Ruba Katrib, Looking at People, 'Sam Anderson', *Mousse Publishing*, Milan, 2017

LOOKING AT PEOPLE
— RUBA KATRIB

A seated girl stares at you, eleven times. Lost in thought, the repeated figure in *E number 1–11*, 2017, seems to be unimpressed by anyone else's presence. Her replication in sculptures that are nearly identical but unique is unnerving. She gains intensity in her numbers, all facing the viewer, who is now placed in the position of performer. In *Kids*, 2017, a group of students in varying states of boredom slump in their chairs, some with arms crossed, all with empty stares. Coming upon them, the viewer has the sense of being accused of not being very amusing; the figures continue to wait for someone or something that will pique their interest.

These new sculptures, as well as several others in her exhibition at SculptureCenter, mark a nuanced shift in Sam Anderson's work. Many of her previous works are hinged on the connections between the objects that compose her tableaux, resolutely making the viewer an outsider. In these new works, turning toward the audience, the works address a presence outside themselves while also revealing that the exchange is entirely removed from their own subtle internal dynamics. The relationship between objects is key to Anderson's enterprise. The elements she uses, both found and made, exist in their own dimension while building narratives that engage external forces. *The Park* is comprised of moments that link to form complex relationships to one another as well as to the audience, who become acutely aware of their own role. The works exist within and outside this performative place, a sensation made stranger by its dislocated familiarity.

Some of Anderson's figurative sculptures, like *E number 1–11* and *Kids*, directly address the audience, though it may express only preoccupation or indifference. Others appear to ignore the viewer completely, creating voyeuristic opportunities for examination. Nearly consistent in scale, the figures shrink compared to their human counterparts, a disparity of size that colors the interaction: the confrontation of the sculptures, existing in a shared dimension of its own ordering, with the viewer's body, literally occupying the same space, is less one of mirroring than of distancing. The relationships between the objects within Sam Anderson's works are stressed over human identification with them.

The Park examines the architecture of a community, the figures playing parts within a structure that is only partially revealed. Disparate people, or character types, are gathered within a built environment that suggests a town center or city park.

This alternate architecture emerges within the spaces of SculptureCenter's existing building, whose arches and crannies appear to fit the objects rather than the reverse. Each figure or group of figures in the exhibition exists within a contained scene, yet these scenes are brought together and connected in a single space and moment. It is possible to encounter them from multiple perspectives, creating new associations between the figures, such as those represented in the sculptural triad of *Dad*, *Girl with Chips*, and *Teacher*, all 2017.

This body of work, made for the exhibition, explicitly references Robert Ashley's influential 1984 opera for television, *Perfect Lives*. A twisting narrative, the opera tells the story of various people, places, and events, including a convoluted bank robbery. Shifting between perspectives, the story weaves together the mundane and the exceptional. The first section of the opera is titled "The Park (Privacy Rules)," identifying a site that reappears throughout the work as a setting for the characters' interactions and personal moments. The following sections of the opera are named after other sites within the fictional town that become the backdrops for various activities, with characters coming into contact and then diverging to resume their own untold story lines. The structure of storytelling that Ashley engages is central to Anderson's interest in extras—the minor and often forgettable figures who support and move along the narrative of the main players. While Ashley's side characters slip onto the stage or the screen and then just as quickly disappear, Anderson's figures are like extras who finally take center stage.

Anderson's archetypes, such as the aforementioned *Dad* and *Teacher*, along with the *Designer, Historian*, and *Entertainer*, all 2017, ground the exhibition in a fragmented story in which characters with their own trajectories come together under the same roof. The figure of the *Entertainer* directly references Ashley's opera, a nod to the line in which he says "the sculptor has made the horse look stupid"—in reference to a horse statue in the center of the park. In Anderson's sculpture, the horse is adorned like a processional animal, making it part art object, part performer. This duality is literalized by its placement straddling two rooms within SculptureCenter's galleries, making it neither here nor there, its center occupying a place in between. Within the arched corridor of the building's lower level, another site-specific work, *Center*, 2017, is composed of a sequence of square glass sheets spanning joists that support arrangements of organic materials, including salt and pepper, orange peels, and feathers, and other found objects collected over a period of eight months. The sculpture becomes a meeting point within the exhibition, forming the heart of the community in an abstracted architectural image of the town square.

In *The Park*, the architecture points to the characters it houses. In a piece called *Architecture*, 2017, Anderson inserts a low white circular platform into one of the building's existing alcoves. Empty, the platform is lit with colored bulbs, an element that recurs throughout the exhibition. The featurelessness of the sculpture makes it into a stand-in for the larger frame of the building, animated and activated only when it is occupied. The strategy brings to mind Mike Kelley's discussion of Egyptian funerary sculptures in his 1993 essay "Playing with Dead Things," in which he notes that statues of servants were stationed in tombs to usher the deceased into the afterlife, a particular power endowed upon them (and other figurative objects) by their human makers.[1] In Anderson's exhibition, figurative sculptures are similarly brought to life. Not quite automatons, they are efficient vehicles for the representation of archetypes, a sort of shorthand, yet through their specificities—a girl holding a potato chip or a dad kneeling with a glove resting on his thigh—they are not generic characters but vessels for the audience's projections and desires. While they allow the viewer to hover over them, scrutinizing their features, they remain open to interpretation.

The internal relationships formed by Anderson's sculptures are housed by the architecture of the exhibition space, which grows and forms around them. This is underscored by her work *Day Shift*, 2017. Here a translucent sculpture of an aproned waitress stands on a ledge that directly faces a projection screen, offering her outstretched arms as if carrying an invisible tray to the series of birds depicted in the film. The video creates a portal for the figure, and for us, to witness the intimate drama of another relationship dynamic: accompanied by piano music, storks and hawks eat, play, mate, fight, and tend to their young. A purportedly less mediated outer world is piped into the galleries via the sculpture *TV*, 2017, a weathervane installed above the exhibition in SculptureCenter's outdoor courtyard. Changes in the direction of the vane trigger an eight-channel audio piece that switches between originally composed piano music and ambient sound. Related to Ashley's opera for broadcast television, Anderson's sculpture moves between

different channels to further the notion that the story changes, as do the lives and scenes of its characters. The audio fills the lower level gallery, reflecting the movements of the vane as it responds to the wind as well as to the intervention of visitors, who can redirect it using pool cues that form part of the sculpture. In this instance of interactivity, the tone and mood of the exhibition shift depending on external forces, whether the actions of people or of nature, with the changing sound inspiring different narratives. Although viewers are given a degree of control over their own participation, they are denied perception of it: if they are outside, they do not hear the resultant audio effect they produce inside the exhibition, and if they are inside, the changing audio channel makes them aware of an external influence, whether the whim of the weather or another visitor, that remains outside and out of view.

Anderson fixates on the tropes of storytelling, digging into them to the point of abstraction. In the various relationships sketched, the central characters and actions are absent, replaced by more specific fragments and cues. Like a fading memory, only certain figures and details remain. The "park" becomes an arena for the figures within its perimeter. Implicitly inviting visitors to enter this site, the sculptures momentarily join them; as motionless objects, they remain after the visitors leave, perpetually prepared to receive others. This strategy is amplified by Anderson's most recent works, which emphasize the viewer's role as actor within the mise-en-scène of the exhibition. On this stage, familiarity is tied to estrangement. Recognition is paired with disregard. *The Park* is a place that we know, but can never fully access.

1. Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny," in *Foul Perfection Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 75-76.