

NUREMBERG, GERMANY

Phyllida Barlow

KUNSTVEREIN NÜRNBERG

Her former students Tacita Dean, Douglas Gordon, and Rachel Whiteread are internationally famous. But Phyllida Barlow herself? She earned her bread not as an artist but as a teacher at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, though she never stopped constructing her gigantic objects, wobbily propped up on wooden stilts, made of old carpets, used wooden battens, and scraps of cloth, all lashed together and caked with cement, plaster, and paint. Her focus, in these huge, precarious, unfinished-looking sculptures made of shabby materials, was anti-form and anti-architecture—soft shapes, decay, the experimental, and the incomplete. For a long time the work seemed marginal to art-world trends.

Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: structure*, 2011, wood, paint, plaster, and screws, approx. 33' x 56' x 25' 6". Installation view.



A year ago Barlow was still all but unknown outside Britain; she is now suddenly, at the age of 67, in high demand among exhibition venues in Europe. After showing work last year at Vienna's BAWAG Foundation and the Migros Museum in Zurich, she created new installations for her recent show at the Kunstverein Nürnberg.

Factoring in the architecture of this administrative building, built in 1931 by Otto Ernst Schweizer, she used slatted frames held together with plaster bandages to construct a gigantic, more than thirty-foot-high latticework sculpture that made the entire space of the building's entryway seem to vibrate. This sculpture, *untitled: structure* (all works 2011), extended the building's austere geometries while also, thanks to the bandages, departing from its formal coldness and severity.

Barlow's installations are sculptural constructions, but there's also something painterly about them. The gigantic piece in the entry hall could also be understood as an abstract picture extending into three dimensions. The eighty rolls of jute in *untitled: containers*, expressively "painted," not only with paint but also plaster and cement, and arranged to form an imposing group, address the theme of the mark or blemish. At once sculptures and paintings, neither static nor truly in motion, using forms that cannot be positively

assigned to the realm of the aesthetic, Barlow's constructions are characterized by their hybridity, a state of rupture that we are only now learning to value. Perhaps that explains her late-arriving success.

But the impression of a rupture isn't produced exclusively by the oppositions of painting/sculpture, mobile/immobile, form/anti-form. Barlow intentionally leaves traces of the process of a work's making in its installation. Nothing is to be hidden, everything is transparent. This gives the work a sense of being unfinished, provisional, subject to change at any moment. Her use of transparency could best be seen in *untitled: staircase*. Blocking off the exhibition space, a flight of stairs rose up, made of wooden planks held together with screws and then plastered and painted. Staircase, sculpture, model, scaffolding, even a remnant left behind after a building was torn down? Barlow called the show "Cast." The word evokes light and shadow (light casts shadows), but more broadly denotes throwing (a cast of the die) and shaping (as in a mold). It can refer to the appearance or expression of a thing and, of course, to the actors in a play. Generally, the word has to do with the manifestation of things. What Barlow shows us with her work is ultimately the changes—including decay—in the things that surround us.

—Noemi Smolik

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.