

Sharon Louden: Visual Discovery

by Ellison Walcott

For the moment, the art world is seemingly released from dogma, stylistic schools, or any one prevailing trend. With this new pluralism the future of three-dimensional artistic endeavors may well rest in a synthesis of tradition and experimentation. This fusion will, furthermore, rely on a combination of intuitive/tactile fabrication and conceptual/intellectual investigation. The sculptures and installations of Sharon Louden exemplify this synthesis.

For a little over a decade, Louden has been keenly focused on transformative manipulations of industrial materials, a dramatic use of light, and theatricality in placement and venue. Hers is a labor-intensive process that yields light, quixotic, and often witty results. Although she has had several gallery exhibitions, it is in the realm of site-specific outdoor installation that Louden's artistic enterprise glows, both literally and figuratively.

In the fall of 1999, the Public Art Fund of New York City commissioned Louden to participate in its annual pub-

lic art event at the MetroTech commons in downtown Brooklyn. Responding to the surroundings, and deeply engaged with the materials she'd been investigating, Louden composed the site-specific sculpture *Tangled Tips*. Strands of electro-luminescent wire and mirrors were suspended in the branches of six trees, approximately 10 to 30 feet above the pedestrian activity of the park. During the day, the mirrors activated the sun's light, while at night the glowing pale blue wires created graphic swirls against the moving trees and the dark sky. Between October 1999 and June 2000,

the visual poetry of *Tangled Tips* changed with the physical moods of the seasons. Installed as they were at MetroTech, Louden's *Tangled Tips* were easy to miss but, upon discovery, provided a sense of marvel.

Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Louden's work is an engagement with the viewer's sense of visual discovery. She catalyzes this dialogue through dramatic lighting, unexpected placement of her sculptures, and a clever willingness to have her work viewed at night.

In summer 2001, Louden unveiled her most ambitious night-engaging outdoor work to date. *Reflecting Tips* was commissioned by Yahoo! for its headquarters in Sunnyvale, California. Methodically placed over 10,000 square



Far left: *Tangled Tips* (detail), 1999. Electro-luminescent wire, mirrors, and steel wire, 1 of 6 units in 30-ft. trees. Left and below: Two views of *Reflecting Tips*, 1999–2001. High-intensity reflective sheeting, powder-coated steel, 22 units spanning 10,000 square ft.



LEFT: MATTHEW SUJB, COURTESY OF PUBLIC ART FUND, NY / RIGHT: BEN BLACKWELL



Left: *Swells & Extensions*, 2000. Monofilament wire, cage clips, vinyl pads, pins, silicone, and luminous paint, installation view. Below: *Agents*, 2000. Cast bronze, 2 x 3 x 2 in.

feet of landscaping, *Reflecting Tips* consists of 22 separate bouquet-like units planted to rise 20 to 30 inches above the grass. Each bouquet consists of 200 to 300 white powder-coated steel wires, the apexes of which are individually adorned with welded steel plates covered by an industrial reflective sheeting. During the day, these manmade plantings integrate themselves effortlessly into the landscape. At night, however, Loudon's sculptures reflect and amplify the light of passing cars and other ambient effects into a delightful optical display not unlike congregating fireflies.

The Yahoo! project originated in a 1999 temporary installation on the grounds of the Connemara Conservancy in Plano, Texas. For the three-month installation, Loudon planted 2,500 similar wires (ungrouped and taller) in a 5,000-square-foot flood plane. The spring grass grew around and eventually enveloped the art. Bound clusters of reflecting tips were introduced as a series of free-standing sculptures entitled *Winkers* and exhibited at Numark Gallery in Washington, DC, and The Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, (reviewed in *Sculpture*, June 2001).

The intellectual rigor with which Loudon addresses her artistic paradigm lends itself well to working in series. Concurrently with most of her sculptural projects, she also produces prodigious works on paper. As a choreographer of both two- and three-dimensional line and gesture, Loudon gives character to individual marks through the illusion of movement, placement, and velocity.

Born in Philadelphia in 1964, Loudon received her BFA at the Chicago Art

Institute and an MFA from the Yale University School of Art. While at Yale she abandoned figurative and landscape painting in favor of an immersion in the tactile, intuitive, and abstract—the hallmarks of her mature style. Her fascination with industrial materials, ranging from high-grade fishing line to electroluminescent wire, stems from a desire to confound viewers' expectations; and while she has worked with steel and bronze, her materials have also included cotton and rubber.

Although she rejected the figure and nature many years ago, corporeal evocations abound in Loudon's work. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the two related pieces *Swells & Extensions* and *Tails* (both 2000). Both of these installations harness the lyrical elegance of translucent nylon fishing line.

First shown at the Regina Gouger Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University, *Swells & Extensions* consists of 2,100 lengths of monofilament wire hung from the ceiling to within two feet of the gallery floor. Grouped again in



bunches of 40 to 50, the strands poetically referenced ponytails or the flowing mane of a horse. Below these gently swaying masses stood 2,600 individual strands, each four to five inches in length, which appeared to grow directly from the gallery's hardwood floorboards. The teeming field indexed individual hair follicles growing from the now skin-like floor.

This visual spectacle was dramatically augmented by the fact that the lights in the gallery were set on a 20-second timer. Darkness revealed that each monofilament strand, those suspended and those floor-bound, had been dipped in luminescent paint, which glimmered a light green. The dramatic theatricality of the two views transformed a process-oriented piece of intensive labor into what can only be described as an operatic *mise en scène*.

Loudon fabricated and installed *Tails* during a residency at ArtOmi in upstate New York in the summer of 2000. Taking her cue from the hair-like strands of *Swells*, she grouped larger agglomerations of longer lengths of nylon line that gently arced across tree limbs in the adjacent forest, augmenting the meditative pleasure of nature.

Sharon Loudon has forged a charismatic dialogue with nature that seeks harmony rather than dissonance. A further discourse engages the uninitiated viewer. Loudon's works reject bellowing bravado, drawing participants into their sphere through the attention-getting effect of a stage whisper. Italic rather than bold, Loudon's oeuvre continues a path begun by Eva Hesse and practiced today by Ann Hamilton. Loudon embraces the ostensible polarities of permanence and impermanence to create an art of intellectual substance and tactile emotion.

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