

**Elsbeth Pratt**  
*Or Gallery*  
 Vancouver  
 February 17 to 28

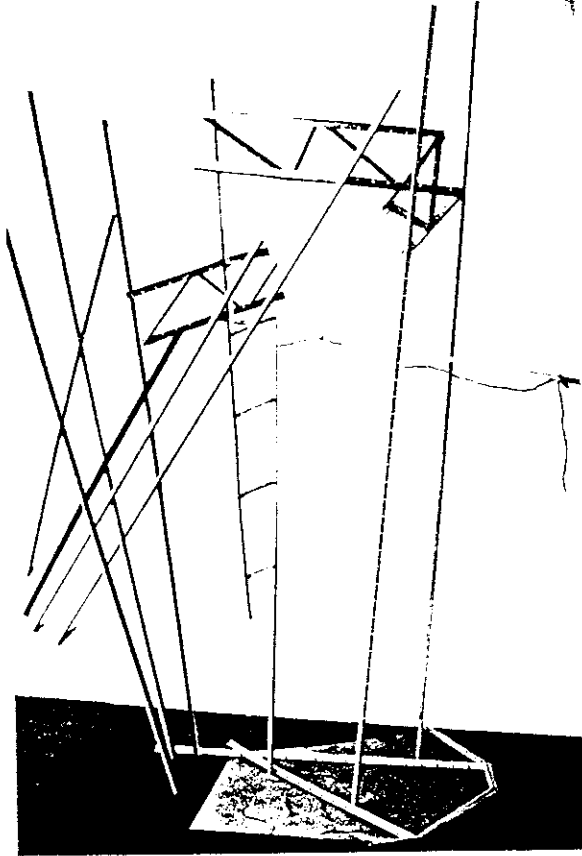
Elsbeth Pratt is a young Vancouver sculptor whose recent show at the Or Gallery consisted of four works, constructed primarily from drywall cornerbead (a light sheetmetal angle iron, predrilled and galvanized) combined with pieces of wire mesh, thin aluminum louvering, reflective tape, masonite, spraypaint and copper wire. The eight foot modular strips of beading, slightly stiffened by the lengthwise right angle fold, were bent, buckled, cut and poprivited together in a loose and linear schema of casual angulations and splayed parallels, propped or lightly nailed against the wall. The work had a kind of staggering tenacity, like a derelict still standing in the face of a pressing engagement with gravity.

Through the medium of builder's hardware, here serving as both model and measure, the work's substantial reference to architecture and the built environment was established. Its tenuous and ironic reliance on these materials in these 'constructed' works drew attention to their departure from conventionality and expectation, through a visual paraphrase of the vocabulary of construction. The work's other reference, to an art history of constructivism, collage and formalism was pictorially and compositionally demonstrated through a series of figure-ground relations, colour juxtapositions and relief practices.

This cross referencing between art and architecture, through the simultaneous use of images and materials linked to those practices, instilled the work with a desultory ambivalence. This fluctuation embodied attitudes toward both these practices, and directed attention toward the function of the work, which succeeded insofar as it was able to sustain this ambiguity.

On the one hand, the work's attitude toward building, indicated by its parodic and insubstantial framing techniques, its irregular trusses, its generally equivocal structure, combined with its gestural images and drawn equivalences to imbalance and collapse, indicated a sense of the material impoverishment of the city itself.

This degenerated image at odds with the expressed purpose of an



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acted in substructural opposition to the perfect image of the city's renewal and self-reflective generation out of itself; the demonstration of its ahistorical stasis-in-flux. Rather than showing a destitution of intentions, the work turned the material systemization of its environment back on itself in lanky mimesis.

On the other hand, the work's accommodation of modernist art practices, while attempting to link up with these architectural concerns, instead appeared as the salient feature of the work, acting as a description of intention through this process of reduction. There was a tendency for the work's reliance on a pictorial vocabulary indebted to modernism to return it to within the limits of a formalist discourse, thereby obscuring its more functional equivocation between art and architecture. While this vacillation remained, it was as a further formal internalization rather than a centrifugal expansion of the work beyond the gallery. The work's internal demonstration of care and sensibility, with its discretely inflected colour and considered arrangements, served to collapse the work's subject back into the familiarity of insular formalism, reconfirming the work's status as independent and discrete object.

The work's ability to deflect its audience away from itself, to divert such attention back through the window of the gallery, remains the indication of the work's success, given its demonstrated intentions. (The window of the gallery, facing onto its light-industrial neighborhood, is a functional disruption between the received hermeticism of much modernist work and the built environment that contains it.) By this reflection, the work revives the sense of a work working, a retrieval of functional purpose, rather unreflective nor passive

but tied through its authorship to a larger, more socially spirited intention.

Pratt's work makes this reference through its embodied ambivalence: less secure is the precarious position it occupies in supporting itself against a reductive misrepresentation. Attention to pictorial compositional analysis, to the the exclusion of the broader function of a work, is a myopic feature of formalist criticism. In Pratt's work, the demonstration of those subject choices superimposed on a rationalist framework together form the larger social experience of the work. To view the work as a series of subjective decisions referring to colour and form alone is to miss the set of objective relations which support and are necessary for a broader reading of the work. While Pratt has begun with certain subjects, she has finished with work as much about the experience of incompleteness and reconstitution as about the illusory finality of objects in this culture.

*Greg Snider*

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