

ARTFORUM

By Brian Sholis

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Helen Mirra: *Break Camp*

Helen Mirra

PETER FREEMAN, INC.

According to the press release for “Break Camp” (Helen Mirra’s second solo exhibition at Peter Freeman, Inc.), the artist’s practice “involves no power tools.” It’s a prosaic statement that nonetheless hints at two important aspects of Mirra’s reticent art, elucidating her devotion to the handmade while also suggesting her political conscience (she’s not one to wield power aggressively). Both of these qualities are often rendered subservient to form in critical interpretations of her exquisitely crafted works.

For those familiar with the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based artist’s modest oeuvre, this exhibition, which features sculptures made as she was about to “break camp” and return to the US from a year-long residency in Berlin, will seem true to form. Viewers less accustomed to Mirra’s aesthetic might stop short upon encountering the eight ankle-height wood-and-pinecone sculptures spread across the floor of the gallery’s small main room. Like the wall-based sculptures that comprised the greater part of her last exhibition here, these low-slung compositions are made of planks from shipping pallets, this time mostly picked up on the streets around her Berlin studio. The weathered gray-brown timber bears evidence of its industrial past; the pinecones that nestle against it, taken from the nearby Grunewald forest, perhaps represent the opposite force, the pure potential embodied in their reproductive function.

At first glance, the sculptures are difficult to differentiate from one another. Up close, however, each reveals individual characteristics: *Unirondack* (all works 2006) is comprised of two squat stacks supporting a number of other wood pieces and a handful of cones, while *Bartók* is long and toothy, like one of Donald Judd’s lengthy, squared-off wall reliefs set on the floor. *Star Route No. 5*, partly brushed with the gray-green milk paint that featured prominently in Mirra’s last New York show, shields dozens of cones between its two horizontal slabs, one cut industrially and somewhat haphazardly, the other by the artist’s exacting handsaw.

These juxtapositions prompt consideration of the ends to which we direct elements of the natural environment, and the means by which



Helen Mirra,
Unirondack, 2006,
pallet wood, pinecones,
7 1/16 x 19 3/4 x 7 1/8".

we do so. A sense of time evoked by the past and (arrested) future lives of the materials calls to mind an early, atypically poetic 1967 Richard Serra sculpture, shown at this gallery in 2004, that features fifteen partially burned white candles spaced evenly along a wooden beam resting on the floor. And, as is almost always the case with Mirra's works, those on view here evoke (through their titles) a peculiar mix of historical figures: not only the composer Béla Bartók, but also the prominent nineteenth-century American pacifist Adin Ballou, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the writer May Sarton. But whereas earlier exhibitions possessed a kind of intellectual site-specificity—works evoking Chicagoans John Dewey and Jane Addams made around the time that the artist lived in that city, for example—the relation of this constellation of influences to the site where she produced these sculptures remains oblique. The delicate equilibrium between place and conceptual underpinning seems slightly out of true.

A smaller room contains three of the narrow, hand-sewn cotton bands on which Mirra types a “subjective” index of books' contents, a format she has previously used to offer veiled, self-reflexive investigations of her artistic process. *Backbone*, *Crosshairs*, and *Downed*, however, all drawn from a book about deer hunting, seem fixated on communicating content (BREASTBONE, 99 BUCKSAW, 129 BULLET ACTION, 37-8, reads part of *Backbone*). One upshot of balancing such bleak material with formal restraint is an emotional resonance—here, pathos—otherwise rare in Mirra's cerebral oeuvre. The concerns about nonhuman life and the environment expressed in this exhibition are rarely addressed in contemporary art, and few artists are as well equipped to voice them as Mirra. But this newfound partisan clarity is not yet fully reconciled with the richly allusive ambiguity of her best works.

—Brian Sholis