

## THE RECENT SCULPTURE OF SUSE STOISSER by LEE B. BROWN\*

When you are confronted by Suse Stoisser's 2008 piece, *And-Dna*, you are struck by how light is its overall effect in spite of its use of such heavy material as steel and sandstone. The polished steel embedded in the stone gives the surface a mirror-like *trompe l'oeil* effect, as if you are seeing into and through this massive object. Ironic contrasts like this between media and message characterize much of Stoisser's recent work, some of which could be seen in the Autumn of 2008 at the Casino Gallery in Cadaques, Spain.

The works people saw there represented years of evolution since Stoisser's six years of study at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna. A resident of Cadaques since 1990, Stoisser has worked in a remarkably wide range of media--including wood, paper, concrete, fabric, and sheets of glass or metacrylic plastic.

Many of her recent pieces exemplify a central project--to manipulate space in radical ways. In many cases, unlike *And-Dna*, we are invited literally to examine the interior of a work. Within the tall stainless steel piece *Word Column* (226 x 42 x 42cm.), also from 2008, the careful viewer can discern as many as seven distinct levels of construction, like a multi-dimensional chessboard. But even a piece in rusting Corten steel such as the nearly square (127 x 122 x 40 cm.) *Cross Word Puzzle* (2008) has a literal interior consisting of complicated but visible broken planes.

Stoisser counts several modernist and post-modernist trends among her influences, among them the abstract expressionism of painters Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. However, a basic aim of much of Stoisser's work is finding possibilities at the apparent boundary between sculpture and painting. Among the most influential artworks on her own body of work is a well-known piece by sculptress Eva Hesse (*Hang Up*), constructed of an empty picture frame and a hanging-wire swerving out from it, as if to scoop up the space between it and the viewer--which results in a jarring collision between the concepts of painting and sculpture. Stoisser, like Hesse herself, also sees the emptiness of the piece as resonant with a sense of the empty absurdity of life in general. Stoisser even finds points of departure for her manipulation of space in certain Pop Art gestures. In the era of New York Abstract Expressionist painting, opposing schools of criticism fought over two approaches to the application of paint to canvass. One side decreed that a painter's literal brush strokes should *not* be visible, while the opposed camp insisted that painters should on the contrary use heavily loaded brushwork as a way of referencing the literal physical activity of painting. Roy Lichtenstein's clever response to this elitist argument was to create *images* of brushstrokes, screen-printed in a manner usually associated with advertising or comic strips. The

effect was to depersonalize the very concept of a brushstroke. Not content with that, he went on to adapt the image to sculpture--notably, in *Brush Strokes in Flight*.

According to a conservative theory about essential divisions within visual arts, what Stoisser tries to do ought to be impossible, as two-dimensional graphics--such as painting and watercolor--inhabit an essentially distinct realm from three-dimensional sculpture. Even ordinary common sense shares this conservative perspective. (We take it for granted that paintings are to be viewed from the front. But we assume works of sculpture can be viewed from any or all sides.) In Suzanne Langer's terms, what a painting presents to the eye is what she called a *virtual scene*: Put simply, we find some kind of imaginary space, realistic or otherwise, within or beyond the picture plane. Sculpture, by contrast, presents us with what Langer termed a *virtual volume*: A work of sculpture inhabits an imaginary *environment*, so to say.

Even in the classic tradition, however, artists did not shrink from playing at the boundary between the two art forms. (Consider one-sided wood or marble images carved in relief, for instance.) Given standard conventions, Stoisser's work counts as sculpture. However, much of it can be seen as a set of experiments in breaking down the dichotomy between the two forms rather than respecting it.

Stoisser works at this project in various ways. For instance, the imposing work (105 x 207 x 90), *Maja Vacía (Empty Woman)*, from 2003-04, makes use of a negative space connecting the "front" of the piece to the "back." In fact, the concept of "back" in this case is misleading. True enough, Goya's famous "*La Maja Desnuda*" ("*The Naked Maja*") --to which Stoisser's piece refers--has only one aesthetically relevant side. With Stoisser's piece, by contrast, the spaces that pass through it are elements that conjoin two related but distinct images. (One side is colorful, the other white and off-white.)

*Maja Vacía* also illustrates Stoisser's interest in the use of negative space. (In her early work, for instance, she would often embed the negative image of a rubber mattress, with its rippled texture, in concrete or iron.) In a famous letter of 1549, Michelangelo defined sculpture--in which he was comparing carved work to the disadvantage of clay modeling--as the art of "taking away" rather than of "adding on." Stoisser's work can be seen as a sophisticated modernist variant on the theme--with the important exception that what is "taken away" remains as a purely negative but still vitally active space. Her elaboration of the negative manifests itself in countless ways.

The substance of Stoisser's works is as contemporary as her use of media. One of her favored themes is the chaotic sea of signifiers within which we find ourselves enmeshed--which explains the title of one piece--*Knäuel* (or *Snarl*). Often, as with the large (132 x 112 cm) piece, *Cloudy Words*, this takes the form of visual representations of simple words, such as "and," "und," or

“less.” These suggest not only the endless answering of small childrens’ questions, but the further question of who among us does not pose such questions.

This content is embedded within Stoisser’s general project about space. In both *Knäuel* and *Cloudy Words*, while some of the small words consist of positive images, others are negative. Some are reversed, as in a mirror. But *Knäuel* takes the message of *Cloudy Words* even further--toward semiotic chaos.

One of Stoisser’s striking uses of negative space is in representations of female figures. In the two-meter-long *Red Chair*, with carefully articulated surfaces--including some of black iron, some oxidized, and others varnished--the figure is presented entirely as an *absence*. *Modern Times I*, from 2005-06, also gives us a negative image of a sitting female figure--suggesting a woman who was there but is now gone.

This theme--of the female image--often joins with another favored theme in her recent work, namely the commercial barcode, that embeds the price of almost every consumable we buy nowadays and also registers every purchase in a continuous tally of modern consumerism. In her 2006 piece, *Modern Times II*, we again see a female figure in negative space, but designed to allow us to peer in and find two layers of barcode. The piece poses a question--whether modern women are not figuratively made of these commercial signifiers.

If much of Stoisser’s work uses materials typically regarded as masculine, she does not mind the irony that it nevertheless often resonates with feminine themes.

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