

Sheila Segal *Drawings and Other Constructions*

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Number 56, Summer 2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9438ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wood, E. (2001). Review of [Sheila Segal: *Drawings and Other Constructions*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (56), 50–51.

Sheila Segal: Drawings and Other Constructions

ELIZABETH WOOD

If one thing is certain in contemporary art, then it is the fact that the relation between nature and art has become problematic. Art no longer fulfills our naive pictorial expectations and we can no longer say what the content of a picture is.

(HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *THE SPEECHLESS IMAGE*.¹)

In her book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, American author Maya Angelou writes with exquisite power and poignancy about growing up in the segregated South in the 1930s². Her story, unquestionably, is replete with paradox: restriction, paucity, and sadness co-inhabit pages saturated with striking tenderness, insight, and triumph.

Evoking its enigmatic title, Angelou dedicates the book to her son and to "all the strong black birds of promise who defy the odds and gods and sing their songs." The work of Montreal artist Sheila Segal resonates not only with similar imagery, but—more importantly—with a comparable dichotomy: in her work remarkable beauty emerges despite the raw confines of circumstance. Segal's works were presented recently in two exhibitions: a large solo show of new work at Montreal's Galerie Lillian Rodriguez this past autumn, followed by an exhibition in January at Galerie McClure of the Visual Arts Centre (integrating one new sculpture and a series of earlier drawings, together with three works from the fall show.)

Segal's constructions and works on paper are characterized by dualities, as they integrate materials from the natural world—wax, feathers, copper, skin—together with industrial components such as wire, tar, and aluminum.

The constructions themselves speak—metaphorically of course—of such contradictory poles as light and shadow; translucence and density; animal and mineral; smoothness and sharpness; fragility and resistance; perma-

nence and impermanence; birth and death. Rigorous exploration of surfaces and textures provides a compelling invitation to amplify our tactile, lived awareness of the realities exemplified through these themes. Perhaps the most noteworthy of the polarities permeating both exhibitions is the recurrent symbolic representation of confinement and freedom. In this regard, the works are imbued with extreme sensitivity to materials, exploring the possibilities of these with simplicity and delicacy. Although she creates works of arresting beauty, this does not preclude a courageous examination of imprisonment and darkness, in its many forms.

In the earlier works on paper, presented at Galerie McClure in January, the predominance of bird imagery thematically unites the works. When viewed from a distance, perception of the iconography and movement in these works is stronger, although critical details become less accessible. In *against the wind 3* (1992-92: mylar, oil pastel, feather), feathers and paint are fixed to the transparent mylar surface. Here, perhaps most forcefully, we encounter the image of a bird that would fly but cannot, since the feathers are glued. A second work, *against the wind 14* (2000: mylar, oil pastel, map fragments) consists of a drawing of a bird in the top half of a blue-grey textured background surface, with a bird's claw occupying the bottom. Although the concrete image is absent in *against the wind 7* (1999: mylar, photo transfer, oil pastel) this work seems to capture the bird's presence indirectly. Yellow in the upper corner and dark at the centre, there is in this drawing a softness—emphasized by the gentle blending of pastels—that not only contrasts with the dark intensity of the work's centre, but which also provides a foil for the weightiness of other works present in the show.

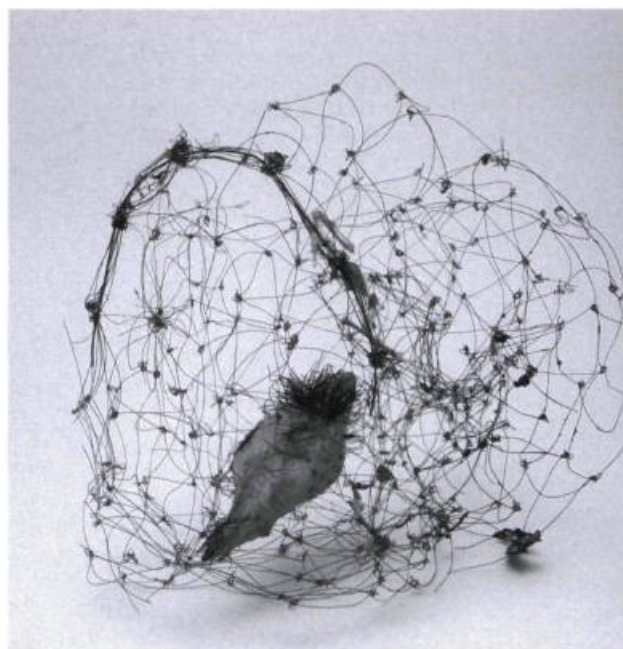
Unlike the previous drawings, in which we are struck by the creature's inability to fly, the

theme of movement is established quite differently in the last two. In *against the wind 6* (1994-97: mylar support, oil pastel) once again a bird appears in the top half, however the image seems to melt, to literally run downward in the lower half of the surface toward the bottom: movement is merely suggested, as though in a quest for freedom the image itself seeks to escape the page. In the final drawing, *against the wind 12* (1999: mylar, photo transfer, oil pastel) the surface is a map, applied backwards so that the writing is illegible. A large bird claw shape in the centre is accompanied by another fragment or remnant in the bottom left. A startlingly aggressive energy characterizes the thick paint that outlines the letters of the map.

Perhaps the central piece in this exhibition, *Host 3* (2000: stainless steel wire, casing, leaves,) provides a link to the works from the fall show. This is a sculptural work, suspended from the ceiling, consisting of a wire cylindrical structure, wrapped in a casing of transparent fibre, and stuffed with leaves. Those that fill the inside are green, whereas leaves attached to wire raining downward, and dangling toward the floor, are red. *Host 3* invites us to speculate: is the work an invitation for us to be more mindful of the links between life forms, for example the human body and the natural world? Or, is it more prescriptive, perhaps, an urgent call for the conscientious protection of nature's fragility, for the halting of its deterioration?

In the exhibition presented last autumn, *Drawings and Other Constructions* (primarily wall-mounted works), the artist explores similar themes from richly varied perspectives. In that series, the bird motif is peripheral. *Untitled* (#6, 2000: metal

wire, copper, tar,) for example, a horizontal sculptural wall piece, is constructed primarily of wire. Tar covers portions of it, especially at the knots in the wire, and twig-like bits (which resemble birds) perch at sporadic intervals. As in other wire sculptures here, the work is directly lit, casting shadows in a range of thick-



nesses that leak outward on the wall, extending the occupation of the space.

Two wall-mounted sculptures share some of the characteristics of this piece, while introducing a new theme of the plant world. The first, *Untitled* [Web] (#1, 2000: wax, metal wire) consists of a tangled mass of delicate wire, almost hair-like, with sharp "barbs" like that in rural fencing. The wall is lit directly from above, again producing an effect that multiplies the tangled, chaotic nest of lines. Inside, a wax form, resembling a hibiscus bloom barely open (or perhaps receding into death) seems to be caught in the tangled web of wire. The thin fragility of the metal filament contrasts with the heaviness of the object caught inside. This dichotomy is reflected in the shadows, dense yet delicate, on the wall. In a second similar

Sheila Segal, *Untitled*, 1999. Steel wire, beeswax, fabric. 86.3 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

work, *Untitled* (#7, 2000: mixed media, skin, metal wire), the same fine metal wire winds throughout, however the larger with flower-like shape in this one seems to be in a fibrous material like paper, and larger this time. Here the bloom opens up and outward, with a wax-covered mesh forming the base.

The integration of plant materials is pursued in *Untitled* (#9, 2000: mixed media, skin, leaves, plaster on paper.) In this framed work (a paper surface, sheeted in plaster), the now-familiar metal wire knotted with fragile barbs runs through an oval shape in the centre. Around the metal structure are attached various materials: skin and a textured leaf-like form, resembling the silk of milkweed, in greys, creams, and related earth tones.

Reminiscent of the theme of flight that characterized the McClure series, questions related to movement are addressed in a number of works here. The roundish shape of *Untitled* (#3, 2000: sculpture, mixed media) gives a swirling feeling, like a metal, oval tumble weed. Inside, embedded at its centre, is a thin, greyish fibre wrapping a bottle-like form. All of this is covered in wire, nearly invisible except at closer viewing, and shadows on the wall once again capture the density—in light and shadow—that characterizes the piece itself.

Throughout the show, the notion of transformation or of the passing of time is explored, perhaps most poignantly in *Untitled* (#8, 2000: steel, resin, various materials). This work consists of a suspended frayed metal jutting form, supporting a pod-like structure. Like a chrysalis, or a snake shedding its skin, with fragments resembling tree roots emerging out of the top, this work is strangely anthropomorphic: the reflection cast on the wall gives the eerie impression of a hung, hooded, figure. In a related work, *Untitled* (#11, 2000: mixed media on mylar film), the artist addresses our human fascination with the process of “evolution,” with our need to freeze the passage of time and to conserve it

for ongoing observation. Here images of amphibian-like creatures on translucent mylar, some tinged with red and some with black, are pressed immobile between glass and frame.

The theme of temporality is central in one of the strongest pieces in the show, *Untitled* [Host] (#10, 2000: mixed media, skin, roots), which consists of a metal shelf on which are scattered a series of egg-like forms (in size and shape) smoothly cast in resin. Some are broken open, others remain intact, and bits of material—fragments of plants or hair fibres—float inside (like insects, as in the flies often fossilized in yellow amber). Resembling a collection of ancient remains excavated and displayed like specimens on a stainless shelf, this piece recalls archeological or religious relics, enveloped in the ceremony of the past, wearing their historicity like a virtue.

Another important question addressed in this series is the relationship between temporality and human identity. A recurring element is the human fingerprint which, in legal contexts, is seen by its uniqueness as an important window into determining identity. For example, *Untitled* (#2, 2000: mixed media on mylar film) presents an oversized (approx. 4-5”) image of fingerprints at the top of the work, however (linking it to earlier series) the bottom of the page contains the representation of a bird’s claw. The dark masses and cell-like shapes serve to create in this work the ominous impression of an x-ray, another important contemporary tool for diagnosis and identification. The fingerprint reappears in a series of three wall-mounted open metal boxes, works which integrate bits of wax caught in wire, mirroring these elements’ use elsewhere in the show. In *Untitled* (#14, 2000: aluminum, film, wax,) film provides a backing for the open metal box (merely a structure, made of metal corners and edges), on which appears the image of a black fingerprint, coloured in with

yellow and eggplant. Very thin wire twists through the knotted space of the metal box, inhabiting it and extending outside the box, as though the structure is insufficient to contain the contents. In a similar piece, *Untitled* (#13, 2000: aluminum, film, skin) films at the base of the box are coloured and, inside, the bottom edge of the box forms a ledge. Here a “skin” that looks like paper is torn open to reveal egg-like forms, seen elsewhere in the exhibition. In *Untitled* [with leaves] (#4, 2000) the barely perceptible image of a large black fingerprint appears on an inside sheet of paper, which is covered by a second transparent sheet. Leaves are collected inside, as though the print had been there for a long time and the leaves (although green... evoking life) had accumulated in between the layers.

It is interesting to note that several elements—some intentional, some perhaps not—serve to provide a sense of unity that connects these works to their environment. For example, as noted in the descriptions, shadows from all three “boxed” works create strong, angular delineations that stretch outward, dissecting the space beyond the works. In other instances, direct lighting (cast directly above the wiring that structures the works) traces ethereal shapes on the wall around them. Interestingly, the gallery space itself also seems to collude with this phenomenon: cracks running through the grey floor of the gallery provide a background of sorts for the works, one in which the floor’s organic, rambling lines harmonize with the objects themselves, creating a reassuring sense of unity.

Stepping back from this series, we are left with the challenge of reconciling, making meaning of, the fragments of observations introduced. The presence of the natural world, to be sure, is striking. But interspersed throughout is another, equally important and perhaps even more insistent presence: that of the complexity of human

life, particularly human identity and the notion of freedom within this. In considering what might be seen as a point of entry into these works’ meaning, Andreas Huyssen’s penetrating discussion “Memories of Utopia” is useful. He writes: “In an age of an unlimited proliferation of images, discourses, simulacra, the search for the real itself has become utopian, and this search is fundamentally invested in a desire for temporality. In that sense, then, the obsessions with memory and history, as we witness them in contemporary literature and art, are not regressive or simply escapist. In cultural politics today, they occupy a utopian position vis-a-vis a chic and cynical postmodern nihilism on the one hand and a neo-conservative world view on the other *that desires what cannot be had: stable histories, a stable canon, a stable reality*”³ (italics added). Perhaps, in the context of this work, we might recognize even identify with this desire for what cannot be had. And—as eloquently evoked by this artist—it the same longing, with the parallel knowledge that we are compelled to carry on despite the limitations of time and nature, may provide us with precious insight into *why the caged bird sings*. ■

Drawings and Other Constructions
Galerie Lilian Rodriguez
September 23–October 21, 2000

Dessin / Constructions
Galerie McClure,
Visual Arts Centre
January 5–27, 2001

NOTES

1. This essay appears in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. (Robert Bernasconi, ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
2. Maya Angelou. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Bantam, 1993
3. Andreas Huyssen. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995. p. 101.