

ARTFORUM

Helen Mirra

PETER FREEMAN, INC.

“In the context of this exhibition, there will be backwards walkings every morning the week of 5 November.” Those familiar with the oeuvre of Helen Mirra will recognize this odd announcement—appended as a note to the show’s mostly blank press release—as entirely consistent with a life and practice for which the act of walking (backward or otherwise) has long played a crucial role. (On the artist’s website, she dubs herself a “walking experiment.”) For Mirra, as for Stanley Brouwn, Douglas Huebler, and a handful of other artists before her, this routine, while outwardly simple and repetitive, allows for endless and unpredictable variations: the perfect platform for a poetics of the ordinary.

While Mirra did indeed lead her eccentric expeditions around New York’s SoHo neighborhood, the exhibition itself, “Bones are spaces,” consisted of a rather lovely set of small weavings—created from linen, alpaca, sheep’s wool, and silk—hung in an elegantly forthright manner. Outwardly abstract and rendered in muted grays and browns, moss greens, and lichen yellows, these objects shared a subdued beauty, a humble, meditative cast evocative of Agnes Martin or perhaps Giorgio Morandi. Some of their titles—including *Hay*, *Straw bale construction*, and *Pale tying bale edging*, all 2016—functioned as straightforward descriptions of their materials and structures. Others, such as *February* and *March–April*, both 2018, and *Late May early June*, *Trisha Brown Stanley Brouwn*, 2017, were indexed to specific periods. Thus weaving becomes a tool for documenting places and times.

One could say that the show was a collection of landscapes, as the works’ distinctive textures and patterns suggested fields, rivers, soil, and stone. And the patience required for their production made it clear that Mirra’s explorations were inward-looking in terms of atmosphere and mood. The works were also an homage to the Conceptualists’

Helen Mirra, *Straw bale construction*, 2016, linen, wool, 12½ × 9⅞”.



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veneration of procedure and routine, which, ideally at least, have the capacity to reveal and actualize the creative potential and oft-unacknowledged wonder of everyday life. In prefacing each work with a simple walk, Mirra anchored each piece in a prosaic and near-universal action. *Unbleached handspun, dark blue*, 2015, for example, not only fulfills the straightforward material promise of its title, but also nods toward a raft of topographical references, from a lake to a cave entrance. (It veers too far into the territory of Robert Ryman, however, with its emphasis on the mechanisms of support and hanging—two tape-like fabric tabs on the upper corners contribute a teasing juxtaposition of the crafted and the common.)

In a review of “Suchness,” Mirra’s 2016 two-person exhibition with Allyson Strafella at the London gallery Large Glass, critic Cherry Smyth stressed the spiritual aspect of both artists’ work: a perhaps Buddhist-aligned sensitivity to the raw, unmediated quality of things in and of themselves. “Bones are spaces” had a similar feel, of reason and observation distilled to their very essences, and of modest means and scale implying an entire cosmology. Mirra has employed a variety of strategies to derive images, objects, and texts from her jaunts (“Waulked,” her last appearance at this gallery in 2014, featured photographic works that echoed the perambulatory narratives of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton), but none of her other methods has had the same soft power.

—Michael Wilson