

maggie madden whispers....

“How beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken”

The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams

With so much of contemporary art brash and branded it is a relief to come across an art that asks you to reach out. It requests, politely, one's attention. Maggie Madden's sculptures exist at the edge of perception; they could easily be missed in the clamber of a group exhibition. That is a rare enough quality these days, a modest proposal that suggests the primacy of the eye followed by a rigorous intellectual engagement. As Madeline Grynzstein says of Richard Tuttle's audience *he let's them trust in the visual durability of physically slight things.*¹

And indeed it is in the artistic strategies of the 1970s that one finds the antecedents for Madden's delicate constructions. At that time sculpture was wrestling away from form and volume to attempt to sculpt space itself. Eva Hesse experimented with materials, latex, cheesecloth, softer more malleable elements. Tuttle got even more casual introducing into the gallery space a quiet abjection. Fred Sandback opted for string to draw dimension into the air. And on the west coast, Bob Irwin and James Turrell worked with light itself to create illusionistic and optical spaces.

Aspects of this hard won license are still prevalent in three-dimensional work today but the subtlety and gentility of that earlier decade seems lost. Maggie Madden boldly takes on this mantle in her source of material and the delicacy of her interventions. Though typical of American minimalism at the time was its insistence on the inability of the object to carry meaning beyond its formal description, her post minimal works not only carry allusions but encourage them.

Upon encountering *Shelter*, 2014, one's initial response is that of protection, the work appearing vulnerable and delicate. And it is from this unusual custodial role that we depart into our engagement with the piece. *Shelter* is formed by two supports of slender willow rods protruding from the wall. Upon them is placed an open cube made by a light blue fine wire. The lines of the wooden rods, like the worked wire, are irregular, imprecise and organic. The wire is familiar, the fine grade we see in the multi-coloured world of telephonic cables. It is a basis of communication. The willow similarly resonates with its ability to conduct information albeit in the more ancient art of divining -each material capable of pulsing with an energy that transitions into meaning.

Madden likes to work with found materials - scouring the streets for the discarded or uncovering unseen potential in some ubiquitous item. Her discovery of discarded telephone cable and the palette of colours offered by its inner strands immediately proposed themselves as a way of creating coloured line in space. More recently she has utilized fibre-optic cable whose properties, equally as colourful, contain even more opportunity for imaginative associations. The colour casing of the cable protects a miniscule strand of silica glass through whose internal reflection information is transmitted at high speed. Unlike the malleable alloy of telephone cable fibre optic can be snapped, broken, its glass brittle. Yet we now depend on this vulnerable material for global digital communication .

In *The Weight of a Shadow*, 2016, a large open cube drawn in orange telephone wire sits on a cube of orange stained wood of equal portion. The definition of shadow seems to oscillate between them. The work flickers with associations between volume and line, history and information, patina and absence. Like a haiku, the seemingly contradictory image of line and solid unravels into a third possibility, full of potential.

In *Rolling Out (Kompong Khleang)*, 2013, again we are first struck by its rickety nature, an almost comic capability to collapse. The long slender willow rods support a complex open structure made from red and orange telephone wire. The jointing in these works is imperceptible achieved by the artist through using pinpoint of surgical glue. The *Kompong Khleang* of the title refers to the Cambodian village built on spindly stilts to cope with the seasonal high waters of the lake. If some of Madden's work is a reflection on our culture's dependency on electronic communication in these more elaborate pieces, also *High Rise (Tonlé Sap)*, 2013, she seems to be reflecting on notions of stability and adaptability. How indigenous architectures can eschew Western ideas of durability and create adaptable structures for their own environment.

This cultural commentary is emanating from objects that are almost self-effacing in the gallery space. Her recent installation *hardly audible*, 2016, utilises the banal plastic shopping bag as the core component. Collected over time and continents these indestructible containers are chosen for their translucent qualities. They are patchworked together using glue or parcel tape to create a

curtain wall and canopy to diffuse and tint light in a beautiful and seductive way. Emblematic, they can stand as allegories for our pollution of the environment- around us and above us. Flimsy yet durable they signify the very real threat that our consumerism is having on the planet.

So Maggie Madden's progeny are slight, delicate, formal and whispering and it is in this latter quality that they capture our attention and reverse their audibility to a scream of associations both poignant and relevant.

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1. Madeline Grynstejn, *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, SFMoMA,



High rise (Tonlé Sap); green and blue telephone wire, willow rods, glue, 2014