epic proportions. Not only is it a symbol of beauty, life, freedom, and so on, but the sunset is the ubiquitous subject of every Sunday photographer; in short, it is a metaphor and a messy one at that.

While Harrison's photographic series examine issues and concerns traditionally thought to be the domain of sculpture, her sculptural work operates in a similar fashion, incorporating and exploring illusionistic and actual space. In fact, Harrison often uses actual photographs, mounted in frames or simply placed on a shelf or in a drawer, as in *Nigel* and *Marlon and Indian*. But the melding of the two mediums is more than a simple act of combining, in that while not all of Harrison's sculptures incorporate actual photographs, they all in some way address notions of the photographic.

Harrison's choice of surface materials often plays off our expectations with regard to her sculpture's structural integrity. *Mind the Gap*, with its three different surface treatments, is an example of that disconnect. Three hollow-core doors lean precariously against one another. The surface of each door is treated independently, both in terms of material selection and technique. One door is covered with papier-mâché, then painted to imitate a gray flagstone wall (or floor) with white grout. The next is covered with a *readymade* Formica laminate, depicting a blue-and-pink snowflake pattern. The last door is partially covered with commercially available flooring material. Inset within each door is a photograph (to be discussed later). As this list exemplifies, Harrison's choices of materials often function illusionistically. Gone is the notion of integrity that was both evident and necessary in sculpture from the '60s, specifically Minimalism.<sup>5</sup> In this sense Harrison's work is consistent with strategies employed by Richard Artschwager, whose use of laminates and illusionistic imagery has playfully critiqued the ideological rigidity of Donald Judd's sculptural objects.





While Harrison's use of laminated materials, simple structures, and readymade objects reveal the artist's explicit reference to Minimalism, the latter also serves as a precedent for her art's investigation of the photographic/sculptural. Specifically, Minimalism introduced into sculpture a quality associated with photography: that of time. In Minimalist sculpture, its three-dimensional presentation of form in actual space requires the viewer to travel around the object in order to "see" it. The viewer would then become aware that their experience of the sculpture was a function of their moving through space and through time.<sup>6</sup> Two of Harrison's sculptures, *2 a.m. 2nd Ave.* and *Mind the Gap*, both from 1996, reference the temporality of photography and sculpture, finding a shared point of interest and becoming an opportunity to destabilize our expected functioning of each medium.

The title of the work *2 a.m. 2nd Ave.* is derived from the time and place that Harrison first encountered the five photographs that are incorporated into the sculpture. The temporal and geographic specificity of the title is, however, undone by one's experience of the object itself, which serves as a critique of Minimalism's modernist inclinations.<sup>7</sup> The bright yellow orb, containing five photographs, each resting in its own niche, is propped up at roughly eye level by a tripod that is hastily slapped together, out of a few machine screws and three black pole extensions. As structures, tripods are both very stable when deployed and very transportable when not in use. In fact, as we know, most cameras, especially when the shutter speed is a slow one, are placed upon tripods for stability. The yellow orb, intuitively reminiscent of the sun, is a form that immediately makes the viewer aware that they are seeing only a part of it. As the viewer walks around the work, the various photographs sitting in their niches appear into view and also disappear from view, in such a way that you can never see more than two photographs at the same time.

In addition, the subject matter and composition of the photographs conspire to create a narrative uncertainty and confusion. Each photograph consists, in varying degrees, of recognizable popular figures, including Johnny Carson and the actor Carroll O'Connor, as well as anonymous men, including a priest and two men in tuxedos. While all the photographs were obviously taken at the same event, however, the images or links necessary to complete any story, no matter how mundane, are not present. While a casual viewing of the work would lead a viewer to believe that the photographs are presented sequentially, and therefore allow for the comprehension of a story, a more careful viewing makes clear that they do not. Furthermore, a viewer's thoughtful reading is made all the more difficult by Harrison's clever orchestration of the elements of the work that are always visible (the three legs that make up the tripod) and those that vary with the viewer's position (both the number of photographs and specific imagery in the photographs). In other words, as you walk around the sculpture, these different elements—those that are constant and those that vary—conspire to create a narrative uncertainty, as opposed to an antinarrative. In addition, two photographs are remarkably similar in composition: the only difference being which way Johnny Carson's head is turned—in one, it's turned to the left and in the other, to the right. Ultimately, one's actual experience of the work proves to be only partially useful in one's comprehension of it, since Harrison sets up a situation in which experience, without analysis, is the perfect recipe for missing the point.

On the other hand, in *Mind the Gap*, the viewer is presented with a photographic narrative rather than a series



of fragmented moments. This time, the three photographs, each imbedded in their own visually diverse two-dimensional planes, are sequentially consistent. For this work, Harrison, armed with a camera, followed a man walking down a street. The lower torso and back of the legs are framed by the camera, which closes in on the subject until, in the last image, the camera is so close as to eliminate every detail except for the crease of his posterior. Here, sequential time is comprehensible from the photographs, but its presentation in space—through the sculpture—is disjointed. The three hollow-core doors, which lean together, are clad in a variety of surfaces that do not relate one to the other. As the viewer walks around the structure to see the photographs, it is the sculptural structure itself which negates a narrative sequence, due to its use of disparate materials.

In *Mind the Gap*, Harrison once again flips expectations and explanations, by having the photograph do what the sculpture should have done, namely, make the viewer aware of the transition of time in their experience of the work. Something like this strategy operates as an analogue for all of Harrison's work. You can almost think of the mechanics of this analogue as a practical joke. Two pranksters—photo and sculpture—meet an unsuspecting friend—you, the viewer. One of them engages you in an engrossing discussion; it doesn't matter which one, whichever you're more susceptible to—they've done this before and they know how to work together. You stand there, so engrossed in the conversation that you don't notice that the other prankster has quietly slipped away and gotten down on all fours, right behind your legs. When the standing prankster gives you a gentle push, you can't step back to regain your balance, so you fall backward over the one kneeling behind you. Mind the gap—don't fall in.

#### Notes

1. For example, Andreas Gursky's *Untitled #5*, 1997, sold in February of 2002 at Christie's for \$611,000, and Thomas Struth's *Milan Cathedral (Façade)*, 1998, sold in June of 2002 at Christie's London for \$310,000. These exceptional prices would not have been possible without an atmosphere of super-speculation, fostered by and dependent upon the voracious exhibiting by both galleries and museums of almost anybody with an MFA in photography. A few examples worth mentioning are: the frequent commissions by the *New York Times Magazine* of young photographers at a very early or relatively early stage of their careers (e.g., Malerie Marder, Justine Kurland, and Gregory Crewdson); the many, many exhibitions curated around the very loose themes of photography and the gender of who clicks the shutter; and the countless traveling midcareer retrospectives of photographers such as Nan Goldin at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston in 1999, Hiroshi Sugimoto at the Kunsthalle Bregenz, Austria, in 2001, Andreas Gursky at MoMA in 2001, Thomas Ruff at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Germany, in 2001, and Thomas Struth at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2002, to name but a few.

2. For a thoughtful discussion of the continuing organization of museums' collections by medium, see Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject," *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

3. Both Jonathan Crary and Rosalind E. Krauss have written extensively on the issue, albeit from different perspectives. See Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); and Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

4. For an insightful discussion of Bochner's use of the medium of photography and its relevance to his oeuvre, see Scott Rothkopf, *Mel Bochner Photographs 1966–1969* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

5. For a full discussion about the importance and ideological weight of sculptural material, see Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Double Negative: a new syntax for sculpture," *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

6. See Krauss, "The Double Negative."

7. For a fuller understanding of the at times conflicting claims made for and against Minimalism, see Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).