

“I like to think of playgrounds as a primer of shapes and functions; simple, mysterious, and evocative: thus educational. The child’s world would be a beginning world, fresh and clear.”

—Isamu Noguchi



Reservoir (detail)
mixed media, 22 x 22 x 45 in.
2019

Small, Medium, Large

Works by Daniele Frazier

July 30 - August 14

From sketch to tabletop model to work that dwarfs the artist, creating public art necessarily articulates stages in time: beginning, middle and end; conceived, constructed, created. The manifestation of large, durable work similarly spans artistic and technical approach: the artist must employ drafting, architectural model-making, physics, and engineering to achieve a “finished” project. The resulting mental gymnastics – the movement from “small” to “medium” to “large” – inform the title of this show.

Public artists like Christo and Noguchi have long questioned how the unique process of making public art requires the artist to move from a plan to a model to the “real thing.” Conventionally still produced at and as a preparatory stage, artists nevertheless frequently create models which are subsequently considered works of art in and of themselves. Still, the chronology public artists deploy has primarily remained linear: if the “model” can now be art, the “model” remains generally understood as “prior.” Alternatively, “models” are made as precise miniatures – objects sold as tokens or mementos. The intention of the maquette (miniature), however, remains tethered to the preparatory ideal: the aim with maquette is not necessarily to comment on the finished project anew – an independent act or artistic statement; instead, maquette exist to invoke recollection of the “original.”

If public artists already question which stage is “complete” by complicating the art/model relationship, while also leaving certain aspects of that chronology undisturbed, Daniele Frazier’s new show pushes such questions to their logical conclusion. Leaping into new dimensions beyond (and bringing public art with her), Frazier points out that finality itself is essentially uncertain: a matter of perspective, something that can coexist along multiple planes without incongruity at once. The result is new and also universal insight for us all:

Frazier created her first public work, a 20-foot tall minimal geometric construction out of wood and enamel derived from the argyle motif, at Socrates Sculpture Park in 2011. (*Argyle*, 2011). Now, in a show which ranges from posthumous models of additional large works Frazier has installed herself in Highland Park (that is, models made, counterintuitively, *after* the installation of the “main” public art project), to painted reinterpretations of existing park sculpture, to altogether new work, Frazier invites us to revisit our own assumptions about how we, too, make things – ideas, or material existence – real.

Frazier’s characteristically essential play on the relationship between scale, time, and, simultaneously, possibility and the suspension of disbelief, culminates here in her most recent work, *Reservoir*. *Reservoir* is an apotheosis: unifying and refracting the elements of public art into art, model, and vision at once, *Reservoir* ultimately collides model and installation as simultaneously one.

On the one hand, the piece is a proposal for what would be Frazier’s largest work yet: a monumental bronze bouquet of flowers coming out of the center of the Ridgewood Reservoir. In the model, the basin of water represents the body of water that is the reservoir. On the other hand, the work is public artwork as finished production: the model is also a functioning bird bath. Parallels and inversions, implicit and explicit alike, compose the entire construction: the flowers themselves are bronze and cast from a spring-time’s-worth of flowers that Frazier collected from the park and then systematically preserved in wax until the bouquet was complete. Therefore, the scale of the flowers in the “model” is 1:1; the temporality of the flowers is also “natural” – even if their suspended status now is not.

But 1:1 is neither ubiquitous nor requisite: the tiny swan positioned next to the flowers in the birdbath asks the viewer to see the flowers not as 1:1 but to believe them to be towering – many times the size of a swan. Because the model is a functioning birdbath, it plays with the viewer’s sense of scale a final time when an actual bird lands on it. In this moment, a live bird bathing itself in the “reservoir” around the bronze bouquet incidentally dwarfs the swan. Frazier plays Caterpillar to Lewis Carroll’s Alice, reminding us that “one side of the mushroom will make you bigger, and one will make you smaller” – except we are now offered three options: small, medium, large; miniature, actual, monumental.

Precise and novel, Frazier’s work in this show not only asks but also shows how to re-engage with questions on the order of the profound: whose scale do you trust? Is the bird a giant? Is the swan a miniature? Is this a lake or a birdbath?

The new scale and material in which such questions are composed make old questions seem new. Throughout, Frazier refracts and reorients the perspectives inherent to production of public art itself, asking us to interrogate when and why we understand projects, concepts, ideas, or material acts as “done.” As a result, we not only question our environment but our limits – which is to say, ourselves.

In “Small, Medium, Large,” in short, Frazier ultimately re-organizes the temporality and constraint of aspiration itself. Opening up new space, new chronology, and new relationships, Frazier gives her viewer the most tantalizing possibility there is: new answers to old questions, she seems to suggest, might neither be too impossible nor too far afield to find. Instead, resolution is present *in the present*: answers lie available, Frazier offers, within reach – in contemporary time.

–Caitlin Tully