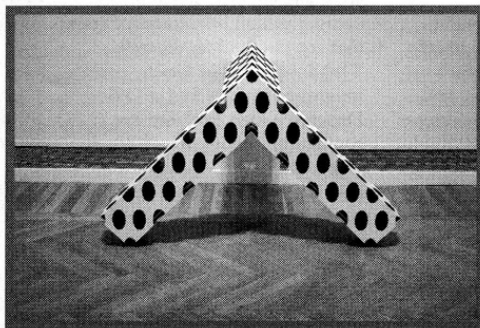


Gay Outlaw at Mills College Art Museum

If imitation is, as we've been told, the highest form of flattery, parody, its ironic cousin, may often serve as tribute as well. Fine artists who adopt the look or style of an artist or movement may actively seek to affiliate themselves with the well-established work. At other times, artists appropriate to make a conceptual statement. Sometimes, images are subverted with the clear intention of a put-down: Think Jos Sances's biting takes on Thomas Kinkadee, or Jeff Koons's acid redux of Art Roger's puppies. Often the questions of authorship and intention—whether the form or the idea is at the heart of a work—become issues of heated debate. Sometimes, the artist is just trying on the style, like a new set of clothes, to see if it's a good fit. As the work evolves, intention clarifies and a stance in relation to the earlier work emerges.

Minimalism, always an easy target for the cheap shot ("You call that art?"), elicits response ranging from blind devotion, among a select few, to that of the public at large, whom often react with vitriolic hatred or blank incomprehension. Curiously, as the aesthetic has evolved into a design style, co-opted by trendy interior and graphic designers, a broader acceptance has emerged. Still, minimalist-influenced art often remains perilously hermetic. Where minimalism often gains interest, engaging us intellectually or emotionally, is at the point where the physical object intersects with the artist's perception of its meaning—frequently, the aim is to elevate its formal properties to the status of the sublime. Just as often, minimalist artists may ascribe to the "what you see is what you get" school,

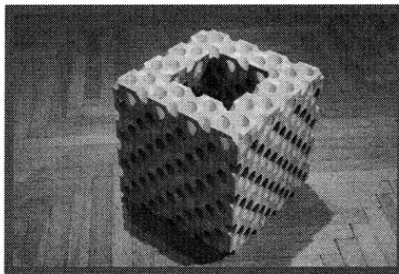


Gay Outlaw, (above) *Three-legged Inversion (version three)*, 2005, cardboard, paper, glue, 34" x 57" x 40"; (below) *Camo Cube Negative*, 2005, coroplast, paper, glue, 16" x 16" x 16", at Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.

with implications about meaning, content, and context which seem, perhaps, in the contemporary fabric of art, to be growing increasingly frayed with age.

San Francisco-based artist Gay Outlaw's installation of sculptural objects and photographs at Mills College Art Museum combined a minimalist aesthetic with a more playful, ironic slant. Her blocky objects might recall cartoon interpretations of Swiss cheese; she has designed geometric forms from corrugated cardboard, riddled with a dense network of oval cavities. The hand-carved oval incisions, roughly the size of a small bird's egg, create a lively pattern on the surface of the work, as well as enlivening the interior spaces.

The sculptures fall into two categories: the "inversions," three-legged structures which are more-or-less wall-mounted, and a pair of hollowed-out cubes which rest on the floor. The scale of the works fairly intimate along with the humble material, cardboard, gives the work an aura of humanity and approachability, while its strong formal properties remain somewhat austere. Two of the works are smooth and white on the exterior, paired by their inverse that flips the rougher, brown surface to the exterior, the finished white to the inside



Mills College Art Museum Director Stephen Jost cites Outlaw's passion for the work of artist Tony Smith, as well as her fascination with systems—her process of working within the confines of a narrowly defined territory in which she manipulates subtle variables—as motivating factors in the work. A rather labor-intensive process engages the artist in patiently cutting the multitude of oval shapes through the dense layers of paper; her clear love of form, process and a commitment to these subtle investiga-

tions give the work a solidity and reflective feeling

The play of light and shadow draw attention to the space around and through the tripod forms. The simple Y-form has become dramatically complicated: Incisions create a multilayered world of straight and curved forms, presence and absence, and overlapping, notched shadows. While these constructions are about emptiness and space, as defined by the quirky forms, the cubes seem more solid, focused; their holes appear, from many angles, plugged

by the carefully chiseled, egg-like slices of tube. They call Eva Hesse to mind, particularly her *Accession I*, likewise a hollowed-out cube, lined with a dense network of lengths of hairlike rubber hose. Outlaw's cubes have the feeling of vessels, inviting us to come inside, if not physically, at least psychologically, finding refuge in their comforting, sturdy familiarity.

Color, a faint, flickering presence in the suite of photographs that accompanies them. We have all, no doubt, had the maddening experience of picking up photos where some have been incorrectly printed so that half of one image appears in the frame, with half of the next image alongside it. Outlaw adopts this photo lab tech's mistake as a deliberate and slyly humorous device. We see sidewalks, buildings, cracks and a triangle formed by a bent cardboard tube—matched by

spherical bushes flanking a dusky pink house. A window with a periwinkle blue frame contains an improbable egg-yolk colored pane. We see the objects not so much as themselves, but as the hues and forms they present in these very sculptural photos.

The offhand, disposable nature of cardboard clearly positions Outlaw's work in opposition to the long tradition of art-making that emphasizes archival qualities and precious, solid materials: oil painting, carved marble, cast metal. Outlaw, who took her undergraduate language degree to France where she studied at the La Varenne cooking school, has investigated minimalism by way of large-scale formal installations constructed from puff pastry and caramel, which might ooze onto the gallery floor during the run of the exhibition. This recent body of work, with all it has going for it, seems in comparison a bit dry—as if Outlaw wants to have her "cake," a quirky take on minimalism, and eat it, embrace its cool, detached frame of reference, too. Still, her novel approach to materials keeps us engaged in this well-crafted and intelligent work, and curious as to what materials and forms she might adopt next.

—Barbara Morris

Gay Outlaw: Three-legged Inversions closed October 9 at Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.

Barbara Morris is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.