

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

An Artist's Devotion to Exactness

The sensual surfaces of Susan York's graphite sculptures bring together sight and touch without favoring either

John Yau, January 21, 2018



“Susan York: New and Recent Work” at Del Deo & Barzune (January 18 – March 30, 2018):
Installation view (photo courtesy Del Deo & Barzune, New York)

I first learned about Susan York from the poet Arthur Sze in the winter of 2012. He had called me to say that they were collaborating on a project involving her drawings and his poems, and asked if I would be interested in interviewing them about their project. The subsequent publication, *The Unfolding Center* (Radius Books, 2014), encompasses their project and my interview of them, which was conducted over the phone. York's contribution consists of 11 diptych drawings in graphite on sheets of 88 Arches paper.

It was while I was preparing for this interview that I learned that York is a sculptor whose primary material is graphite, although she also uses porcelain. Besides her drawings, the one exception to these two materials that I know of is a series of four double-sided, two-color lithographs, *Achromatopsia II* (2015), based on the medical condition of seeing only in black and white. This series of prints is included in the exhibition, *Susan York: New and Recent Work*, at Del Deo & Barzune (January 18 – March 30, 2018), which also features sculptures and a large graphite drawing.

Concurrent with this exhibition is her installation, *Susan York: Foundation*, at The Drawing Center (October 13, 2017 – October 18, 2018), which utilizes the building's foundation, parts of which are visible in what is called the Lab Corridor, as the source and site of her sculptures and drawings. Located in The Drawing Center's basement level, the Lab Corridor is a narrow passageway with offices and rest rooms that runs along one side of the building and leads to the lower galleries. Jutting out a few inches from the wall, along the floor, is a series of foundation stones left visible by the architects who repurposed the building, most likely because constructing a new wall to conceal them would have made the passageway even narrower.

York, who makes one graphite drawing per day, some of which can be seen on her website, used graphite to make sculptural objects that mirror the foundation stones: there is a one-to-one correspondence between each visible part of the foundation stone and her response, down to the worn, uneven surface. Except in one case, York places her sculptures above their corresponding foundation stones, but shifted to the left or right so that they are not directly over the original objects.



“Susan York: Foundation” at The Drawing Center (October 13, 2017 – October 18, 2018):
Installation view (photo Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio; courtesy The Drawing Center)

The one exception was determined by the foundation stone, which juts out from a corner of the passageway. There is a closed white door immediately to the right of the corner marked by the stone. York's response to that particular situation was to place her sculpture high on the wall and directly above the stone. When you walk down the hallway toward the closed door, the hallway acts as a frame enclosing the foundation stone and sculpture on the left, both wedged in the corner, as well as a second pairing on the right, in which the horizontal sculpture is installed on the same level as the door handle, and about a foot closer to the door than its corresponding stone, creating pressure on the door's white rectangle.



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Consequently, the sculptures and stones seem peripheral, with the nondescript door being the largest thing in sight. The black graphite is apt to make you more aware of the white walls, as well as the beige-gray color of the stone floor. Also, the placement of the foundation stones makes one wonder how this area once looked, who else passed through here. One becomes aware of being anonymous.

Along with the objects, York made graphite drawings that also echo the foundation stones' contours. The drawings evoke strata, a landscape, as did the objects: they speak to a deep past, evoking a vast arc of time in which we are temporary and minuscule presences. I don't think it is a stretch to connect the forms in York's drawings to the mesas of New Mexico, where the artist has lived and worked for many years.

The work might first strike one as Minimalist and literal, but it soon sheds those associations and becomes something else, a meditation on time, landscape, and architecture. Like the sculptures, their sensual surfaces bring sight and touch together without favoring either. York's devotion to exactness does something I did not expect. Walking back and forth in the corridor, turning this way and that, at a certain point, the works transport you beyond the realm of likeness into some other dimension of experience, where you reflect upon the different layers of time in which you exist, where the passage of time becomes the filter through which your life is experienced.

High up in the corner of Del Deo & Barzune, York has placed a graphite square as an homage to Kazimir Malevich's seminal painting, "Black Square" (1915). Malevich's black square is framed by a wide, white border, and the painting's surface is cracked after years of neglect from the Soviet government. When it was first exhibited in the group show, *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10*, in Petrograd in the winter of 1915-16, it was hung high in a corner would normally have been placed.



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As I see it, York's black square is an act of restoration: its flawless surface evokes the "experience of pure non-objectivity in the white emptiness of a liberated nothing" that Malevich spoke about, but in a way that seems linked to the artist's practice of making a daily drawing as a way of shaping one's passage through time. The time spent achieving a flawless surface is part of the meaning of the piece. And, in some way — which might strike some as heretical — York's black square improves upon the historical one by eliminating the wide band.

The other thing that is striking about York's objects is that they feel weighty and weightless, something she attains through their placement on the wall. In another corner of the gallery, she has installed a black cube flush against one wall, but slightly apart from the other. It should feel heavy but it doesn't, perhaps because it casts a triangular shadow, with its tip touching where the two walls meet. It is as if this ice cream cone of a bisected triangle is supporting the black cube. This perceptual conundrum is just one of the many pleasures of York's work. The sheen of her graphite surfaces both reflect and absorb light. What might seem ponderous becomes a thing of quiet joy.

On the way out of the gallery, I noticed a black rectangle sticking out from where you might ordinarily expect to see an "Exit" sign instead of a piece of solid graphite. "Where is it that you are going?" it seems to ask. The unspoken question is humorous and wise and not as absurd as you might first think. In fact, it was only after I left the gallery that I realized I had never inquired about the titles of the works, and thought it best to leave it that way.

***Susan York: New and Recent Work* continues at Del Deo & Barzune (15 West 26th Street, Suite 2R, NoMad, Manhattan) through March 30.**

***Susan York: Foundation* continues at The Drawing Center (35 Wooster Street, Soho, Manhattan) through October 18, 2018.**