

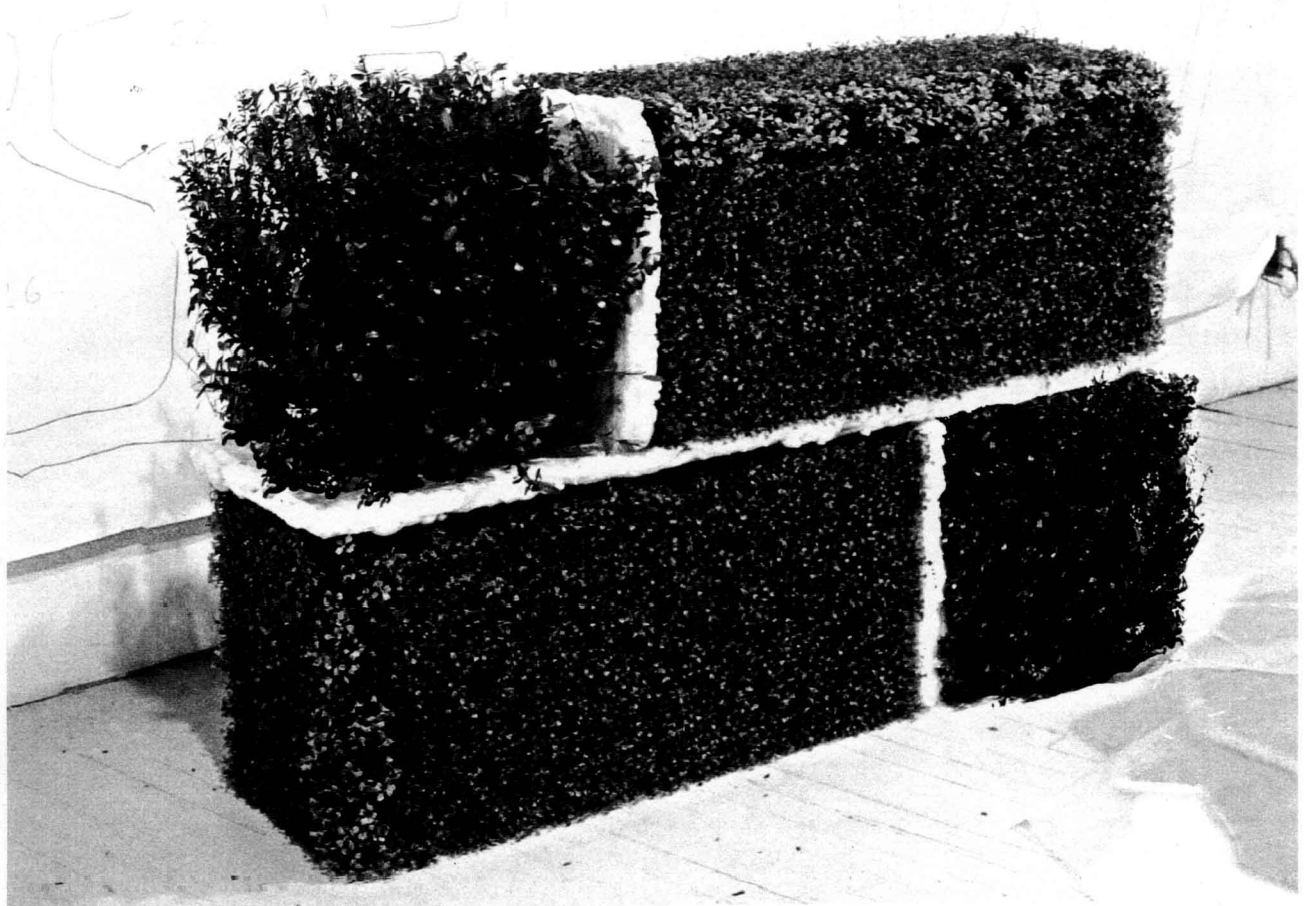
"Oh. So she's a sculptor who wants to be an architect." This was my first thought when looking at artist Oona Stern's work – according to her, a common reaction. After all, her materials are those of the built environment, sheet rock, carpet, vinyl siding, and her pieces play themselves out on the same scale as doors – patios – windows in other words, on the scale of architecture.

At the Carriage House at the Islip Art Museum, where Stern wheat-pasted large drawings that look like rows of shingles over the rough surface of the house's real shingles, covering a window too, "shingling" it over,

then finishing by pasting only an image of a window on the shingles nearby (*Resurfacing, window, 2002*). She has carved long wavy lines into the smooth, uniform floor surface of the Nathan Cummings Foundation in New York, perfectly evoking the wood grain of floorboards that actually aren't there [*untitled (wood grain floor), 2000*]. She has made a whole series of garden paths and patios for her most recent show at Galerie Reinhard Hauff in Stuttgart, verdant grass growing up between the expanses of paving stones. These then reveal themselves to be bands of bright green commercial carpet snaking around between soft

ovoids of white carpet, the paving stones.

As I looked more, however, I became less sure that architecture was the central concern of Stern's work. Stern's sculptural interventions never challenge the whole wall or structure. The paste-on shingles, for instance, stay in from the edges of the wall, and are therefore clearly subordinate. Her patios in Germany similarly acknowledge the space's boundaries and the fake floorboards generally note the outline of the room. In fact, her pieces aren't ever



STERN'S SCULPTURES EVOKE THE ARRESTING BEAUTY OF SEEING COMMON BUILDING MATERIALS FOR THEIR ABSTRACT VISUAL QUALITIES

about the shaping or physical use of inhabited space, the core of architecture.

Instead, Stern's use of common building materials and elements of architecture began to seem a pretext for another goal entirely. Her sculptures are actually small, precise tests of the viewer's ability to see clearly. The clarity tested is of both an ocular and an ethical vision.

To see clearly is difficult. Each of Stern's sculptures is built around a confusion of looking. In her work I think I see paving stones. I think I see shingles on a house. I see things that aren't there because my vision is a function of both my sight and my expectations and Stern confuses, or tests, both. For example, her patios present me with grass-green bands that wander under my feet in just the way the grass between paving stones in a lush garden would. I am hard-pressed not to, for a moment, see grass. Furthermore the objects Stern evokes, windows, shingles, paving stones, are the objects seen in everyday built environments. I am, therefore, brought to consider how and why I might see things that aren't actually there in my everyday built environment, in other words, in my daily life.

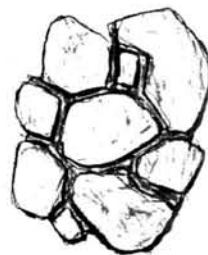
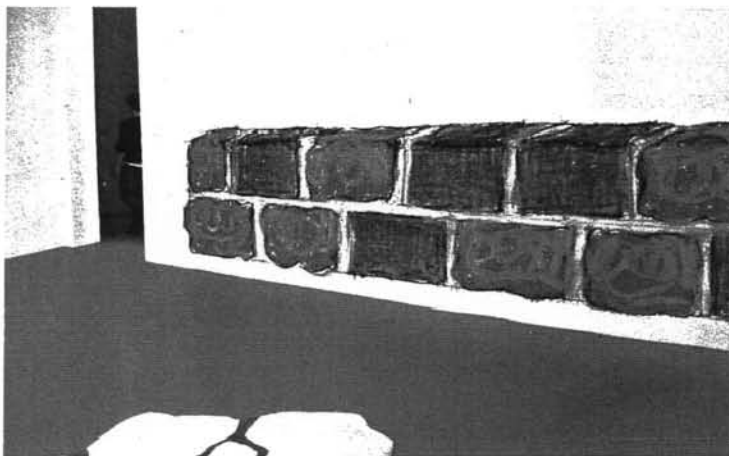
My daily life is a big confused jumble of seeing and thinking, half in my head, half looking around, hardly thinking about what I'm seeing and yet thinking constantly as I see things. Both activities end up being fractured and partial, with thoughts cut off halfway through and objects seen only quickly. I walk down the street worrying about my bank account, for a second I see through a doorway, a pattern of red and gold across the top of a room, large white ellipses across the floor. I try to get back to thinking about my bank account.

Out of this jumble, by necessity, I must always be assembling a cohesive idea of what I have seen and thought. I am, every day, all the time, remaking my experience as whole. Because my information was partial, fractured to begin with, this reassembling is filled with choices. In other words I don't have all the information to judge what it was I thought I saw. I therefore make assumptions and fill in the gaps myself. To go back to my example, what was gold and red? What white ellipses? Ah! Probably those hanging gold and red Chinese chandeliers, probably the ellipses were the white of tablecloths over large circular tables.

This process of experiencing a confusing jumble and then filling in the gaps ourselves is the central focus of Stern's work. She focuses on it with good reason. It is a process in which societal values are reestablished through the simple act of figuring out what we think we saw. I, for instance, came to the conclusion that I had passed a Chinese restaurant simply from the partial fact of the abstract experience of red, gold, and white combined with my preconceptions about Chinese restaurants.

The beginning of this process, the confused jumble, is a state of openness. The terms of the reassembling are yet to be decided. Much of the effort that goes into the design of the daily built environment around us is focused on influencing what these terms will be. There are things we want to see because we want to feel certain ways about ourselves. For example, many of us would like to see ourselves as wealthy – even if we aren't. Likewise, the people who build things also have certain goals in mind. There are things they want. Their goals will be more easily accomplished if they can convince us that we can, for example, see ourselves as wealthy. The confused, jumbled state of daily perception, precisely because it is jumbled and therefore open, presents an opportunity to influence the conclusions people reach about what they thought they saw.

These observations begin to sound political. Stern is not a political artist but she is an artist who is acutely interested in the choices we make about our social environment, the shared built environment. One of the most symbolic of those choices is how we choose to see what we have made. This is why her sculptures are always made from common build-



STERN IS NOT A POLITICAL ARTIST BUT SHE IS ACUTELY INTERESTED IN THE CHOICES WE MAKE ABOUT OUR SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

ing materials. She realizes that the ways we choose to see these common (shared) materials have profound social implications. Let me take an example that I came across while visiting Stern's studio.

I noticed on her desk a promotional photo from the catalog of a manufacturer of garden accessories. It shows a handsome fieldstone column fitted with a mailbox. It's really just made of fibreglass, but they did a nice job. It looks like a handsome, handmade fieldstone column. She told me that she had been looking at it for about three years, that it held a kind of secret she had not yet unlocked. I began to think about it too. Why exactly does the company cast their "mailbox stand" so that it looks like a fieldstone column?

Well, no one would buy it if it was just a plain uncolored fibreglass tower with a mailbox extruding out of it. By making it look like fieldstone the manufacturer is making a judgment as to what we would like to be looking at and consequently how we would like to be seen.

Nietzsche wrote that all evil comes from ancient compacts that grow distorted over time. The original agreements were concluded for functional reasons. Two poor farmers with adjacent rocky fields agree to clear their land and define the boundary by piling the cleared rocks in a single line. It's easier and more efficient and you get a higher barrier. You end up with a good wall.

As economies and societies change, however, the forms produced by these agreements lose their original function and become valued in and of themselves, it's no longer just a good wall, it's now a handsome fieldstone wall, presented as a symbol of the fact that one owns land

and has owned it a long time. The form grants value to its owner without them having to do anything. Consequently it becomes a popular form.

Plenty of people are not in a position to have a fieldstone wall but they can be part of it by getting the fibreglass fieldstone mailbox column. The column therefore becomes a small, easily accepted invitation to a life of defensive complicity. I can't afford a real fieldstone wall, but I'd rather you didn't know that. In fact I would rather you didn't discover that my whole garden is funded by debt I can't sustain. You probably feel the same, so I won't ask about your garden and beyond that we both probably shouldn't ask why it is that, even with both parents working, United States middle class families have been growing steadily poorer since 1971 and yet are still driving around in brand new large shiny cars, most of them now clad in fibreglass and therefore, really, just large versions of that same tempting false fibreglass column.

So the way we treat even the simplest materials reveals, quite literally, our willingness to accept our state. Do we know what we are looking at? Do we want to know? Often not. How easy it is for us to allow ourselves to see what isn't there, to see wealth where there isn't any, to see a healthy society where there isn't one. It is as easy as not seeing a fibreglass column for what it is. The manufacturer of the mailbox column is banking on this. In addition they bank on the fact that most people will only see the column briefly, driving past it, thinking of other things, in the midst of that jumble, how much easier it is to win people over when they are in this distracted open state. If we are the ones that allow our-

selves to be tricked and do the tricking, where do we look for help? Clearly, we need to look outside of ourselves. Stern asserts, through her sculptures, that the place to look is right back into that daily jumble of materials, partial perception and choices. She asserts this because the openness of that jumble is precisely that, openness. It is an opportunity to see things anew, an opportunity that we often refuse but which asserts itself upon us, Stern proposes, through our chance encounters with arresting abstract visual beauty.

Stern's sculptures evoke the arresting beauty of seeing common building materials for their abstract visual qualities, patios as simple patterns of wandering green bands against a pale ground, floorboards as nothing so much as a series of wavy lines. To see this way, clearly – or simply, or whatever the word is for it – is one of the recurring characteristics of that open, jumbled, pre-occupied consciousness of daily life.

Chance encounters with abstract visual beauty are the source of Stern's work. She studies them the same way she is studying the image of the false stone column, trying to tease out the secrets they seem to offer. Her sculptures are embodiments of the lesson she learns. The lesson learned is simply to allow oneself to be arrested by their arresting visual beauty. That momentary check in the slide toward believing we know what we saw is all that is sometimes necessary to allow a new and better choice to be made. She distills and transforms these chance encounters with material beauty into controlled models by which a viewer can understand the way our prejudices, good and bad, shape what it is we think we see.

Stern accomplishes this transformation through the simple but careful insertion of freehand drawing into the built environment. All of Stern's pieces start with small drawings. The wheat paste stickers mentioned before do look like shingles but they are actually small drawings that have been enlarged and layered together. It is hard even to say that they are drawings of shingles. It is more like they are just drawing, marks so stripped down they seem to only be about themselves – a long dragged mark, a small scratchy mark. When examined up close there is hardly anything there, just a couple of lines. This stripping down of the drawing is the process by which Stern determines just the point at which she will begin to see something that is not there, shingles in this case.

If she can do that, get to that point, unlock and reveal just the moment at which deception can begin she will have left her viewers at a place where the choice is laid open, they can see both sides of the argument. What do we want to be looking at? What do we want to see? How do we want to be seen? The next step, which way we decide to go, whether we buy the false column or not, is up to us.