

shift

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Kathleen McCarthy

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DiverseWorks Artspace

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It isn't very often that two artists with such dramatically different sensibilities can come together within the context of an exhibition so seamlessly. Despite their differences, the work of these artists struck me as surprisingly similar for a number of reasons. Both artists assume the task of transforming common materials into almost magical sculptures that come to life within the space. Both give careful consideration to the impact of light within the room and carefully and consciously manage the way light interacts with the form. Both artists are also keenly aware of their ability to engage and challenge the viewer to forge a relationship with the work; one that involves physical interaction and discovery, one that requires an active viewer and not a passive one.

Sharon Loudon and Kathleen McCarthy met for the first time four months prior to the opening of *Shift* while on a visit to Houston to begin planning their individual installations. Following that brief meeting, they went back to their respective studios and somehow managed to generate work that became an intense and poetic visual dialogue within the gallery space.

Shift is an exhibition that challenges the viewer's perception of the seen and the unseen. The work presented engages audiences on a visceral level and masterfully stimulates the senses through subtle transformations and barely perceptible changes that occur as one moves through the space. For me, the elements connecting these two artists continue to emerge and I find myself in a constant state of discovery when experiencing this work first-hand.

I want to thank Sharon and Kathleen for lending their talent, creativity, and energy to *DiverseWorks* during the creation and presentation of *Shift*. I am inspired by you both. Special thanks to Franklin Sirmans for his thoughtful insight into the work of these two artists and to Maureen Boucher for designing a document that captures the essence of the show. Thank you to Deron Neblett for framing the work through his camera so beautifully. Sincere thanks to Kevin Jeffries of Buffalo Bayou Artpark, the Municipal Art Commission of the City of Houston, Susan Christian, Pam Ingersoll, Eric Stolz, Cheryl Murray, Alexandra Moscovich and Whole Foods Market for their assistance in presenting the outdoor installations included in *Shift*. Huge debts of gratitude go out to Paul Arensmeyer, Thomas Coffman, Denise McCoy and Karen Niemeier for their around-the-clock work on the installation. Thanks also to Wade Brower, Christine Dusek, Christina Giannelli, Andrea Grover, Keith Gulla, Guy Harrison, Andrea Hernandez, Patricia Hernandez, Barry Ilio, Elisabeth Jackson, Laura Lark, Bobby Lege, Polly Lui, Debbie McNulty, Chris Olivier, Marina de Rosas, Denise Ramos and Jeff Shore for their good ideas, creative solutions and hard work.

Diane Barber, Curator
Houston, March 2001

Shift: Sharon Louden and Kathleen McCarthy

Wonder has no opposite and is the first of the passions.

—MARINA WARNER

A discussion of the work of Sharon Louden and Kathleen McCarthy invariably places one in the service of a language that borders on the linguistics of Minimalism. Surely the work of both artists is non-figurative, non-referential, and non-narrative, the guiding tenets of Minimalist Theory. McCarthy's work even shares a discordant similarity in terms of its seemingly strict geometrical patterning. Both artists possess a deftness of touch and eyes keen for the subtle changes in degrees of light, which makes me think of an artist like James Turrell. Because they are women, we might also conjure images of Eva Hesse and Lee Bontecou. But, this approach is limited, as is language, and having looked at the work of both artists, and begun a discussion, I have surely taken some bait and allowed myself to become hooked, for better or worse. As a critic, I have assumed this faithful position many times, continuing to come back for more. At any rate, their work, full of hidden meanings within personal vocabularies, hits me, as it should, with more questions than answers. If we think, for instance, of advertising or political sloganeering, we know that language must not always be trusted to mean what it says. Perhaps, that is why I embrace the work of Louden and McCarthy, as it exemplifies a space—a form of creative and thoughtful practice—in which there is no assurance of meaning. If anything, meaning is highly subjective, and even then, only a thought that turns in on itself, in consideration of their work. Louden and McCarthy both make art in a non-linguistic space where language is resisted, a cultural place where the active, passionate synergy of materials is endowed with a subversive power in liminality.

Entering the physical space of *Shift* at DiverseWorks is but the first line to cross. From there, the installations that follow force us to heighten our somatic consciousness as we become a part of the work on a sensory level rather than intellectually. Approaching *Entry*, McCarthy's two rows of columns, made of fishing line or the more museological monofilament, confront us as pillars delineating space and thus controlling our movement, even though their weightlessness belies their inability to truly control any one circumscribed route. After all, a prominent feature of good fishing line, is the fact that it is strong yet flexible. The rigidity of the grid formation nonetheless serves to enhance the columns weight as markers. Beyond the physicality of the columns there is a play of light that changes with the hours and degrees of sunlight through the day into the night, in addition to McCarthy's meticulous placement of light bulbs in the corners of the space. Though the work changes with the conditions of the room, consciousness of the differences that mark off our positions in the gallery, and the effects of this changing light, open up other points of entry to the work. Trespassing, in the moderate sense of the word, through the columns and under a passage into the next larger gallery. There, McCarthy's sculpture *Extended Structure* greets us as an overhead construction from wall to wall. Shaped like two parallel bridges, the fishing wire forms arcs over the middle of the gallery space. Cut at its tallest point in the center, the wire still hangs only about 5' 6" (a typical height) which is a barrier that involves the movement of the body to pass in many cases. Passing the threshold we feel the work as spectator and as integral participant, redefining the architecture of the space, left to contemplate our own notions of perception.

With less emphasis on the sculptural presence of discrete forms, Loudon's all-encompassing, room-size installation, *Fairies*, is as much abstract drawing as it is sculpture. Using industrial strength wire cut into arced strips about two feet long,

Louden has carpeted most of the floor with an amoeba-like sea of wires. The ocean of material dips and swells, but like a celestial sea it is punctuated by points of light—some of the wires have been tipped with reflective sheeting that carries constantly changing nodes of light as you traverse the work and the gallery space. The form of these waves of wires, or perhaps a bed of hair, in the manipulated light of the gallery—in addition to the reflectors, two sources of light at opposite sides of the gallery are timed to control a 30-second sequence that goes from bright light to almost pitch darkness. Within this sequence alone, the character of the work is constantly changing. In the brightest light, the focus of the work comes from the shadows, which creates a field of stalks against the wall. As the light fades, the metallic nature of the material recedes. Although it looks seductively comfortable to dive on in, they are quite the opposite. And by covering the floor up to the walls in some places, Louden forces us into a tactile experience. After carefully navigating the ring of the piece, I was content to accept the space as my own intellectual space where my thoughts spilled just as circuitously as the arcs grouped on the floor. Like most of Louden's previous installation works, we have been given an experience that changes every time, based upon the way we accept the artist's stimuli on our perception. In addition to *Fairies*, Louden has installed two outdoor pieces off Houston roadways. The works, which she refers to as *Reflecting Tips*, are similarly made of industrial material transformed into elegant objects, but in the landscape, the nature-like aspects of her work are made fully evident. In light of the work in the landscape, we can consider the fact that landscape is not exclusively a natural form, but as a perception of the mind. Prompted by Louden's shifting forms, we complete the work of art with our own varied associations.

For Louden and McCarthy, the Shift occurs when you leave the space, images and perceptions intact, provoked, waiting for the next charge on the border between the real and the unreal, between what occurs and what the mind creates.

Franklin Sirmans

Houston, March 2001

Sharon Loudon



Reflecting Tips, 2001, wire, white paint and reflective sheeting
Site-specific installation, Buffalo Bayou Park, Houston



Reflecting Tips, 2001, wire, white paint and reflective sheeting
Site-specific installation, Whole Foods Market, Houston

I consider my sculpture as groups of anthropomorphic individuals. My mission is to take simple materials and transform them into things that are gestural and which come alive as individual, humorous, elegant entities unto themselves. Although abstract and formal, they have human-like aspects within their very minimal state. By using industrial or everyday materials, the forms are imbued with another layer of personality. That is, my sculptures evolve through the transformation of the original material into another form that makes no reference to the material's original use. By making massive groups that are repetitive in nature, the groups appear to take over and gain their own presence as figures that live in their own world.

The difference between *Reflecting Tips*, an outdoor installation, and *Fairies*, an indoor installation, is that they speak of a contrast between harmony, beauty, order and chaos.

Originally installed at the Connemara Conservancy in Dallas, Texas, *Reflecting Tips* is a piece consisting of approximately 2,500 wires, 3-4 feet high, that are painted white and topped with high-intensity reflective material. Because it is situated on a road side, in two different locations, motorists experience the shimmering of the reflective sheeting during the day, and the high-intensity reflection during the evening hours. The grass-like forms move and sway with the wind as cars drive by. The *Reflecting Tips* are poetic, quiet, playful and look as though they are a part of the environment that surrounds them.

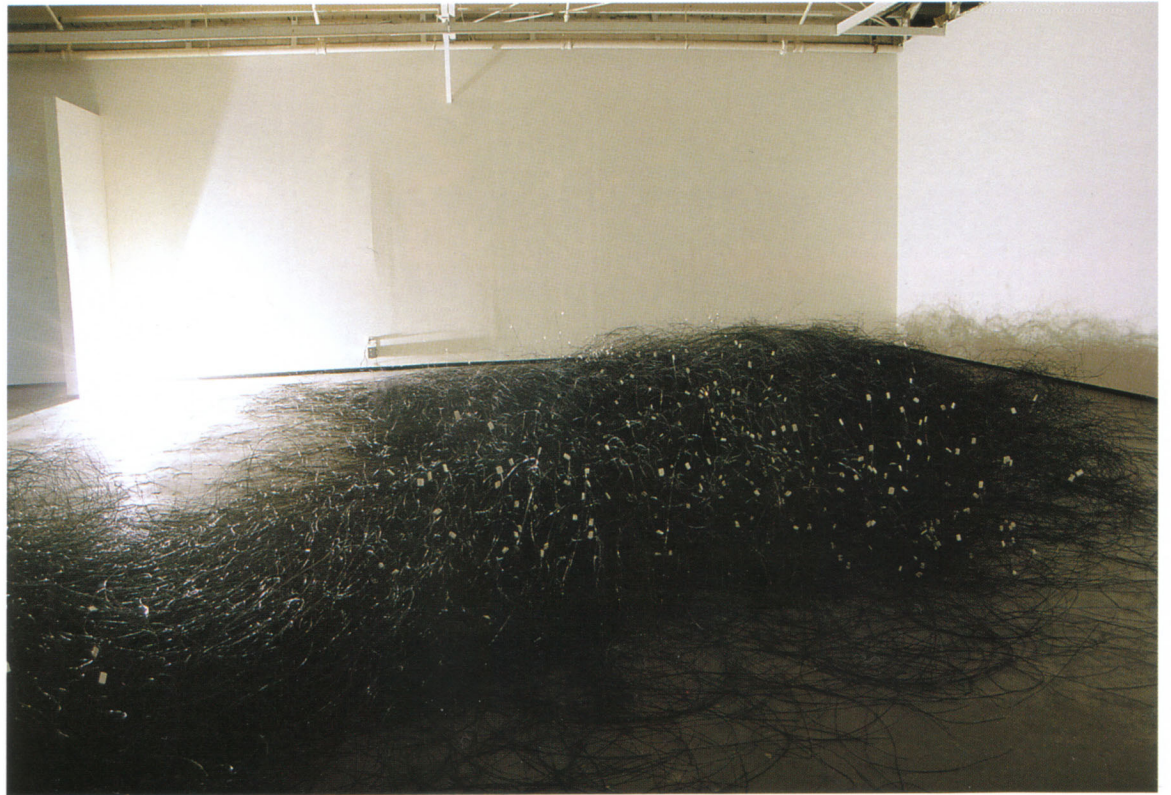
Fairies has a direct relationship to the *Reflecting Tips* in that they both use the same raw industrial material. *Fairies* consists of tens of thousands of strands of black wire on which some of the tips are placed reflective sheeting. This sheeting is sometimes hidden within the massive amounts of wire that are layered on top of one another. At other times, the wires peek out to hit the strong, stark light that comes from two different sources. This layering effect creates a great contrast: what is presented are delicate forms within a thick sea of black wire. In contrast to the open, grassy-like *Reflecting Tips*, the *Fairies* are more hidden, massive and "out-of-sorts." The *Fairies* are more randomly placed, and composed in a less orderly fashion.

The idea of these pieces is that the openness and the expressive surprise of the reflection outdoors, exhibited in the *Reflecting Tips*, is in direct contrast with the hidden, massive and more randomly placed *Fairies*. When placed inside, even in the safest environment, there is less order to the *Fairies*, more intensity, more privacy, and a feeling of being overwhelmed with these forms. Both pieces however, have a visual association with things of nature, adding both the indoor and outdoor landscape as objects.

Sharon Loudon
New York, March 2001



Fairies (detail)



Fairies, 2001, black wire and reflective sheeting, 1500 square feet