



ARTnews April 1994

Studio Gravity and Light

HEATHER HUTCHISON

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Heather Hutchison, who makes conditions on the rectangle both form and function, says she wants her work "to emanate openness and invite people to come in."

Every day it's the same pattern—going over the bridge or on the FDR or on the water. It's reassuring," says Heather Hutchison as she looks out from her sixth floor studio in an abandoned factory building in Brooklyn at the traffic passing over the Manhattan Bridge. Turning from the window, she surveys her own work—variations on the rectangle built from wood, Plexiglas, and beeswax.

On one wall three slender boxes are arranged horizontally and placed at even intervals. It's a work in progress, Hutchison explains. She is still making subtle adjustments—the thickness of the wax, the shade of pigment, the dimensions of the constructions and the spaces between them. Neatly, a long, narrow row of deep warm orange is flanked by rectangles of cool gray. The work is called Ribbons of Euphoria. "It seems to emanate openness and invite peo-

ple to come in," the artist says in a throaty voice. "I want it to completely take you in, instead of your consciously having to get to everything else I don't think anybody gives art the time or the energy."

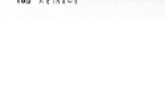
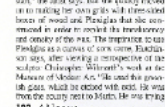
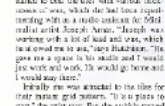
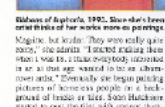
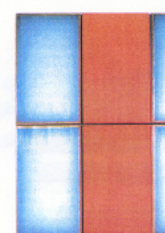
For her delicacy, Hutchison exhibits a certain hardness. Regal in stature, with refined features and shoulder-length dark blond hair, she somehow looks natural handling the drills, sanders, and jigsaws that are carefully arranged in her studio's entranceway when she's not working with them.

Hutchison renders heavy, sharp-edged geometry in wood, Plexiglas, and beeswax. Her work is called Ribbons of Euphoria. Photo: Bruce M. Wilson

When she got to New York in 1986, Hutchison continued her exploration of materials, though at first she made surrealist paintings that were "like Magritte, but louder. They were really quite cute," she admits. "I started making them when I was 18, I think everybody interested in art at that age wanted to be an album-cover artist."

Eventually she began painting pictures of homeless people on a background of bricks or tiles. Soon Hutchison started to coat the tiles with various thicknesses of wax, which she had been experimenting with as a studio assistant for Minimalist artist Joseph Amar. "Joseph was working with a lot of lead and wax, which he allowed me to use," says Hutchison. "He gave me a space in his studio and I would just work and work. He would go home and I would stay there."

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to expose the light, the key," she explains. "I wanted to get the kind of feeling."

Like what? Hutchison explains that feeling is by peeking at the interior of the box's wood frame. Protruding several inches from the wall, the box, like other boxes, has a base of white felt. From the edge of the wax coating, Hutchison renders the heavy, sharp-edged geometry of the work.

"I'm using all these tricks to get a certain," she says. "The effect, the feeling, was something I had been searching for for a long time. It's like the sky, or the fire water. Something that's very subtle, something that's more of the mind."

New York dealer Steve Cutler, who represented Hutchison for many years, recalls that he was struck by Hutchison's manipulation of light and wax. "I was really into it," he says. "I had been experimenting and had just started to come to something, and people were suggesting things like, why don't you try the repetition of light bulbs behind them. I was thinking in a sort of geometry, a lot of things I wasn't sure of."

To ground herself, in her next body of work Hutchison retreated to very simple, very formal compositions that contrast layers of diaphanous beeswax with solid-looking facades of concrete or Masonite. She showed them at New York's Jamison Thomas Gallery in 1990, two years before the gallery moved to Portland, Oregon.

After a half-dozen renditions (one of which was donated by a collector to the Brooklyn Museum), the artist abandoned the concept, finding the oppositions—the cement of the city and the transience of nature, flatness and depth, opacity and translucence—too obvious. "I had done it and there was nothing else there."

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Initially she was attracted to the tiles for their instant grid pattern. "It's a place to start," the artist says. But she quickly moved on to making her own grids with three-sided boxes of wood and Plexiglas that she constructed in order to exploit the translucency and density of the wax. The inspiration to use Plexiglas as a canvas of sorts came, Hutchison says, after viewing a retrospective of the sculptor Christopher Wilmarth's work at the Museum of Modern Art. "He used this greenish glass, which he etched with acid. He was from the county next to Marin. He was trying to capture that light, that fog," she explains. "I wanted to get that kind of feeling."

The way Hutchison achieves that feeling is by painting the interior of the box's wood frame. Protruding several inches from the wall, the box fills with light, and a haze of color diffuses from the edges of the wax-coated Plexiglas sheet. As Rothko did with paint, Hutchison renders the heavy, sharp-edged rectangle ethereal. "I'm using all these tricks to get at emotion," she says. "The effect, the feeling, was something I had been searching for for a long time. It's like the sky, or like the water. Something that's very reliable. Something that's there all the time."

New York dealer Bess Cutler, who represented Amar and made regular visits to his studio, became intrigued by Hutchison's manipulation of light and matter and offered to display one of the artist's pieces in her gallery. Response to the work was immediate and strong and a few months later, in October 1989, Hutchison had her first show with Cutler. "It was really hard to keep my focus," she recalls, "I had been experimenting and I had just started to come to something and people were suggesting things like, why don't you put photographs or light bulbs behind them. I was throwing in a lot of geometry, a lot of things I wasn't sure of."

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Lately she has been consumed with subtleties of composition, often scraping down the boxes, repainting them to get just the right density and shade of avocado green or cadmium yellow, for example, and rearranging the spaces between them. "Since I've been using color, I've been thinking of my work more as paintings," she says. "They are on the wall, they're paintings, yet they are very sculptural. They are defined by how the light hits them."

Last month Hutchison had a show with dealer Nohra Haime, who had bought one of her first works. Among the new pieces, which range in price from \$5,000 to \$15,000, was *Benediction for Bernice*—two columns of three rectangles hung side by side—which, the artist says, is her ode to her grandmother, who recently died. Interrupting the smooth wax surfaces across the top of the lower four quadrants is a strip of purple, leaning toward burgundy. It was her grandmother's favorite color and one that carries overtones of Hutchison's Catholic upbringing. The crosses formed by the perpendicular spaces between the boxes, accentuated by the colored bar, adds to the religious symbolism.

Though Hutchison's artistic vocabulary is pared down, it is heavy with such associations. "It's like Charlie Chaplin," she explains. "His technique was to get people open and laughing, and then he would hit them with something serious and sad. I think if it's open and peaceful, then a simple line like this really means something."

—Deidre Stein