



*Agents*

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DELAWARE CENTER FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

# Sharon Louden

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## Agents



▲ *Agents*, 1999, installation view  
DCCA Main Gallery

Every artist who works with installations has a bit of the cannibal in them. Not only do they imbue found objects or industrial materials with new corporeal meaning, they often feed off themselves, reusing the same objects from installation to installation. These objects take on a life of their own, evolving and growing as they change environments. Viewers who follow an artist's work—say the airplane parts of Nancy Rubin or the soap bubbles and pipes of Joseph Cornell—have an understanding of why an artist uses particular materials and the transformation that takes place under his or her hand. It is, in fact, this transformation that is at the heart of installation work. Objects must transcend their objecthood—Rubin's reconfigured, wrecked airplane parts may not fly but they certainly defy gravity, while Cornell's bubbles become planets floating in the night skies—if the viewer is to be drawn out of reality and into another world.

The installation "Agents" is an extension of ideas and environments Sharon Louden has been working on for the past three years. She too has cannibalized her own work to create this site-specific piece; many of the rubber forms have appeared in earlier work. Even the ideas have been a part of her psyche for a decade. But what is interesting is that Louden does not consider herself an installation artist. Instead, she sees herself as someone who draws, both on the paper and in the air. Her search and use of industrial material has been but an extension of her desire to realize three-dimensionally what she has rendered on the two-dimensional page.

The path to working in a mode that includes both drawing and installation work has been an indirect one for Louden, involving several defining moments over the course of the past ten years. When she began graduate school at Yale University in 1989, Louden was working in a figurative and landscape tradition. In her second year, an accident with the printing press left her right hand in a cast. Though traumatic, the accident proved fortuitous, eventually changing the direction of her art. Forced to work with her left hand, she began drawing abstract lines in space that captured the movement, attitude and expressiveness of the human figure. When her hand healed, she returned to painting landscapes. The following year, however, having moved to New York City, she once again began exploring the territory of gestural figuration using drawn line.

These early drawings were shapes derived from stacking one line on top of another. The goal was to create marks that not only evoked the essence of the human figure but convincingly occupied space. Louden was driven by a desire to give her marks bulk and form. Her experiments led her to try gel-medium, which gave the surface literal three-dimensional texture, and luminous paint, which gave the allusion of three dimensions. The luminous paint was particularly revelatory because it helped Louden realize that these gestures could work three-dimensionally. It was her first phase in moving the two-dimensional marks off the page and into the air. The next step was to find a sculptural material fluid enough to emulate her mark yet solid,

enough to be freestanding. After several false starts (string was too flimsy and caulking too unstable) she settled on rubber tubing, an industrial material with the same width and flexibility of her marks. This opened the door for a plethora of materials with similar characteristics, and during the course of the next few years, Louden experimented with television antennae wire, braided cotton dental rolls, steel wire and clothesline cord. In each case she was driven by a desire to draw in space while allowing various characteristics of the material to come through. Although clearly aligned with a minimalist sensibility, these pared-down lines contain too much expression to be considered solely minimal. The writer and critic Robert Pincus-Whitten has acknowledged this point of intersection — which he dubbed postminimalism — between the absolute purity of form and allowing the materials to determine the outcome. Louden has taken this notion one step further by imbuing her forms with humor, movement and personality. It is something like postminimalism with a twist.

In 1996, Louden started work on a series that became the genesis for a number of installations to follow, including this one. She began creating different configurations by twisting, gluing and cutting the rubber tubing. The forms were made with specific thoughts in mind, some formal some conceptual. For instance, there may be a sexual preference or humor in certain positions while others are about the tension between the lines in the way they touch or do



◀ *Agents*, 1999, foam rubber, glue, Latex enamel paint and metal, dimensions variable

◀ *Agents and Chairs on the Floor, 1997-99, foam rubber, glue, Latex enamel paint and metal, 10 x 126 x 93 in.*

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not touch. Each form is different from the other, but they are clearly related. In some cases the way the forms interact one gets the sense that the internal states of these characters has been exposed and that is what we are seeing. As a whole, the group was "Agents," a play on the notion of something "with a purpose." In science, an agent is a substance that produces an effect, and there is also a software agent. Secret agents are often characters who have a mission or purpose which is not divulged to the public but known only to them. Double agents remain a mystery to both sides.

For this particular installation Loudon groups the forms in various areas around the gallery. She uses the floors, the walls and pedestals. She incorporates both black and white tubing. Each grouping is an individual city or pod; together the pods form a constellation of separate parts to the whole. Here Loudon has introduced specific objects into the installation—small, metal chairs painted with semi-gloss black paint. The chairs work on several levels. On a formal level, they not only give a sense of scale but interact with the pedestals and walls through reflection and shadows. They further extend the anthropomorphic

feeling of the rubber figures—before the twisted forms were very much alive and imbued with a specific personality. Now they have places to sit. A single chair placed far away from the other pods is enigmatic—a deserted outpost or a new world to be explored. The three large chairs with the pile of rubber tubing brings to mind a sleeping muse, or supine figure, and is more elegiac than humorous. Strings of tubing hung off the walls around the gallery give the sense of movement not only among the forms but between the pods.

The beauty and mystery of this installation is that there is no single interpretation. It is about making marks in the air. It is about materials, relationships, size and scale. It is about form and shadow, humor and whimsy. It is about the transcendence of ideas and the transformation of materials. It is that point where reality ends and fantasy takes over. And therein lies the magic.

—Sue Scott, 1999

Sue Scott is an Adjunct Curator at the Orlando Museum of Art and an independent writer living in New York.

- Cover, *Agents*, 1997-99,  
foam rubber and glue, (detail)

The process for a curator working in a contemporary art space includes working in dialogue with an artist to support a new reality, helping to manifest a unity which did not exist before.

The work Sharon Louden showed in her studio several years ago appeared in my mind's eye over and over. Her manipulation of unusual materials was intriguing, as was her facile line and formal composition, which existed somewhere between drawing, painting, sculpture and installation.

Louden's work pulses with life and energy. It has vitality and mystery. It deflects the past and yet connects the past with the present. Seeing a familiar exhibition space become changed and charged with a site-specific installation opens up possibilities for fresh dialogue and points to new directions for the future.

It is a pleasure to work with an artist completely committed to the process of making art and open to opportunities for sharing her inner vision with new audiences.

Dede Young  
DCCA Program Director/Curator

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► *Agents Lying on Chairs, 1999*,  
foam rubber, glue, Latex enamel  
paint and wood, 36 x 54 x 22 in.

## Exhibition Checklist

1. *Agents Lying on Chairs*  
1999, foam rubber, glue,  
Latex enamel paint and wood
2. *Hanging Agents*  
1997, foam rubber, glue
3. *Agents and Chairs*  
1999, foam rubber, glue,  
Latex enamel paint and metal
4. *Agents and Chairs*  
1997-99, foam rubber, glue,  
Latex enamel paint and metal

5. *Hanging Agent*  
1997-99, foam rubber, glue
6. *Agents*  
1997-99, foam rubber, glue
7. *Agents and Chairs on the Floor*  
1997-99, foam rubber, glue,  
Latex enamel paint and metal
- 8-15. *Agents*  
1999, graphite and gel medium  
on paper, 23 x 19 in.

All photography

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