

Essay by Faye Hirsch
for the catalog:
BARBARA GALLUCCI
SCULPTURE: 1990-1995

REFURBISHING MODERNISM

Douglas is a dirt poor company border town in southern Arizona. Once it boomed, when copper mining was still a lucrative enterprise. The legacy is a streaked and gutted landscape and a grand hotel called the Gadson, whose Tiffany skylights alone might well buy more than the whole town. At the Gadson, a huge staircase spills like a wedding gown into a spacious lobby with golden piers. But mostly its gone to seed. Some time in the '70s, during a spark of economic hope, all the rooms and hallways at the Gadson were refurbished in the unmistakably chintzy taste of that era: carpets and wallpapers in the palette of '60s hallucinogenia, coopted by the regulating patterns of the burnt out '70s aesthetics. At the Gadson, built by a golden age, the redecoration is jarring: there is no attempt to restore anything historically, with the result that the new decor, manufactured to disappear into institutional anonymity, is very noticeable. Every hallway is there to remind the guest that Douglas lives in the present. Alas for the Gadson, that present is now 20 years past. The '70s refurbishment has ironically frozen a moment of optimism as a monument to inexorable decline.

Barbara Gallucci loves hotel and other institutional carpet, she seeks it out in remainder stores, purchasing it in quantity to build her recent sculpture. It performs in the manner that materials in sculpture have tended to ever since, in the late '60s, Hesse, Morris and Serra defied minimalism: it folds and flattens itself according to the laws of gravity. But what looked rebelliously messy in the '60s; poured lead, rubber, and various amorphous plastics, looks positively high art in contrast to Gallucci's found materials, which constitute a particular kind of Pop. It's generational: Gallucci's is a ubiquitous decor from the 70's a suburban milieu of Formica and wall-to-wall carpet that over determines some '90s artists' abstract leanings. Call it pre-fab dystopic.

A recent group of work, however, underscores Gallucci's formal preoccupations. Despite a content of collapse and diminishment, these sculptures convey confidence in the potential of form to evolve renewed expressiveness and ways of seeing. Gallucci used to tack her carpet to unitary wooden shapes with no give; the fabric had only limited possibilities for folding. Lately, she has begun to hinge the wooden forms, conceived in two parts so they can bend with the tacked-on carpet, allowing for more flexibility and therefore greater visual interest in the folds of the carpet. Moreover, the hinging of the Formica-laminated wood shapes; yellow triangle, blue oval, yellow clover, etc. makes these shapes more eccentric recalling the geometrics of Ellsworth Kelly, who is ever vigilant to the vagaries of even the most apparently reliable forms. It is as though the visual contradictions that send purity flying in Kelly's work have been embodied in the push and pull of Gallucci's materials; the tacky yellow, blue and white patterned carpet,

(Refurbishing Modernism cont.)

with which the tasteful yellow, blue or white laminated shapes "go" very nicely, both aesthetically, in a decorator's sense, and kinetically, in a sculptor's.

Not all of Gallucci's sculptures are floor pieces. A harbinger of the recent motility of her freestanding works is to be found in her earlier wall reliefs, where she tacked up a swath of wallpaper and allowed the rest to fall away, sometimes crumbling it for added effect. Or she suspended a lengthy stretch of wallpaper or carpet from the ceiling, weighting it so it didn't swing about. In her installation "You're The One For Me", Gallucci folds huge rectangles of pink carpet along the floor and one wall of a narrow corridor, creating a series of linked conical funnels along the wall that are coextensive with the viewer's pathway. Always considerate of multiple viewpoints, Gallucci constructs her freestanding works with an eye to an in-motion experience; even the small pieces are quite variable depending on point of view. But in her larger installations Gallucci is granted more leeway with the kinetic factors of viewing, as spectators are forced to maneuver through works of awkward presence and clumsy dimension. Portions of her sculptures may be sleek, but their gawky development in space or their ungraceful denunciations render them anything but slick.

However mundane the materials, Gallucci pays it the respect of something quite deserving: her works are manifestly "crafted" with the expertly-installed hinges and neatly-spaced carpet tacks. She likes it when the gallery vacuums her runners, tidying up viewers' footprints. Her rather old-fashioned respect for craft and a modernist's instinct for form keep her work from falling prey to the nostalgic fascination with "low" that absorbs the current art scene. Where another might appreciate the degeneration of these carpets to an abject state, Gallucci keeps them neat, like a homeowner determined to keep the place as good as new. What another tidy sculptor, Andrea Zittel, similarly concerned with life indoors, does with representation, Gallucci does with abstraction. Zittel's self-contained dwellings seem ominously futuristic, Gallucci's furnishings are curiously nestled in the recent past.

Gallucci's materials perform a double function. First, they intervene as a trace of the real work where ideated form is of prevailing concern. No matter how pristine her carpets, they always seem a little dirty, evoking their function despite the fact that they have been granted a reprieve from the gritty world. But they also convey a peculiar nostalgia, even when they are of fairly recent manufacture. For they are the detritus of a civilization of expansion, where massive enterprises, from tract housing to corporate headquarters to the travel industry, have demanded ready-made decor. Gallucci's extractions from the decor create a delicate memoir of affluence. She formulates her materials as an impure geometry, infiltrated by the content of their allusions, but still striking the pose of a discrete morphology, the legacy of modernism in sculpture.

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