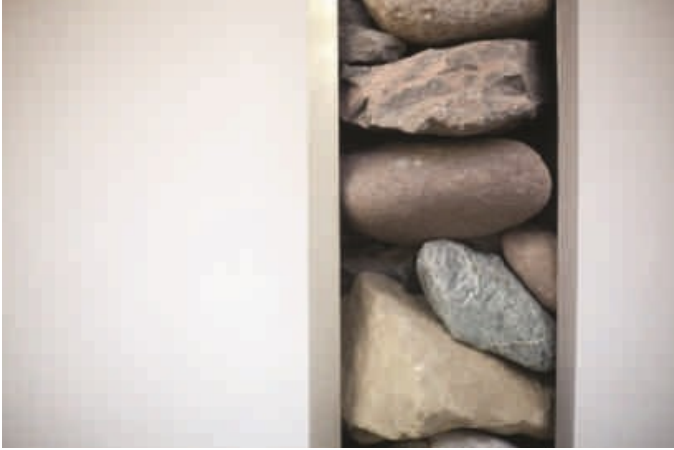


Nicole Wermers



Nicole Wermers, Rockdispenser (2010)

► Barry Schwabsky

Nicole Wermers' sculpture has been widely noted as a form of 'three-dimensional collage'¹ or, as I would prefer to put it, an overlay of seemingly dissonant elements — art and design, abstraction and function, geometry and representation — into brilliantly concise physical emblems of life in contemporary culture. Untitled Forcefield (2007) is a kind of person-sized space divider — basically a large hoop squared on one side by two corner brackets. It refers at once to the idealisation of geometry in Western thought at least since the Renaissance — think of Leonardo's famous drawing of the Vitruvian Man whose supposedly ideal proportions are reflected in the overlay of a circle and square. At the same time, however, it evokes the anti-theft portals we are accustomed to walking through at

department store exits, although one might feel a little less comfortable about walking through it because it's not flat at floor level — it looks like it could trip you up. In other words, by inviting us to pass through it, the work at once subtly exalts us and degrades us, renders us suspect. But there's more: as the work shifts one's self-perception, it also shifts one's perception of the space in which it is located. It draws a distinction, creates an artificial division in the room. There is my side and there is the other side — and somehow the other side is always more attractive, it is the other side of the mirror as in Cocteau's Orpheus; but when I walk through, the other side is now my side and the one where I was is now the magical rather than the prosaic one.

When I first saw Wermers' works — these were the 'ashtrays' such as she showed at the Camden Arts Centre in 2005 and Tate Britain in 2006; the Untitled (Sand Table) (2007) in the Zabłudowicz Collection is a later and rather different outgrowth of that motif — I felt I was for once seeing something unfamiliar in sculpture. These works had a mannerist incongruity about them but one that paradoxically seemed unforced. They often seemed too simple to sustain real interest but thanks to the artist's acute judgments of scale, materials and references, the case turned out quite otherwise: I had to keep thinking about them. Wermers has said that, rather than directly referencing modernist sculpture, she is 'referencing how these movements have been digested as styles into our surroundings'.² Maybe it's the work's oblique take on sculpture



Above: Nicole Wermers, Untitled Forcefield (2007) and Rockdispenser (2010) installed in The Shape We're In (London)

Overleaf: Nicole Wermers, Untitled Forcefield (2007)

that made it so striking to me. Right now, though, what I'd rather do is insist on the strength of the work's relation to sculptural tradition, and locate one source of the work's ability to surprise to the fact it reflects a different part of the tradition than one would expect.

Let me explain. As a sculptor born and raised in Germany, living and working in England, educated in both countries, her main precursors, you'd think, would be found in one or both of those countries' traditions; one might be tempted, for instance, to compare her use of negative space to Henry Moore and her fascination with everyday materials to Tony Cragg; or to connect her tectonic concept of form with Wilhelm Lehmbruck's treatment of the figure and her interest in the aesthetic of display with Joseph Beuys and his vitrines. To sound such relationships might even be illuminating but it would miss the more essential point: the main traditions of modern sculpture in both Germany and England depend on the humanisation of the

object, on seeing the thing as metaphor the living, organic self — while Wermers' art tends to avoid this humanisation altogether. Her things are stubbornly thing-like. If anything, her work seems closer to an Italian tradition, one that flows through the vast opening created by Lucio Fontana's concetto spaziale and takes in the 'fake sculptures' of Pino Pascali or Gianni Piacentino's vehicles. In this tradition, the pathos of the humanised object is avoided in the conviction — as Piacentino put it — that 'art had to have something to do with beauty and decoration, even when taken to extremes.'³ Art in this tradition forms part of the theatre of human habitation rather than standing in for the protagonist who lives and suffers in it. Focused on the meaning and phenomenology of contemporary space, Wermers succeeds in formulating a more extreme sense of décor, at once sensuous and austere.

1— www.frieze.com/issue/review/nicole_wermers/

2— www.aspenartmuseum.org/archive_wermers_zuckerman_jacobson.html

3— http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_1_41/ai_91202149/



