

On Topic

Interiors, Balloons, and Marcel Duchamp

Lee Boroson's site-specific exhibit *Windowbox* is now on view at H&R Block Art Space. The artist gave a lecture/gallery walk Saturday, November 11. Before the lecture Kati Toivanen had a chance to talk with Boroson about his work and process. This is the first feature of a *Review* series *On Topic*.

KT: How did you become interested in architecture?

LB: One of the first pieces that really dealt with the space it was in I did in Provincetown in 1992. I inflated a balloon so large within a gallery space that it filled the entire space and eventually forced all the people out. It was a very small gallery space, and it was a 16-foot weather balloon. It was a hugely problematic piece, and I never thought I would do anything like it again. But it did force me to deal with the architecture in a way that I hadn't before. The piece had to be inflated with a vacuum cleaner, which had to be in a different space because it was so loud. I had to run a pipe through to where the vacuum cleaner was. As the balloon blew up, it needed to be protected from the sharp surfaces of the architecture, like wood trim of a wall and the window frames, so I covered everything with fake fur. ... That was probably one of the first times I dealt with architecture.

KT: Your piece reminds me of that Marcel Duchamp piece from 1942 called *Mile of String*. It was installed in a salon show with several other artists. He took a string and strung it around the entire gallery in such a way that no one could enter the space. You didn't keep other art from being viewed, as he did, but both projects kept the audience out.

... While creating divisions between various media is often not interesting or productive, I would still like to hear how you relate your work to both sculptural and fiber art traditions.

LB: I don't believe in any divisions anymore. I think of everybody as artists, and I think if those people who work with a specific medium need to identify themselves with that medium, then that's okay. If people ask me, I say I'm a sculptor, and I figure that sculpture is anything that works with space, including photography and time-based media. I've never thought about fiber as a specific art form, I just end up using fabric because it seems to suit the types of forms that I want to make.

KT: How do you choose your materials?

LB: The choice of materials has sort of evolved. I don't necessarily imagine something and say, "this needs to be

Review, Page 20, December 2000

made out of this." The newest materials in this piece are the tuftets, which are foam. And I knew I wanted to make the seating comfortable, and I wanted it to be very simple. I found that there were foams that were stiff enough actually to support this much weight — three people. To be able to make them out of one material was, to me, the best. I like a simple solution. I don't like to complicate things.

The covers are not the ultimate solution for me, but, the foam is ugly. If I could choose the colors of foam, then I'd be pretty happy. But I wanted them to be a colored element within the piece, so that became more of an issue of something that would be washable, something comfortable to sit on.

KT: What about the material on the tubes? Parachute material?

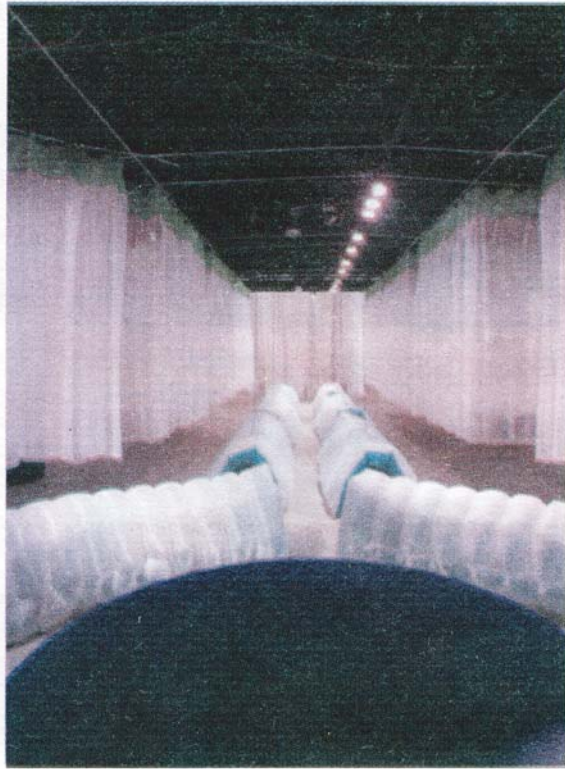
LB: That developed out of functional needs. It started with the balloon, and then I started making the forms out of ripstop nylon. It's air resistant, but the amount of pressure I needed to keep the pieces inflated was huge. So I ended up using these big blower fans, and they were really noisy, and that was a problem. The pieces looked Utopian and idyllic, and yet the noise was really unbearable. Then I couldn't be in a group show, because the work was so noisy. I didn't want to make something that was so attractive and yet so annoying. I did a little bit of research on the Internet and I found a company that made parachutes. Essentially it is a ripstop nylon, but it's silicone coated and impervious to air. The only air leakage comes through the needle holes.

KT: To me, the parachute has to do with survival.

LB: I never even thought about it.

KT: What is your relationship to labor or the artist's touch in the practice of art?

LB: I think I'm more and more willing to give up some amount of the labor. I do a lot of things that are labor intensive. There's something about what I was taught good studio practice means: you do activities that keep you in the studio so that you're there at the right time. You're there in the studio when you have a



Boroson's *Windowbox* installation at H&R Block Artspace

thought that's going to help you. It's about creating an openness to something good happening. I think if I was running around doing business all the time, or just sort of doing idea development, I wouldn't have the time when I just get bored; when things come to mind that just don't come to mind at other times. It's like labor equals boredom, and boredom equals openness for the ideas to come in.

KT: There are lots of people who believe in that. I personally have a completely different practice, where I think that if I'm out in the world, I see things and ideas come from the world.

LB: Right. I'm sort of a little bit of both. I feel like I need that balance.

KT: I was reading your reviews, and listening to people last night, and your work has been referred to as playful, or fun, perhaps even whimsical. Is that one of your objectives?

LB: I think that providing entry for the viewers is really important. I want to be all about accessibility. For me there's something that happens when I spend more time with something, like when something makes me want to stay a little bit longer. I think that when I gather information beyond the point when I think I'm done gathering information, that ends up being the most helpful.

KT: Some people say that if you move your studio, your work will change. Or in a different city your work will change. Do you think your work is informed by the place, whether physical or geographical, in which it's made?

LB: That's less true for me now than it was. For me the work is more about the space that it's going to be in, not the space where I make it, because it doesn't look like anything in the studio. It looks like piles of fabric. The first six months that I was working on the *Windowbox* I didn't have a studio. I worked on drawings. I was in Provincetown, and I was in Italy, and I was in New York. I worked on the drawings wherever I was.

KT: Many of your projects are site-specific, especially the last couple big ones. Are some spaces more challenging than others, and what are the most challenging aspects of them?

LB: Well, this was a challenging space.

KT: How?

LB: I would say that the fewer historical elements, the fewer unusual architectural building elements, the less there is to respond to. Working site specifically is all about finding something to respond to, and the white cube is the most difficult space. It's like an insulator, it's supposed to be neutral, and as a result, there's nothing there.

KT: How did this project in Kansas City begin?

LB: Raechell Smith asked me about a year ago if I was interested in doing something out here. And I said yes, definitely. Having known what she was doing out here, I knew a little bit about the space. She sent me some photos of the space, so I had a little bit of something to respond to, and these three drawings were from that time about a year ago when I first started thinking about the space from the photos. I flew out here in the spring, got blueprints, studied the space, drove around Kansas City a lot, met a lot of people, saw some of the parks, and really

loaded up on information that I thought would help me to develop that. And it grew from there.

KT: How do you fund these expensive projects? I assume they're not only labor intensive, but they're expensive.

LB: This project was funded by H&R Block Artspace. I teach part time at RISD and that gives me enough to live, but not enough to buy materials and keep my studio running. So I have been working solely on projects that have funding involved in the situation.

KT: How do you see your relationship with your art community, however you want to define "art community"?

LB: I have good friends who are artists, and we make studio visits on a regular basis. There's a really great support structure in New York. There are so many artists and so many different communities within the big community. Through my friends in this community, there's a dialogue, there's parties, everything. It's all sort of focused around that community in New York. And so it is a huge support structure for all of us.

KT: I assume you write artist's statements about your work, each project?

LB: I do. I have some statements, and I don't necessarily write one for each show, but they seem to be constantly evolving and I keep going back and I change things, and I lose things, and I'll add a new paragraph here or there. And so it is this sort of evolving thing. I feel it's important to voice certain ideas that might not be evident, yet people always find those ideas through the work eventually. Often I'm working with somebody who's writing something on the work. Raechell Smith is going to write an essay that'll go in the pamphlet. After I get my statement from her, then she would have my point of view on it. In this class that I'm teaching at Rhode Island School of Design called New York New York, students come down to the city, we go to galleries. Then we meet with different artists who have shows up, and they tell us about their work. We read the press releases, and hear what the dealers say about the artist's work. We have all these different points of view. How does that fit in with everything? Who's right? There's room for everybody's point of view. And I don't want to be authoritarian in any way. I don't want to say, "this is what it's about, if you don't get this, then you're missing it." I hope that when I talk about entry level and accessibility, that there is something there for everybody, something that you can come away with, whatever you decide that it's about. So in that way, I have faith in them and us.

Kati Toivanen is an assistant professor of studio art at the Art & Art History Department at UMKC. She likes to play with dolls, which she also photographs.