



## The Stuff Nature's Made of

*Tara Donovan uses commonplace materials in new ways at the CAC*

**MATT MORRIS** // FEB 18, 2009

Even from the sidewalk, it's excessively clear that a new, sprawling, elegant exhibition has moved into downtown's Contemporary Arts Center (CAC). Kaplan Hall has been hung with a looming nimbus form made from thousands of white Styrofoam cups and

backlit with a soft glow. This and two other floors have been turned over to Tara Donovan's immense, organic sculptures.

Her work is characterized by the accumulation and arrangement of simple, vernacular materials such as clear drinking straws, paper plates or toothpicks at such a scale that they function organically in response to the more rigid architecture around them. In nearly every piece, an optical phenomenon happens where the brightness of the most external edges of a material plays against the shaded, deeper cavities. As you move around the objects, this interplay of reflection and shadow, surface and depth, travels with your gaze. It is a weird, totally compelling experience.

Donovan manages to activate materials previously considered mundane with this shifting quality.

"I have this interest in the way light behaves, the way light plays through transparent materials and also reflective materials," she says. "It's something that can shift as you move around, almost as an imagined landscape. That's what I'm always looking for when I work with a material. That's the draw."

At age 40, the Williamsburg, Brooklyn-based Donovan has already been included in a Whitney Biennial, a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and numerous solo projects in galleries and museums across the world. Most recently, she received a coveted MacArthur "genius" grant. Her new CAC show is adapted from a recent exhibition at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art.

In interviews with both Donovan and the CAC's Director and Chief Curator Raphaela Platow, as well as frequent visits during the installation leading up to the resplendent exhibition's opening, I've been able to get intimate looks at the artist and her work, how they function in the CAC and some of the visceral and conceptual experiences that the sculptures offer.

Donovan is a pleasant, talkative person who was perfectly happy to discuss the inner mechanics of the sculptures and her approach to making them. During the installation process she displayed sensitivity to how the works were lit, the conditions of the floor and the way some of the arrangements "trail off" into compositions that are often compared to nature.

Platow discussed this metaphor at length. She speculated that Donovan's works are practically natural phenomena in their own right.

"I find it interesting that these plastic materials that she uses are surrogates for nature," Platow says. "She mirrors nature with industrial materials, because there is no real separation anymore between the natural world and the man-made world. By now, nature as a separate entity doesn't exist. Tara's work talks about the merging and the inversion of these two worlds into each other. You see the plastic cup piece on the floor. Maybe that's our ocean."

Donovan doesn't overstate the metaphysics surrounding the work, instead praising the materials themselves for their potential: "I choose a material that has a low profile, and that material dictates its final form," she says. "I work with it to tease out its potential of being able to transcend itself. I use repetition and accumulation and often rely on the inherent quality of the material. These everyday materials are accessible and I'm inventing a new way of using them. At a point, I want my hand to disappear and it to seem like they could generate new forms on their own and expand indefinitely through the space."

Her ambitions are extremely well realized in "Haze" from 2003, a wall packed nearly to the ceiling with translucent plastic drinking straws. At the opening reception, I watched visitors come across this piece and gasp, just like I did when I first saw it. So often Donovan is said to render her selected materials "transcendent," but it is this work in particular that brushes with the sublime.

With "Haze" and many of the other works built directly onto the architecture of the spaces, the CAC can be proud of an exhibition that readily engages the problematic, strong personality of Zaha Hadid's building.

This was one of Platow's expectations in bringing this exhibition to Cincinnati.

"In having her work respond to our architecture, I thought it would bring these galleries to life in a really novel, interesting way that nobody has experienced before," Platow says. "We were trying to figure out how we can integrate everything we are doing into the reality of these spaces."

It's exciting to be offered exhibitions that further elaborate on our understanding of this illustrious building. Donovan's show not only offers refreshing views of the museum, it

also gives pause to appreciating a broad vocabulary of materials, all pushed and piled up to striking effect.

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**Tara Donovan's work will be at the CAC through May 11.**

**<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13017893/the-stuff-natures-made-of>**