

July 18, 1999

ART; The Push of Gravity, The Pull of Gravity

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

WHAT goes up must come down is the law of gravity as well as of temporary exhibitions. The two domains have now coincided in a show at the Stamford branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art in "Zero G: When Gravity Becomes Form."

The show was organized by the 1998-1999 Helena Rubenstein curatorial fellows. Every summer, curators in the making put on interesting, if sometimes frustrating, exhibitions. This one is canny, not only because it provides intellectual fodder but also because the fellows -- Eva Diaz, Ko'an Jeff Baysa and Michelle-Lee White -- are capable of treating their weighty topic humorously.

The Whitney branch's central space is a showcase in which sculptures demonstrate, to paraphrase the press release, the deployment and the defying of gravity.

These scientific factors were at the forefront of issues embodied in Minimalist sculpture in the 1960's and 70's, and the one of the chief exponents of Minimalism, Richard Serra, continues to build work that sometimes frightens viewers as it challenges gravity.

An early, rudimentary Serra work -- "Prop" from 1968 -- is a sheet of lead held against the wall by a lead pole propped against it. (The precariousness is lessened by telltale strips of Velcro probably keeping the sheet from slipping.) Across from this piece, and mounted on the wall, is Lynda Benglis's 1969 "Wing." With its ripples made by the pouring of liquid aluminum, it challenges Minimalism's austerity. It is perched on the wall, even though the process of pouring should push it downward. As it is, one might sit under "Wing" for shelter.

Another major Minimalist, Robert Morris, makes a large arc of two lengths of heavy felt. It has an obvious downward tug. Mr. Morris wrote that his intention was to record, "the history of art as the history of the particularization of weight."

At the far end of the central space is Tom Shannon's recent work, "Serene in Suspense." An inner magnet keeps the idealized, floating resin and lead female figure pointed to magnetic north, even though she will bob and spin at the slightest touch. Shannon's creation is a sleek figure, but the room contains two large examples of its opposite, old-fashioned balloons with fresh twists. Tim Hawkinson's bulbous "Balloon Self-Portrait" increases in absurdity when the viewer apprehends that the latex form, an inflated casting of the artist's body, is turned inside out as pieces of rubber dangle from its nostrils and ears.

A female counterpart of the Hawkinson figure is another manifestation of Nancy Davidson's ability to make enormous weather balloons into erotic distillations of woman. An accommodating silken blue corset helps the transformation, but so does a length of black rope that gives the work suggestions of cleavage.

Serving as a kind of footnote to these large works is Byron Kim's "Belly Painting (White)." Mr. Kim is known for paintings that suggest fleshiness, and hence life, by the slightest of gestures; here it is simply a bulge in the linen, fixed with encaustic.

Eager to defy the three examples of floating is Ernesto Neto's "Poff" (1997). Almost in the middle of the gallery, a stocking filled with wheat flour has seemingly, and with a certain impudence, been thrown to the floor. Some of the flour looks as if it has escaped due to the impact of the landing, and surrounds the sock like a halo.

A collapsed object is another possible illustration of gravity; it can pull so hard that it will suck the life out of a thing. The curators call such pieces "familiar objects gone strange." In the golden age of Pop, the middle 1960's, Claes Oldenburg seized on vinyl as a material out of which to fashion limp versions of familiar items. Viewers have probably never applied the pathetic fallacy to a toilet before, but Oldenburg's sad, flaccid apparatus asks for it.

The curators point out that their show has two directions: "the conceptualized use of gravity on the one hand, and its literal representation in painting and photography on the other."

Two paintings represent gravity very differently. "Pink Matters," an eight-foot-high canvas by Hanneline Rogeberg, features two Junoesque women keeping each other from falling. Helen Aylon, however, parodies the quick gestures of Abstract Expression by taking a month to make her point. In a performance, Ms. Aylon creates the conditions for a sac of liquid paint to slowly accumulate; it bursts when her assistants tilt the painting upright.

Photographs include Peter Garfield's "Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny)" from 1996, and Erwin Wurm's "One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)" from 1998. In Mr. Garfield's work, a house flies as if in Dorothy's Kansas; in Mr. Wurm's, a woman is pinned down by a suitcase as if a victim of foul play.

In one photographic work, Tom Friedman makes it look as if there is a huge hole in a field, made by a flailing figure who has fallen through the ground. In another work, John Coplans, who makes strange and poignant photographs of aspects of his aging body in odd positions, is upside down.

Vito Acconci's 1969 "Throw" is two dizzying snapshots of a factory building. One is of the building's exterior while the other is of the ground, tilted. Mr. Acconci is demonstrating the camera's viewpoint, what it would record if thrown from the building.

"Zero G: When Gravity Becomes Form" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion in Stamford through Aug. 4.

Photos: Clockwise from above: Tom Shannon's "Serene in Suspense" (1998), Peter Garfield's "Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny)" (1996) and Erwin Wurm's "One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)" (1998).