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Selected Works from the Artist's Studio and
from the Exhibition *Cartoon Geometry*

May 11- July 18, 2012

Aisle Gallery

424 Findlay Street

Cincinnati, OH 45214

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This book is for Michael, Amira, and Sivan.





Proposals for the Present: Suzanne Silver at Aisle

by Matt Morris

But it was not along a linear course of history that [Malevich] was racing. Rather, it was into a realm of metaphysical essences intuited out of the new technologies and urban perceptions, and consisting of pure forms and color masses situated within mystico-utopian geometries of space.

—Susan Buck-Morss¹

1. After the revolutions.

If the utopian visionary builds failure and collapse into her project, what adjustments are made to its effectiveness, longevity or flexibility? Additionally: what does a built-to-fail utopia look like? What is its relationship to everyday life? These and other questions are scattered about in Suzanne Silver's *Cartoon Geometry*. The exhibition's installations on the floor of Aisle Gallery and also on two worktables are sites of play, experimentation and a daring-do dealing with the previous century's fraught relationship to geometric abstraction. A vocabulary of form, shape and composition once again revisits notions of social engineering. Burdened by Modern societies' expectations that squares, triangles and circles (among other constituents) perform as basic building blocks for new progressive world orders, Silver makes use of a conflicted history materially, sculpting with skeptical critique and rhapsodizing recollections as much as she does with thick felt, lumber and other trappings of craft and hardware stores.

Suprematism, Constructivism, Futurism, Formalism, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Reductivism: there you have it: an albeit abbreviated loose chronology of social idealism's greatest hits at the crux between revolutionary politics and research projects outfitted with what was oft pitched as the simplest, most "essential" elements of seen and lived experience. The advent of each of these movements saw their visual vocabulary in a new light and with

¹ Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000. Page 49.

new potential. But the freneticism implied in ‘progressive movement’ seems to have hardened into long memories, and it is unlikely that what could be proposed has not been proposed before. Even the most radical gesture can be subsumed into the rhetorical devices dominant to the age; any revolutionary could tell us so.

Shouldn’t it give anyone who involves himself in these ongoing geometric games pause to consider that Kazimir Malevich himself abandoned the “supreme” utterly nonrepresentational working methods he pioneered to instead produce painted portraits of poor peasants and the disenfranchised proletariat? Should it also astonish that with seemingly so little to go on and with a disastrous track record for effecting social improvements anyone making use of this multifarious aesthetic research would see alternatives to a full on dead end?

Silver here repositions her stance in order to directly engage with an imminent sense of decline. She explores what ambivalence, imprecision and full-on failure can mean in the construction of possible or imaginary worlds. She sets *Cartoon Geometry* at an axis that seesaws between historical recollection and aspirational ‘what if’ propositions. Her use of deconstruction as both a philosophical and material practice reopens a closed argument for locating the otherworldly, purely geometric in her everyday. She intersects her installation of fragile dreamworlds with works on paper that meditate on obsolescence and recuperation. She favors a liminal, provisional space instead of pinnacle pursuits and ultimate endgames. Through her own and viewers’ tactile experiences with these installations and works on paper, Silver’s claim seems to be that utopia is never actually realizable; as long as it remains in states of ideation and becoming, it’s good to go.

2. Cities on tables.

While he was teaching at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s, Buckminster Fuller kept a studio where he filled tables with small-scale, simply constructed models for ideas like energetic geometric and dymaxion geodesic spheres. His colleague the photographer Hazel Larsen documented

this workspace full of provisions, iterations and possibilities. Somehow the 'real things' never quite live up to the bracing potential amongst the clutter on Fuller's desk seen in Larsen's photographs. Nowadays more often than not, the imagery of his visionary practice is invoked to signify the many other similarly utopian pursuits of the 20th century.

In 2004, I was at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC to see an exhibition of Frank Gehry's models and proposals for museum spaces, some of which had been realized and some which hadn't.² I remember being struck by the materiality of the models and the less than obvious ways those materials had been used. Foil, foam, balsa wood, wire and all kinds of other stuff were sometimes organized to be recognizable as a building structure, but just as often loose crumples and folds that were very physical and gestural in the model translated into the undulating, organic forms which are the architect's penchant in the actual buildings. The models read as actively produced drawings and tests with different materials. Only through the refining of the proposals, the deliberation and other politics that go into building a building were they adjusted to scale and construction methods used in the life sized structure.

For a number of years while I lived in Cincinnati, my favorite exhibition to look forward to was an annual showcase of Architecture by Children at the public library, a program through the American Institute of Architects that pairs K-12 students with working architects to conceive and execute architectural models around a theme (such as sacred spaces, revision, thinking green or museum).³ Even more so than Gehry's models, the creative solutions for designing spaces that the students come up with hearken back strongly to the visuals of Russian avant-garde artists like El Lissitzky. The ways walls don't line up, materials like chenille stems and glitter symbolize unclearly and the very construction of each dwelling looks remarkably unstable lend to a visual volatility, each little building set to explode or to dance about into other forms. So wild and imaginative that they may not be

² "FRANK GEHRY, architect: designs for MUSEUMS." Corcoran Gallery of Art. 500 Seventeenth Street NW, Washington, DC 20006. October 2, 2004—March 21, 2005.

³ Visit <http://aiacincinnati.org/community/abc.cfm> for more information about Architecture By Children.

translatable into inhabitable structures, all of these small-scale sculptures arranged on row after row of long folding tables do revolutionary work. With only partial stakes as an architectural proposal, these projects are otherwise occupied with the pleasure of materiality, fanciful thinking and structures that could be legible as many things at once.

The centerpiece of Suzanne Silver's *Cartoon Geometry* is a table standing in the middle of Aisle's main gallery. The horizontal plane of it has been wrapped in reflective silver material, and fraying rumpled pieces of muslin are hung around its edge like banners, pennants or a ragged tablecloth. (De) constructions made of felt, lint, metal, clear vinyl and a plethora of other this-and-thats are arranged in piles, stacks and aggregates across the tabletop. For every faltering and apt structure, there is a swimming mirror image swirling just beneath it in the table's reflective surface. It would be a crystalline paradise if it weren't so junky. Otherwise pristine geometric shapes are stirred into scraps, fuzz and what looks to be snipped remainders salvaged from the artist's studio. Therein is Silver's provocation with these installations. As in the models by Fuller, Gehry and Architecture By Children, Silver's city is all the more interesting in this stage of being made rather than in its potential for actualization elsewhere.

More than that, element after element has been installed already in a state of decline. Thin tower-like forms have bowed over or collapsed. What were stacks have been knocked over into miniature rubble. Two wobbly metal 'bricks' are stacked into the tallest form on the table, and even they lean in contrapposto. The city she has built is already in ruin, and therefore gestures backwards towards failed civilizations before her as well as a mindful hypothesis regarding progress. The surrounding landscape within the gallery environs scripts this narrative even more fully.

Scattered across the gallery floor are scraps of felt, cut out shapes of muslin, a crowd of wooden plinths on brand new caster wheels all arranged like game pieces on a chessboard or adversaries in a war strategy. Some elements are aligned flush to the floorboards while others fall sloppily out of rank; stacks of felt rectangles sit in the north-facing corners of the room like keystones or sentinels for the mess that lies before them; even in the construction of the small assemblages, there are plays with the pattern of wood grain, how they

are stacked to repeat in a pattern or otherwise break down into curving marks running in opposite directions. Silver composes with many of the conventional tools of yesteryear's abstraction, seeing equal potential in balance and unbalance, order and disorder. But in spatializing the composition, she welcomes ongoing interruption through the viewer's navigation of the installation. The sculptures on wheels gesture towards the mobility and lack of fixity that the viewers themselves enact within the exhibition space.

One tableau in particular articulates Silver's redress of these aspirational problems. A white felt pyramid has been sewn together into standing position, while just beside it a three-wheeled block looks as if it might teeter over. Here we have a loose, fantastical reenactment of the rise and fall of industry and technology and the promise of harmonious society each of these waves carry with them.

How might it be productive, then, to build models already in states of failure? Their very construction is a proposition of moving elsewhere, to something else, but they are unreliable in their ability to foresee where a particular elsewhere may be or how it may be arrived at. Silver's gestures are one of displacement, dislodging without concrete alternative. If not productive, at least the most interesting is an inarticulate, interstitial space that is neither here nor there, pulled between the past and a number of (im)possible futures: a striking, shocking present as an ongoing state.

Gameboard Geometry is a second, smaller table featured in the exhibition. It is a worktable, with a top and two lower shelves, as well as worn caster wheels mounted to the bottom of each leg. It is pushed up against a wall, where delicate reflections from silver elements in the work reflect up onto the wall behind it. On this tabletop all of the elements lie flat, like shapes being moved around to determine the composition of a painting. Indeed the flatness of this scape points not only to the poetic urban planning suggested elsewhere in the exhibition, but also to how painting specifically has been utilized not only as a drawing board for social engineering but also as an exploration of an affective dialectic through which a society is connected to itself. The use and misuse of painting conventions in Silver's exhibition is a heartfelt reinsertion of an individual, personal life into the sweeping cycles of civilization that have been here reconstructed in miniature.

3. Vocabulary terms.

Blue collar worker blue, scalloped edges, light grey, clumsy hand drawn rectangles, triangles that point like arrows, scribbles, twinned cutout shapes like pieces of a dress pattern, ineffable speech bubbles, foil volcano, checkerboards, lumber brown, sepia brown, brick brown, shit brown, ivory, triumphant arches (Arc de Triomphe), collapsed cones, scraps and leftovers, pops of primary hues, Silver the name, silver the effect.

4. Play it again.

Most of the objects in the exhibition are composed of materials that have the feel of recent purchase from a hardware store, a fabric store or an art supply store. While these materials have been cut up, arranged, stuck together and toppled from one form to the next, all of them retain a sense of newness, of recent acquisition. These rudimentary structures are vexing for their participation within capitalist methods of exchange. They would be radical in their misuse of materials that might otherwise be used to build homes, sew clothing or keep house except that manufacturers couldn't care less what their products are used for after purchase. So these landscapes on tables and floors appear as games within games, a meta problem of dislocation from myths about progress, while still paying into larger systems of production.

LP Geometry—a set of LP record sleeves that have received treatments of painting, collage and even been stuffed with what look to be scraps of other paintings and drawings—run through the different spaces in the exhibition and are quirkily out of synch with the thrust of the rest of the project. As the thin paper lining between a vinyl record and its packaging, these works begin to characterize exactly the liminal space to which the exhibition as a whole speaks. Their rounded-off corners make them neither circle nor square, a suitable geometry for Silver's suppositions. Their previous use was as storage, and perhaps here their function has not changed. Their recognizability as record sleeves locates them historically, with the accruals of obsolescence and nostalgia record players carry today. They are the only dateable things in the exhibition. They seem, as a set, to be indexes for experiences of history, toying

with dichotomies like front/back, inside/outside, light/dark. They are color fields with either two options: thin, foggy, white daylight or sepia-toned night. Within the exhibition, they are a bit like fiddling while Rome burns, or in this case, listening to records while civilization crumbles.

5. Play it again (and again).

A ‘cartoon’ denotes preparatory preliminaries towards a resolved final work, but more commonly conjures reduced, abstracted characters, as might be seen in political cartoons in the newspaper. Silver’s exhibition exists in tension with both of these definitions. It is a wry assessment of the rise and decline of successions of avant-gardes based in geometric abstraction, experimenting with their leftovers and testing hope against skepticism that this indeed is the visual language of the every person. Meanwhile preparation comes unhitched from any final goal so that the movement itself is the thing—playing the record again, setting tables and plinths and viewers in motion within the composition, tenuously arranging. Without destination, Silver’s utopian politics seek flux as a continuous state. Revolution, in other words.

Painting-cum-architecture clatters about as scatter art on the floor in disheveled yet considered compositions. The work’s art historical forebears sought to paint geometry into compositions that not only upset the spatial orders within which they found themselves, but along with it a shakedown in conventions of time, social class and governmental regime. If Silver sets about to enact these efforts again, and I believe she does, she proceeds with an ambivalence informed by its prior defeats, collecting (at least) the previous century’s near-misses into a floor arrangement so they might function as stepping stones to someplace unexpected. All of the record sleeves are empty, and no vinyl is to be heard in the installation. I tend to doubt this song would be among them, but as the world seems to be ending (again), I remember learning from Imogen Heap’s pop one off under the moniker Frou Frou that “there’s beauty in the breakdown.”

Matt Morris is an artist and writer living in Chicago.











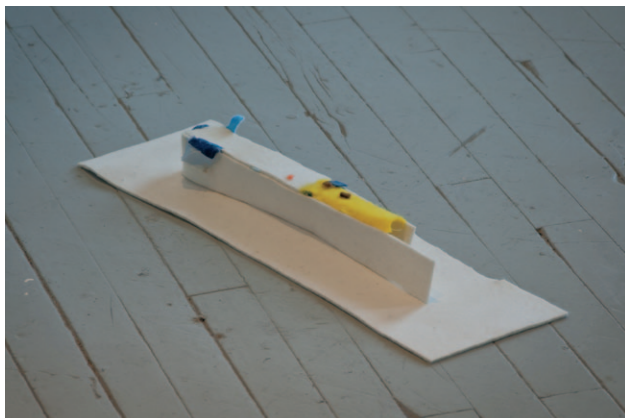








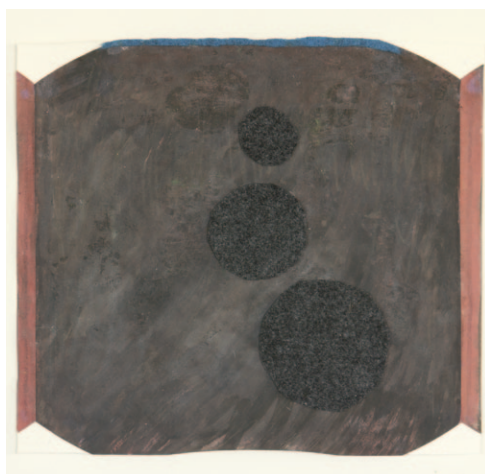




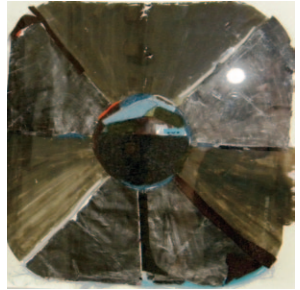
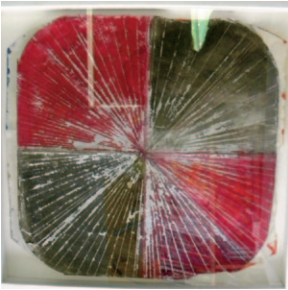


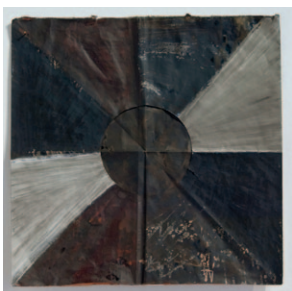




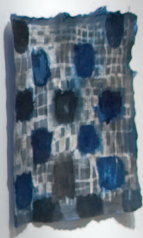












Suzanne Silver

Suzanne Silver is an Associate Professor in the Painting & Drawing Program of the Department of Art at The Ohio State University. Silver studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and received an AB from Smith College and an MFA at The Ohio State University. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally, including the Axel Raben Gallery in NYC, Nexus Contemporary Art Center in Atlanta, Contemporary Jewish Museum - San Francisco, David Yellin College in Jerusalem, the Castle of Otranto in Otranto, Italy, Pierogi Gallery, Soloway Gallery, and Proteus Gowanus in Brooklyn, the Weston Art Gallery in Cincinnati, The Bureau for Open Culture, and the Columbus Museum of Art. Silver has received an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award and grants in mixed media and in 3D art from the Greater Columbus Arts Council and drawing from the Virginia Commission for the Arts. Her artist's book *Blacklists/Whitelists* was published by Logan Elm Press. Silver's art and writing have appeared in such publications as the *American Abstract Artists Journal* and *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* and can be found in the Avant-Writing Collection at OSU.

Images

The main gallery at Aisle featured the site-specific mixed media installation *Cartoon Geometry*. Elements included a table on which rested various fuzzy or shiny shapes, upright or prone. These forms, made principally of felt, aluminum, muslin, vinyl, and wood, replaced the lucid perfection of ideal geometry with a delinquent version that defied logic as well as gravity. Dimensions are variable, dependent on the size and shape of the site and the specific configuration of parts. The main space at Aisle Gallery is approximately 20'x30' with 10' ceilings.

The horizontality of the table-top repeated on the floor level where larger wood works on wheels could be moved into different relationships with the table elements. Each wheel work is approximately 12"x10"x12" (with a few considerably smaller or considerably taller). The wheel works as well as *Long Playing Geometry*, drawings on record sleeves, and *Gameboard*, a series on handmade papers, are yet other ways to examine geometry and to pay homage to its mathematical and poetic possibilities.

A nearby smaller rectangular space housed *Gameboard Geometry*, an old desk on wheels on which were placed 3D felt and aluminum foil objects and flat felt pieces with colored pencil marks. Three unframed *LP Geometry* works hung in relation to the table. Watercolor, gouache, ink, thread, colored pencils, and felt were used in various combinations to make the *LP Geometry* series on record sleeves. Each is about 12"x 12". A few LP works were framed to create a close relationship to the geometry of their perimeter.

The aisle-way space displayed small works (8 ½" x 11") on paper on one wall, visible from the larger space. These works were *Untitled* (abaca linter, watercolor); *Untitled (Triangle)* abaca linter, pigmented pulp, thread; *Untitled* abaca linter, pigmented pulp; *Gameboard Geometry #1* abaca linter, watercolor, ink, graphite; *Untitled (Rectangle)* abaca linter, pigmented pulp; *Gameboard Geometry #2* abaca linter, pigmented pulp; *Untitled (Triangle)* abaca linter, pigmented pulp; *Untitled* abaca linter, colored pencil.

The ideal viewer would navigate among the elements within each space and from space to space in sometimes amused but always thoughtful contemplation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Bill Renschler and Krista Gregory of Aisle Gallery, who invited me to experiment with form and content within the main and elongated rectangles of their exhibition spaces. They first suggested the idea of a catalogue to encourage explorations of space on the page.

I thank Greg Bonnell for facilitating and clarifying such space in the design of this catalogue-book.

I owe a special thanks to Matt Morris whose creative analysis and understanding of my work over the years has made him an invaluable interpreter.

Many thanks go to my colleagues and students in the department of art at The Ohio State University, in particular Alan Crockett, Clara Crockett, Ann Hamilton, Laura Lisbon, Michael Mercil, George Rush, and Sergio Soave. I would also like to thank Mary Jo Bole, Carmel Buckley, Malcolm Cochran, Munro Galloway, Prudence Gill, Martha Keller, Mary Lum, Bob Tauber, and Jim Voorhies, whose catalogues and books have served as models.

Photos on the front and back covers and pages 14, 15, 26, 28, and 29 are by Francis Schanberger. Photos on p.30 are by Francis Schanberger, Suzanne Silver, Sivan Silver-Swartz, and Tony Walsh. All other photos in this book are by Tony Walsh.

Grants from Arts and Humanities at The Ohio State University supported the making of this book.

