



Teach a Woman To Fish: Tara Donovan at The Parrish Art Museum

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by Janet Goleas

Known for chimerical, site-responsive, often massive installations in museums and galleries across the world, the artist Tara Donovan has landed this summer in Water Mill. On view at the Parrish Art Museum through October 12, 2015, three hypnotic works by the Brooklyn-based artist recalculate the ordinary, commuting the prosaic into breathtaking expanses of serpentine ringlets, helices and spirals.

For nearly two decades Donovan has employed the use of everyday items—plastic cups, straight pins, buttons and straws—in her practice, transforming their most basic structural aspects into shape-shifting assemblages that sprawl across walls, floors and ceilings. Her element of choice here at the Parrish is the esteemed Slinky®, the long-lived toy extraordinaire that has captivated the imaginations of millions of baby-boomers and their children for well over half a century.



Installation view of Platform: Tara Donovan. Detail of Untitled, 2015. Slinky®s. Parrish Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York. Photo by Janet Goleas.

Possessed by the urge to alter space, redefine containment and transcend the material nature of things, Donovan's capacity to morph garden-variety items into fantastical interior landscapes is staggering. A little history: In 2003, she occupied a 44-foot expanse of wall at Rice University Art Gallery, embedding plastic straws into its face. The wall mutated into a glorious, diaphanous stretch of pure ambiguity.

At Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, she pinched Mylar sheets into conical ruffles that formed glistening spheres. Replicating like cellular mutations gone wild, the orbs swelled into a gigantic aggregate that spilled across the galleries in mounds.



"Untitled (Mylar)" by Tara Donovan, 2011. Mylar and hot glue, site-specific

installation, dimensions variable. Photo by J M Goleas; courtesy Pace Gallery.

In 2009, Donovan's mid-career retrospective sprawled through six galleries at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, where piles of buttons coalesced into eerie stalagmites, loops of polyester film swirled inside glass as if floating in a luminous aquarium, and more than one million 7-ounce Styrofoam cups were transfigured into a massive billow of clouds that hovered above. It's no surprise that in 2005 Donovan was the first recipient of the Calder Prize and just three years later, at a mere 38 years old, she was honored by the MacArthur Foundation with its prestigious "Genius" award.

At the Parrish, hundreds of deconstructed Slinky® coils hurl across the lobby's arching, 30-foot wall as they rise up to vaulted ceilings. Flattened like snakes on a highway, the silvery spirals surge upward and outward and around the corner with a graceful ease, shimmering in the northern light that spills in from a long bank of windows.



Installation view of Platform: Tara Donovan. Untitled, 2015. Slinky®s. Parrish Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Pushing the structure and perimeters of this magnificent white cube, the untitled work redefines the immediate geography. Donovan refers to works such as these—those that are flat against a wall—as "drawings," and the sense of scribbling and gestural line is implicit in them. Hugging the walls like a tattoo, the work's incremental units coalesce, pushing between methodology and the fractious caprice of these meandering contours.



Installation view of Platform: Tara Donovan. Detail of Untitled, 2015. Slinky®s. Parrish Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York. Photo by Janet Goleas.

Down the hall, a large monoprint dominates a long wall. Structurally similar, the print possesses a darker more mediated sense of form, as if its imagery has emerged from the inky well of a Magic 8 Ball.



Installation view of Platform: Tara Donovan. Untitled, 2015. Monoprint. Parrish Art Museum. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Parrish Art Museum Collector's Circle, and Sherry Brous and Douglas Oliver. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Nearby, a freestanding sculpture quietly wrestles within its own physicality. A writhing nebula of tangled, feral Slinky wire, the work implodes with soft energy and an ephemeral, indistinct materiality. Moving in and out of focus like vapor from dry ice, Donovan's Untitled sculpture possesses none of the harmonic motion that drove the popularity of Richard T. James's helical spring.



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Invented in 1943, the Slinky® was known for its ability to somersault down stairs, recoiling itself and then springing forth in a continuum of moving arches. For Donovan, the coiled metal functions more like a pencil line, its loops crisscrossing freestyle like the orbital lines in a Dürer etching.



Slinky® ad, 1946.

While her process may be rooted in the serialism typical of forebears such as Sol Lewitt, Agnes Martin and Donald Judd, Donovan is not easy to characterize. Like Eva Hesse, her installations are

not exactly geometric, anthropomorphic, ironic or connotative and yet they are all those things. Within the hyperbolic planes, accreted bits and buttons, accumulated globes and bursting hulls, Donovan touches on the mystery of mathematical absolutes, weaving a kaleidoscopic and seemingly infinite landscape.

Basic Info: "Platform: Tara Donovan," July 4 to October 12, 2015, at the Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.parrishart.org

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