



# A Conceptual Installation Exhibition Channels Elaine de Kooning and her Studio

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by Pat Rogers

There's something haunting about entering the former home of [Elaine de Kooning](#) (1918-1989). From the outside, the East Hampton home doesn't stand out, a Saltbox set alongside a sequestered street in a wooded and secluded section of The Springs on the East End of Long Island. Passing over the front door's threshold, history rises and the atmosphere blooms with promise that something special lies within.

Knowing that I was walking into Elaine de Kooning's home and studio may have had something to do with my impression. Adding another layer of expectation was the awareness that her home is now hosting creatives of all types in a year-old residency that established a few years after [Lisa de Kooning's death](#) in 2012. Prior knowledge aside, it is fair to say the [Accabonac House](#) has a presence that simmers with the energy of a place where art making is part of its essential fiber.

Nearly bare of furnishings, art is present. So are books of all kinds lining shelves or located on coffee tables. The day I was there, supporters of the exhibiting artists from Brooklyn and other places gathered on the patio outside and in the sitting area, adjacent to the reason the home welcomed visitors on that day: the opening of "Rongwrong," a two-person site-specific exhibition of art by [Aaron Aujla](#) and [Adam Marnie](#).

Presented by [Halsey McKay Gallery](#) of East Hampton, one reason the artists were selected to react to the space is they both use architectural aspects as the starting point for their conceptual art, said gallery co-director [Hilary Schaffner](#) at the opening. The two artists had previously exhibited together with Halsey McKay Gallery, said Schaffner, which promised for an easy collaboration as they developed an installation relating to Elaine de Kooning's studio and the site-specific works that would dialogue with each other.

Featuring eight artworks, the main part of the exhibition is installed on the ground floor in Elaine de Kooning's studio (probably a living room, if occupied by a different type of resident). Dried paint from her art making days remains on a small section of floor close to an angled wall of windows where light floods in, testifying to its use as an artist studio.

"[Rongwrong](#)" is an exhibition where the work seems to divert attention away from itself in favor of creating a new experience.



Installation view of “Rongwrong” featuring sculpture, installation and art by Aaron Aujla and Adam Marnie installed at Elaine de Kooning’s House and Studio in East Hampton. Presented by Halsey Mckay Gallery. Photo courtesy of the gallery.

Drawing my attention first was *Square Construction (de Kooning House)*, 2016, by Adam Marnie. The work both commands and intersects the room, providing an active guide to engage with the wall of windows and the impact of natural light.

Providing an active visual “pacing” where viewers can gaze along the artwork to the windows and turn back to visually slide along the piece in the opposite direction, yielding the discovery of the upper open level of a second story space overlooking the studio. *Square Construction* activates the space and creates a reason to tarry in the near-empty room. The work encourages the viewer to stand a moment, look at the art exhibited throughout the studio, remember the art giant whose studio this was and imagine her working there.

In some of his work, Marnie deconstructs the functionality of the space to create a site-specific installation, he said. This was the case in “[Phantom Limb](#)” at [Derek Eller Gallery](#) on the Lower East Side of New York City, where walls were partially exposed as part of Marnie’s installation. At the de Kooning house, Marnie’s installation was created to draw attention to the room itself and its functionality in order to create a metaphor that pushes boundaries. As is typical of his work, Marnie’s *Square Construction* makes use of ordinary materials (in this case building supplies) and is direct in its presentation.

“I go into a space that has been used for specific purpose and respond with the simplest means,” said Marnie in an interview at the opening.



“*Square Construction (de Kooning House)*” by Adam Marnie, 2016. Wood, wood screws, 202 x 288 x 10.5 inches. Courtesy Halsey Mckay Gallery.

Subtler were a series of conceptual sculptures by Aaron Aujla. The three works on view are part of a series centering on divorcing couples. In the series, Aujla extracted functional cabinetry or casework from the kitchen they formally shared to make sculptures that seem familiar but are not. The works are inspired by separate interviews with the couple and incorporate their choices, reactions and experience with the object from their kitchen being transformed into art.

For the de Kooning installation, Aujla selected several works of deconstructed kitchen cabinetry sculptures. His work metaphorically signifies the modern internal complex, dealing with difficulty

and loss, hope and expectations. This connects with Elaine de Kooning's own experiences as a female artist in a time that was not kind to woman and as the wife of a brilliant and sometimes difficult artist and husband, Aujla said during an interview at the opening.

His works on view are cloaked in monochromatic color, which offers commentary on objects that are integral parts of daily living while providing a twist on expectations of the object's functionality and aesthetic form, Aujla explained. In the case of "[Rongwrong](#)", Marnie's interest in the light and creating a dissection of the room for his piece created distinct spaces for Aujla to install his works.

"Adam was taken by the light and the way the natural light fall led down to the basement," said Aujla. "We both work with architecture but in different ways. His installation allowed me to do something internally with the architecture and then to bring some focus to the room or experience the room in a new way: to subvert or highlight something that was there. It gives people the chance to consider the form and look closer at the work and the room."



"2003 - 2015" by Aaron Aujla, 2016. Kitchen countertop, wood, paint, 37 x 20 x 36 inches. Courtesy Halsey McKay Gallery.



"Midland Road" by Aaron Aujla, 2016. Wood, plaster, paint, 34.5 x 70.5 x 8 inches. Courtesy Halsey McKay Gallery.



"Black Heat" by Adam Marnie, 2015 - 2016. Hardwood maple, spray paint, wood putty, 63 x 3 x 3 inches. Courtesy Halsey McKay Gallery.

An unexpected joy of "[Rongwrong](#)" was discovered when following the horizontal line created in *Square Construction (de Kooning House)*. The view led straight to the window where following downward to the anchor of the work revealed an open shaft, adjacent to the window, that linked the ground floor to the lower level (a basement, if you will). Finding the staircase in order to view the piece in its entirety, additional art was discovered installed near its base.

The artworks installed downstairs were selected by the artists to reveal more of their respective art practices while also relating to patterns of living (doing laundry in the basement, for example) while still being connected to the main exhibition area and the expected living activities taking place upstairs on the ground floor. Adam Marnie's mixed media work, *Red Rose Recursion*, reveals his use of altered photographs in his work as well as his approach to creating site-specific installations through multiply artworks. Aaron Aujla's *Identical twins estimate artists apartment based on a first encounter* revealed his use of interviews that personalize his conceptual art through the use of text culled from first-person accounts. In this series, Aujla presents expectations of what twins interviewed separately of what each believed his studio would look like.



"Identical twins estimate artists apartment based on a first encounter" by Aaron Aujla, 2015. Corian, 8 x 14 inches. Courtesy Halsey Mckay Gallery.



"Red Rose Recursion" by Adam Marnie, 2015. Inkjet color print and inkjet photograph mounted on drywall, frame, 35.63 x 28.5 inches. Courtesy Halsey Mckay Gallery.

"Rongwrong" was an engaging experience for both the art and its conversation with Elaine de Kooning's home and artist studio. In a strange way, the art seemed to divert attention away from itself to create a unique blend of past and present, the human experience and the experience of the artist. For me, the exhibition channeled Elaine de Kooning's past and brought it forward into the present to reveal an imagined intimate view of her as both a human being and as an artist, presented through the lens of contemporary art.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "Rongwrong" with works by Aaron Aujla and Adam Marnie is on view through May 8, 2016 at the Elaine de Kooning House & Studio, 55 Alewife Brook Road, East Hampton, NY 11937. [www.halseymckay.com](http://www.halseymckay.com).

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