

LEE BOROSON

Sculpture

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

Undulating gently above the Philip Morris Sculpture Court, Lee Boroson's blue and white *Underpass* (1999) suggests many things to the intrigued viewer: a cloverleaf traffic construction; a piece of the sky; a river; the wash of waves on a beach; even, to New Yorkers, an abstract version of the giant blue whale which continues to inspire awe at the American Museum of Natural History. Constructed of a fabric used for parachutes, *Underpass* develops like a long roadway not so very far above the heads of visitors to the more than 40-foot-high sculpture court; its quiet, subtle movement is directed by a fan strategically placed inside a crawlspace. Branches of *Underpass*, joined to the long component echoing the space's

pedestrian path, also connect with the side walls, suspended by cord about halfway up the court. The complex movement of the quilted sculpture appears to parallel the motion of the outside world—the traffic patterns that exist both at street level and on the ramp leading to Grand Central's drive-around and the passersby who make their way past the tall windows of this heavily used, but also institutionally distanced, space.

Underpass is a complicated construction that asks to be understood both as a recognizable object, albeit with the position of object and viewer reversed (we look up rather than down at it), and an embodiment of abstract form. One bears in mind that the sculpture court is located on the

Lee Boroson, *Underpass*, 1999.
Installation view and detail.

ground level of Philip Morris's corporate headquarters in midtown Manhattan, a site where information rather than products is considered the valuable commodity. So it happens that the sculpture demonstrates the ebb and flow of data in a place where data are in high demand. As *Underpass* quietly breathes, it becomes a version of the movement of numbers and words comprising the intellectual traffic taking place in the offices above. Indeed, Boroson's sculpture is so attuned to the uses of its site that it can only be shown in this particular sculpture court; its symbiotic relationship to that space demonstrates how a contemporary artist can, if only for a moment, symbolically animate a public space whose ambiance is inevitably at a remove if not actually cold.

What is interesting about Boroson's sculpture is its ability to be successful on both the level of abstraction and figuration at the same time. *Underpass* conflates these views of the world deftly and convincingly; as it seemingly hovers in midair, it also energizes the dead space at the upper part of the sculpture court. In a way, then, the work is additionally an architectural statement. Its complicated route patterns are only partially an abstraction. Indeed, they build on genuine forms, among them the right angles of the city blocks where it is located, 42nd Street and Park Avenue, which are visible through the court's windows and doors. The site's physical reality is rendered symbolic in *Underpass*, but at the same time the symbolism merges with the physical details in such

a way that both structures of experience are recognized. As curator Debra Singer points out in her brochure essay, the flow of materials—traffic, pedestrians, and data—is guided by both real and abstract structures, obliquely recognized by the sculpture.

In the past few years, Boroson's inflated sculptures have gained increased attention. One work, *Room with a Phew* (1995), is a deep purple, ripstop-nylon version of a room, which can be viewed from within as well as from without. This work, like *Underpass*, isn't sculptural in a traditional sense; instead, it refers to spaces, not all of them always physically experienced or realizable, that impact on its physical expression. It may be strange to consider how marketing data and one's experience of home have influenced *Underpass* and *Room with a Phew*, respectively, but these secondary contexts do have a great deal to do with the way we experience Boroson's art. His high-tech materials and inflated forms are tour de force manipulations of a contemporary reality that owes a great deal to new media; but there is a reassuring simplicity to his art—his work can be packed up in an outsize duffel bag. Just as Boroson finds ways of traversing abstraction and figuration, so he finds ways of bridging simple and complex systems. His imaginative structures are as playful as they are referentially intricate and grand.

—Jonathan Goodman