

HYPERALLERGIC

From the Pictorial to the Abstract: The Recent Sculpture of Martha Friedman

Written by John Yau

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Installation view, Martha Friedman at Wallspace, 2012 (all images courtesy Wallspace)

Martha Friedman's recent work marks a significant shift away from the sculptures that first gained her attention. Working within a territory that includes Rene Magritte, Claes Oldenburg and Vija Celmins, Friedman became known for casting enlarged versions of commonplace items; nails, cantaloupes, waffles, yucca plants, blue eggs, olives, rubber bands and cow tongues. Until this exhibition, her sculptures tended to be pictorial and irreverent, their wit something we associate with Pop art and the domesticated Surrealism of Roy Lichtenstein.

Did it occur to Friedman – who is in her mid-thirties – that if she continued going down the same track, her work could end up becoming purely theatrical and a tad superficial, as in “Ladies Room” (2010), where two large cast rubber tongues form an arch, with an olive held between them? Did she realize that her oddball humor threatened to overshadow the visceral, its suggestion of vulnerability and transformation?



Martha Friedman, "Mechanical Disadvantage I" (detail) (2012), steel, concrete, silicone rubber, pigment, 118.5 x 60 x 60 inches

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That Friedman has moved into new territory is all the more interesting because her adherence to the technique of casting shows no sign of becoming a constraint. In the front room of WallSpace, she showed four sculptures, three of which were made of carefully stacked, oversized cast-concrete wedges, like the kind used to pry open a mold or a can of paint. On a larger scale, the tapered wedges protrude, like a row of fangs, from both ends of the stack. Sandwiched in the gray concrete stack was a wedge-like shape cast out of red rubber, droopy and ineffective – an abstract version of Charlie Chaplin draped over a huge gear wheel in his film masterpiece, *Modern Times* (1936)

Each concrete stack felt like it might topple over if another wedge was piled onto it. Friedman further underscored the stack's precarious, seemingly temporary nature by inserting smaller concrete shims in various seams, suggesting that sculpture is a balancing act doomed at some point to fail. She also emphasized their sense of threat and danger by the arranging them at different angles to each other, suggesting the beginnings of a maze.

Even as wedges rose into the air, one could not help feeling crushed. Friedman's repeated cast concrete units do not overcome materiality, as they do in Brancusi's *Endless Column* or Donald Judd's shiny, lacquered stacks. For in all three of her stacks, the concrete wedges also

compressed the red rubber form. This interruption – at once visual and physical– introduced a note of vulnerability into the pile. The rubber form was a caught and helpless thing.

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Martha Friedman, "Hairball" (2012), synthetic hair, wood, plaster, paint, 63 x 34 x 34 inches

In contrast to her earlier work, in which visual jokes were made by shifts in scale, Friedman has moved into a more complex domain, manifest with feelings of danger and entrapment. By moving beyond a realm of experience, where "what you see is what you see" (as the old adage goes), Friedman has deepened the emotional tenor of her work in ways that cannot be reduced to the anecdotal.

At the same time, her stacks comment on Brancusi's *The Endless Column* (1938), that paean to transcendence and spiritual yearning. Brancusi's modular units rise straight up, as if unimpeded by gravity. Friedman's wedges are horizontal; they lie on top of each other, like planks or corpses. The cast shims and the red rubber form underscore the inescapability of gravity.

Friedman's interest in stacking and columns places her in proximity to other sculptors interested in dislodging certain forms from their modernist context (I am thinking of Pam Lins and Isa Genzken, for example). This seems to me one of the interesting areas of exploration going on in contemporary sculpture's expanded field.

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The other sculpture in the front room was a large sphere – made of brown wig hair – resting on a bright, glossy pink, box-like base. I was reminded of monuments to the Civil War in which a

cannonball is mounted on a base. The hairy sphere also reminded me of a coconut, but its placement on a pink base sent it into a weirder zone.



Installation view, Martha Friedman at WallSpace, 2012

It seems to me that Friedman is still learning how to trust herself. In the back room, on the back wall, she mounted a row of what appeared to be historical black-and-white photographs of shims being used in the supporting columns in mineshafts, all contained in pink frames. As documentary examples of the unavoidable danger of being a miner working in unsafe conditions, the photographs felt as if they were a key to the stacked wedges. Friedman doesn't need to connect the dots. This is small beer compared to the work in the front room, where the informing temperament is quirky, disquieting, and, most of all, original.

[Martha Friedman](#) continues at WallSpace (619 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 20.