

ARTFORUM

Review: Nicole Wermers

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Nicole Wermers, *Moodboard #6*, 2017, cast terrazzo in baby-changing unit, 21 x 34 x 21". From the series "Mood Boards," 2016-17

The playfulness of Nicole Wermers's exhibition "Grundstück" belied a more serious project, one that engages the phenomenological implications of familiar forms. The German-born, UK-based artist highlights the peculiar coldness of modernism's retail legacy by hijacking consumer objects and ludically subverting their intended uses. Here, Wermers presented three new bodies of work, each of which contrasts high and low and pits strict geometry against tendencies toward disorder.

The artist's humorous approach was easily glimpsed in the five "Mood Boards," 2016-17, hung along the gallery's east wall. These feature commercial baby-changing stations, the kind usually found in public restrooms. Wermers underscores the bland neutral tones and faux-stone textures of the molded plastic forms by filling the recesses of their flip-down shelves with bespoke pieces of terrazzo. The material has its own pretensions to high value, being traditionally made of marble and natural stone scraps that are aggregated in beds of concrete, disguising their humble origins. Each of Wermers's terrazzo pieces seemed to have been selected with an eye to color harmonies and formal balance, and, if we are to believe the titles, to the artist's mood. The uniquely cast slabs function like little abstract paintings, mockingly bringing the specter of "expression" and the hackneyed language of interior-design porn to bear on the insipid, hideaway surface of public-toilet convenience.

Personal experience and dispassionate industrial objects collided again in an installation of twenty photocollages on the opposite wall, each work a numbered version from the 2016 series "Croissants &

Architecture.” The collages are diptychs, each opposing a photograph of a croissant on a café table with a mostly monochromatic rectangle. The pastries were purchased by the artist in her travels around Europe and operate as a record of her daily rituals. The tedious ubiquity of the breakfast item across many cultures is nevertheless challenged by the varying shapes, sizes, and means of presentation that give each croissant a distinctive “personality.” The monochromes (another modernist reference) on closer inspection turned out to be pieces of sandpaper of varying brands and grits. Some collages displayed a sheet’s textured side; others showed its verso, featuring printed logos and technical information. Here, where the flaneur meets the carpenter, there is another hint of the artist’s ironic sensibility: Not only are the stereotypically male roles assumed by a woman, but the sandpaper (designed to remove material strata) is archly positioned opposite the many-layered pastries. However humorous, the pairings also struck a surprisingly abject chord. The familiar appeal of the breakfast classic was countered by its nearness to the gritty sheets, provoking an involuntary gut reaction. An artist’s book produced contemporaneously to the show further amplifies this latent Surrealist aspect of Wermers’s project: It features the photographs and pieces of sandpaper interleaved in such a way that the images may eventually be rubbed away by the textured pages. Neither the book’s formal order nor the regularity of the collages’ installation matrix could contain this uncanny clash of everyday objects.

Finally, two larger grids visually dominated the space of the gallery: A pair of fire-engine red powder-coated steel bookcases, variations on the iconic shelving designed by Shiro Kuramata in 1970, offered a lesson in deductive structure and a wry critique of a late modernist fetishization of order. The bookshelves feature rectangular apertures that become incrementally larger from left to right and from top to bottom, with the result that the openings running from the top-left to bottom-right corners are square, with each opening similarly increasing in area. Wermers filled each shallow aperture with kinetic sand that clumped into piles, effectively infusing the cool logic of Kuramata’s grid with a sense of play and disorder. If we additionally considered each sandbox to be a separate little plot of land, or *grundstück*, the bookshelf served as a sort of three-dimensional urban-planning document, with each parcel a measurable piece of the surface of the earth. The soft lumps of silicone-infused sand, which retained traces of human touch, reminded viewers that the desire to force rectilinear order on nature is always everywhere undercut by entropy.

Indeed, taken together the works in “Grundstück” recalled key aspects of the famous essay Robert Smithson published in these pages in December 1967. In “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” Smithson employs text and image to pinpoint the constructedness of the concept of landscape and to point out the naïveté of any notion of a return to its original, or natural, state. Like Smithson, with his evocative description of the “jejune” experiment of black and white sand irreversibly mixing in a sandbox, Wermers, too, seemed here to be dedicated to disrupting our nostalgia for modernism’s orderly visual field with entreaties in favor of the multisensory, the personal, and the impure.