Phyllida Barlow
siege

PHYLLIDA BARLOW: siege

New Museum

untitled: eleven columns; standing, fallen, broken, 2011. Eleven columns: polystyrene, paint, fabric, cement, dimensions variable. Installation view: "Sculptural Acts," Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2011

Phyllida Barlow
siege

Edited by
Gary Carrion-Murayari

NEW
MUSEUM

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RIG: untitled; tubes, 2011. Polystyrene, wire-netting, fabric, cement, overall installed dimensions: 20⅛ x 110¼ x 31½ in (51 x 280 x 80 cm). Installation view: "RIG," Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

Foreword

For over forty years, Phyllida Barlow has been choreographing complex sculptural installations which reinvent and reinterpret the materials, objects, and structures of the urban environment. The emergence of her work in the early 1970s marked a radical break with British sculptural tradition and since then Barlow has exerted a tremendous influence on British art through both her realized projects as well as her long teaching career in London art schools. In spite of this, "Phyllida Barlow: siege" marks the artist's first US museum exhibition. For this presentation, Barlow has planned a major site-specific sculptural installation in which several new works function together to disrupt and transform the architecture of the New Museum's fourth floor gallery. This presentation is part of a series of exhibitions inaugurated last year focusing on a single project or body of work within an artist's larger practice. Following presentations of work by Gustav Metzger and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, this exhibition continues the New Museum's tradition of introducing important artists from around the world to a New York audience for the first time.

Massimiliano Gioni, Associate Director and Director of Exhibitions, has conceived of a wonderful program of exhibitions and I extend my thanks for his hard work and leadership for all of the shows on view this season. I would like to thank Gary Carrion-Murayari, New Museum Curator, who worked closely with Phyllida Barlow over several months to realize this installation. I would also like to thank Jenny Moore, Assistant Curator, and Margot Norton, Curatorial Associate, for their continuous help. Joshua Edwards, Director of Exhibitions Management, Victoria Manning, Assistant Registrar, Shannon Bowser, Chief Preparator, and Kelsey Womack, Exhibitions Assistant, all worked together to solve the complicated technical challenges of the installation with creativity and patience. The exhibition is also the result of hard work by the entire Museum staff and, in particular, I would like to thank Karen Wong, Deputy Director and Director of External Affairs, and Regan Grusy, Associate Director and Director of Development, who, along with their respective teams, contributed greatly to making the show possible.

This installation has been realized with the generous cooperation and support of Hauser & Wirth Gallery in New York and London. In particular, I would like to thank Marc Payot, Partner and Vice President, Sara Harrison, Director, and Melissa MacRobert, Project Coordinator, all of whom have been integral to the success of this exhibition. I would also like to thank Adam Burge and Phyllida Barlow's entire studio team for their work on both the realization of the individual sculptures and their collaboration on the complicated installation.

The exhibition is made possible by the generosity of the Leadership Council of the New Museum. The accompanying publication features an interview between Barlow and Gary Carrion-Murayari, a monographic text by Nicholas Cullinan, Curator of International Contemporary Art at Tate Modern London, and a wonderful tribute to Barlow by fellow sculptor, Thomas Houseago. I am grateful to all of the contributors for their fascinating reflections on Barlow's work, as well as to New Museum Copy Editor and Publications Coordinator, Sarah Stephenson, and catalogue designer Conny Purtill of Purtill Family Business, for their hard work on the project. Finally, I would like to thank Phyllida Barlow who took on our challenge to create a major new sculptural installation at the New Museum and responded with an ambitious and nuanced installation that demonstrates her remarkable skill and creativity.

Lisa Phillips
Toby Devan Lewis Director, New Museum

untitled: pallettestarpaulinscylindersticksbunting, 2011. Timber, scrim, cement, calico, paint, tape, hardboard, MDF, 59 x 122 x 122 in (150 x 310 x 310 cm). Installation view: "Before the Law," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2011

Interview with Phyllida Barlow

Gary Carrion-Murayari

GC-M: Balconies, stages, stockades, and arches are all elements that have appeared in your work in some form in the past, but what made you return to them for this particular installation at the New Museum? I'm also wondering how you approached and tried to reimagine the often challenging space of our fourth floor gallery?

PB: When I entered the fourth floor gallery from the elevator I didn't know whether I was at the front or the back of the space. The more I thought about it, the more stage-like the space became. Consequently, I wanted to make the entrance from the elevator be the back of the space, like entering backstage. The front would then be the furthest wall from the gallery entrance, so I was intrigued by the idea of turning the space around.

Having become inspired by thinking of the space as reversible, other concerns then began to present themselves. The height of the gallery is awkward and, for me, emphasizes the theatrical qualities of the dimensions of the space—high-ceilinged but proportionately not equaled by its length and width—which make it seem stunted and stage-like. But more importantly, I want to disrupt how the space is viewed on entering. Using the height seemed the most dramatic way to do this. The arches[1] are formally very different to the architecture of the room and in conflict with it…or that is what I hope. As well as turning the space around, I want to bring an "exterior" world inside. By using height, floor, obstacles, corners, collisions, etc., I hope this will forestall and block how the space can be viewed all at once.

Although I have made a small cluster of the arch forms for "RIG" at Hauser & Wirth, in Piccadilly, London, I have not made them on this scale before. This transforms them (I hope) from something tomb-like into absurdly monumental forms that are kitsch and fake…and, of course, very theatrical. The huge, black balcony[2] will also be placed high up, utilizing the height of the space to complement the height of the arches, but will be

something predatory and clumsy—a kind of folly.

The stage, the tarpaulins, and crushed boxes[3] are all forms used before but, as with the arches, not in the way I will be locating them for "seige." In contrast to the upright formalism of the arches and the brutal, clumsy shape of the balcony, both reaching up to the ceiling, the collection of stuff, shapes, and forms which make up the stage work will be a collision…a kind of car crash which spreads out from the stage form and will be very floor-bound.

The stockade[4] has evolved into a crushed, dense work which will be an interruption between the arches and the balcony at floor level but which will have a height of about fifty-nine inches (150 centimeters). My intention is to create a narrative within the cramped space of the fourth floor, forcing the works to take advantage of the height and to explore the remaining terrain at floor level with unpredictable obstacles and spillages—exploiting both formal and anti-formal qualities.

GC-M: I'm interested in this notion of treating the gallery as a kind of stage and the performative roles that both the objects and the viewers play. Clearly, the terms and the debates around the theatricality of sculpture have changed since you started making work, so I'm wondering if you feel that the audience experiences your work or interacts with it in a different way today as opposed to in the '70s? And, if so, has this affected the way you think about or approach your work?

PB: For me, the '70s were a time of fracture both in art and in society through the grim political and economic circumstances. I am certain that the latter had a crucial impact on the former, not only in the inception of so-called Conceptual art but in the way artists operated beyond institutional frameworks—seeking out alternative and different ways to make work and to release it from its site of production, or, more importantly for me, to incorporate its methods of production into its final incarnation, location, and destination.

There were several exhibitions which were important in

Waste disposal, Edmonton, London

"breaking" sculpture—its formal qualities were, literally, dispersed throughout the space. One exhibition, titled "Spectrum," in 1971, was held in the large hall of Alexandra Palace—a Victorian exhibition center. The space was vast—high as well as wide and long. There were performances as well as installations, except I don't remember them being referred to as "installations"—they were just what they were and usually referred to as "sculpture." The work I exhibited was *Sofa, floor and drawings* (1970–71). It was reassuring to be in an exhibition where this work's theatricality and disparate assemblage of conflicting media were acceptable.

Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Martin Naylor, piles of shoes, a stretched-latex screen, Barry Flanagan giving every artist fifty pence (eighty cents), someone pouring cement from the top of a tree, another destroying their work in situ: it was a chance to displace sculpture from its history. In particular, its British history—a lot of the work demonstrated how artists, including myself, were looking for a release. Arte Povera, in particular, and artists from the US, such as Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, as well as the Judson Dance Theater events and the Claes Oldenburg happenings, were providing the impetus to break away from the formalism inherited through Henry Moore/Barbara Hepworth, and even the New Generation British sculptors of the mid-1960s, and the burgeoning impact of Anthony Caro, as well as other "heavy metal" sculptors.

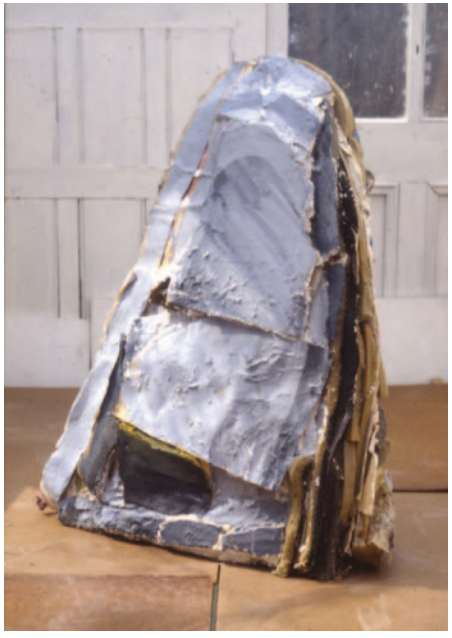
This "breakage"—and the break away—within sculpture freed up the space of the event in terms of both the making and the location of the work. The studio, wherever or whatever that might be, became the vibrant repository of the work's unpredictable qualities, allowing there to be infinite beginnings, middles, and ends. Nothing was finite. Such potential for opening up what sculpture could be, where its fragmentation into many versions, including the uncertainty as to its finished state, made both the space of its production (not necessarily the studio) and its site of exhibition (not necessarily the gallery) entirely up to the artist.

I remember performances on the tube (the London Underground) which included readings, dance, and colored rectangles being placed randomly throughout the length of the train, and drawings which used the length of the tube and its duration of travel as the means to an end…now these things sound clichéd and overused, but then it was liberating.

Then there was the big Royal Academy sculpture exhibition in 1972, "British Sculptors '72," with two, then high-profile, young British artists dominating that exhibition—Martin Naylor and Carl Plackman—who, individually, took over a gallery each and made works which involved and sabotaged the whole space. The audience/viewers were forced to step over, walk across, etc., the works. And the works themselves invited detailed scrutiny where magnifying glasses, trip wires, mirrors, and other obstacles that complicated the act of looking, were imposed upon the space and the viewer.

In London, dance and live performance were beginning to merge. And there were many dance/movement performances which incorporated "costume" as a performative intervention in its own right. Merce Cunningham's collaboration with Rauschenberg and John Cage, which was staged in the West End, was thrilling and, for me, was the culmination of breaking sculpture away from its doggedly formalistic inheritance.

One issue that fascinates me is the concern for the "audience." This seems to have become imploded into the notion of "attracting" an audience. Something I find repellent. And something I do not remember as being any concern during the '60s and '70s. In fact, the more a viewer/audience could be antagonized the better, and the more remote the work could be the better ("remote" both physically and geographically, as well as in separating itself from a known audience, or, conversely, imposing itself on an uninitiated and unsuspecting audience). The experience was focused, for better or worse, on the artist and the work. The preferred audience was like-minded, fellow artists. Maybe I have romanticized this, but I do not remember the concern, which has centered on "who is it for?" and has dominated so much public art, gallery art, and art production for so long (since the late '80s/early '90s), as having any relevance in the 1970s.



"Touchpiece series," 1984. Paint, upholstery foam, paper, canvas, wood, rope, rubber, approx. 55 x 59 x 55 in (140 x 150 x 140 cm). Studio work

Therefore, my relationship with a potential audience/viewer is generated from myself as the primary viewer: what is my relationship to what I am doing? Is it awkward, difficult, enjoyable, laborious, boring, too complicated, quick, simple…? How does this relationship affect what I want to do? How can I reach up there? How can I be surprised? What would happen if I crammed that corner, spilt this stuff, placed that very high up, balanced this on that? Undoubtedly, it's a selfish approach but it is about a relationship that's generated through the process of making and the desire to turn the eventual site for the work into something more than just an act of presentation.

Sculpture as theater (rather than as theatrical) is a resource which transforms me from passive to active participant, from the process of production through to the highly performative act of installing the work—and it is during the work's installation that I not only experience it in its entirety for the first time but also become fully aware of its potential to have a relationship beyond my self. Once the work is installed, I seem to lose interest. Perhaps this is the moment when the work is handed over and it is no longer mine.

Of course, it is all very different with smaller works. These are, in many ways, more conventional. And I am looking a lot at those discredited sculptors of the 1940s and '50s—particularly Europeans—because they now seem more radical than anyone else. Making smaller works and drawing is private and intimate. But the act of *doing* is as similar as with the larger works. However, a result happens within minutes—the work emerges quickly; changes can be executed immediately. Thinking and doing become synchronized. Time becomes a material. Speed becomes sensual and exhilarating, and essential. It is a different kind of theatricality.

GC-M: There are many younger sculptors who attempt to work between performance and sculpture or to create work where the performing body is somehow inscribed in the work, which obviously isn't a new interest. As someone who has worked closely with young artists over the years, has it been surprising to see

an interest in it return or has your opinion or understanding of it changed?

PB: Working with young artists is salutary. The histories from the '60s and '70s seem less than useless for them. Their bravado and clarity is astonishing and admirable. But the climate in which they are forced to operate is harsh. The exhibition seems to be the event which determines their motivation: "exhibition=alive; no exhibition=dead." The performative as an integral part of the work's presentation and its status as an object seem very different now to then. Now it does seem to be very categorical; there is a critical necessity for an artwork to have an audience, as if they are bound together at source: art and audience; audience and art. This is very different to how my relationship with the performative roles of object and viewer has evolved.

How can young artists contend with this orthodoxy of prioritizing the audience without shooting themselves in the foot (or the audience for that matter)—the worst case scenario being that there is absolutely no interest in their work, and no destination for their work? I am sure that the necessity to arouse interest from an audience during the '60s and '70s was not a consideration for myself and other artists. Maybe, again, I am being arrogant, over-romantic, etc., but there was a different urgency—and, for me, it was a raw enthusiasm that struggled to attach itself to any particular notion of destination or result. It was a time of asking "what if…?" and "not knowing" was more enriching than conviction. However, eventually "not knowing" became just as much a conviction and just as problematic as "knowing"…nothing stands still.

A question I ask myself is whether art's relationship with institutions has increased and become more delineated. Has art become more institutionalized with the knock-on effect of psychologically making artists more needy, more aware of seeking approval? But this is countered by the clarity of intention and sharp focus, and knowledge that young artists have, and which makes them canny, highly competitive, and ambitious.

An interest in what and who artists are, and what they do

RIG: untitled: stagechairs, 2011. Timber, cement, paint, 90½ x 168⅞ x 137¾ in (230 x 429 x 350 cm).
Installation view: "RIG," Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

Installation view: “RIG,” Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

and how they do it, beyond, before, and without the exhibition seems to carry no authority. But for me it is fundamental. It is my focus and my interest. The young artists I have worked with in the past and work with now find this old fashioned…and they are right, it is!

GC-M: I want to follow up about the context of your work in the ’70s and how you translate certain influences or energies into your work now. It was interesting to hear that Judson and Oldenburg affected you at the time—there is an exhibition up in New York right now about the New York Happenings and one of the things that comes across is the way in which the textures of those environments were such an extension of the particular landscape of New York City in the ’60s and how difficult that texture is to translate into a contemporary exhibition. In terms of your own practice, how important is London to your work?

PB: Your reference to the texture of a city is a wonderfully cunning way of creating a different interpretation of the urban environment. It cleverly avoids the pitfalls that images of the ’60s/’70s usually trigger: nostalgia and a longing to turn back the clock, etc. The grime and grit, which are inherent qualities of the images and documentation from those times, do have a particular atmosphere. I am looking at a catalogue from 1969—*The Art of the Real: An Aspect of American Sculpture and Painting, 1948–1968*. It accompanied the exhibition of the same title which came from MoMA, New York, to the Tate Gallery, London, in 1969. I remember thoroughly enjoying the exhibition. However, it was when I looked at the catalogue later, in the ’90s, that I fully registered the impact of how art represents itself through its photographic catalogue image. In particular, the image of *Die* (1962) by Tony Smith made me laugh out loud. It was the joy of looking at an image without the self-conscious style of the contemporary catalogue orthodoxy that was so appealing.

Of course, I had not noticed the aberration of presenting the iconic minimalist sculpture (of “too small to be a monument, too big to be an object” fame) when I acquired the catalogue in 1969.

Grimy black-and-white photographs were the norm and presenting an image of a work against a backdrop of urban, domestic, or studio clutter was also a norm for catalogues and any other kinds of publicity. Smith’s *Die* is photographed in what seems to be a back garden; the sculpture itself has a stain around its lower surface; it is squashed into the frame with an excess of space above and below the object filled by a gravel terrain and an array of overhanging and out-of-focus foliage from the surrounding trees. Such an image would not pass for catalogue presentation today. I am sure that it would be deemed essential that this iconic sculpture would be best served placed in an environment cleansed of all interference from everyday life and preferably framed by a sterile white border which could mimic the cleansed space of the white cube gallery.

Without doubt, the professionalism and technical achievements of today’s catalogues distinguish themselves as serving the art within them in vivid and utterly appropriate ways. But are they too democratic? The HD/digital images give an overbearing equality to everything, which is beguiling but distancing and timeless. However, my comments are not intended to be judgmental or moral, and certainly not nostalgic for a return to the black-and-white images of yesteryear!

The griminess and the darkness inherent to black-and-white photography does evoke a different age with very different expectations for how and what constituted an exhibition. I like the confused, crowded, and cluttered use of the gallery spaces that I not only remember but which the images within exhibition catalogues reveal from that time. Maybe the lack of style evidenced the necessity for survivalism: the work should be robust enough to exist in its own right and not because of its style of presentation… somehow that lack of presentation skill is like the city: things are just there. I am interested in “waking up” the things that are just there, giving different status to the behavior of objects which are both familiar but strangely invisible within the cluttered, crowded visual noise of urban/London life. It is not just a process of culling images from the urban environment; more importantly for me, it is the behavior of things which I want to emulate. My intention

RIG: untitled; crushedboxfeud, 2011. Timber, cardboard, cement, fabric, 55⅛ x 90½ x 59 in (140 x 230 x 150 cm). Installation view: "RIG," Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

is to quell the image, obliterate it, and to make it of secondary importance to how the object that contains the image functions in relationship to the space, to other objects, myself initially, and finally others who might encounter it.

Returning to your expression of the "textures" of the environments represented by images from the '60s and '70s, there is also a kind of "truth to materials" which resonates from those images. For me, these images provide the clues to the palimpsest of surfaces that constitute everyday life. These surfaces are the decorative adornments to shapes and forms, and I want this layering of surfaces, and the accompanying textures, to be a part of my work, and how it is made. I want the two—surface and the shape/form beneath—to be both attached and separated within a single object. For example, the arches are built in a simple, expedient way with the minimum of technicalities. The surfaces which clad these simple forms do not add anything more formally to the original shapes. The scrim and cement cladding, which is then painted with daubs of color, is more decorative and in excess of requirement than enhancing the original forms. In fact, the daubs of color are a distraction to the arch structure. The surfaces I adopt for the works are essentially decoration. But it is decoration which is dependent on, and in conflict with, both the structure of the object which lies beneath and the process of how the surface is accumulated: the palimpsest of scrim, cement, paint, varnish…

The urban environment provides me with a versatile resource to observe how objects, including the human object, arrange themselves, both knowingly and unknowingly. It is the collision between the "things"—urban things—which provoke hierarchies and the way we want to disobey these hierarchies, or conform to them, which brings these usually passive-aggressive things into our consciousness. Perhaps when street demonstrations erupt, then the dormant behavior of what constitutes our urban environment wakes up and reveals itself in its most extreme form—the hierarchy of familiar things is used to further the cause of the demonstrators, and not left to be the passive controllers, as is their usual role—things are torn up and thrown, burnt, crashed, crushed.

Barriers, barricades, street furniture, curbs, pavements,

security cameras, street lighting, road works, building works, traffic…all of these and much more provide the controls for how the urban environment functions and how an all-embracing authority asserts itself. These human-made physical interventions proclaim how our behavior is guided and led in order to use the urban space efficiently. But such interventions are also highly political: "things" are prioritized apparently with no consensus; public spaces become privatized; how we move around becomes increasingly but subtly controlled; this is the paranoia of the city…the watched and the watching and the watcher…

This emotive interpretation of how the city behaves evidences its layers and surfaces in another way other than visual. I'm interested in the subjective interpretations of how a city behaves, its psychological and political impact which its behavior has on all things that inhabit the city—human or otherwise—and for me the city in question is London.

I have always lived and worked in London. It is an impossible place where nothing works but everything works; where it sprawls but is dense; where it can gleam but is dark; where there is newness but it is also decaying…

I have a memory which identifies something of this reference you make to the textures of the city. In the early 1950s, my father decided to take myself and my older sister and brother on a tour of the East End of London. He had done his medical training in the East End before the war and wanted to show us what had happened to this part of London since his training. We drove down to the docks and along Mile End Road and Whitechapel Road and into the surrounding localities…he showed us the bombed-out areas which he had known well. The devastation was ubiquitous apart from the evidence of the slow reconstruction which was taking place. I don't know what kind of impact this strange tour has had but it is fixed in my mind. I do know that the constant changes inscribed within the urban environment form a particular archaeology which absorbs present, past, and future: damage, reparation, renewal, reconstruction—these are in an ever-evolving lifecycle which mirrors the decay and renewal of the natural environment. The urban and the natural reflect and

Wrecks, 1984. Studio debris, canvas, upholstery foam, wood, hardboard, chipboard, Formica, paint, 39⅜ x 78¾ x 98⅜ in (100 x 200 x 250 cm), 70⅞ x 78¾ x 74⅞ (180 x 200 x 190 cm), 47¼ x 51⅛ x 78¾ (120 x 130 x 200 cm). Bayfield, Norfolk, UK

reciprocate each other, where there is no perfect moment. My relationship with the processes of making somehow reflects this restlessness where I am never sure when enough is enough—there is always this craving to add another layer, or to break something down again—to destroy, repair, and rebuild. It is to affirm and authenticate the conflict between the shape and its structure in relationship to its surface and therefore its texture.

GC-M: Is the translation or transformation that happens in your work—between images, objects, or materials from the world outside of the studio and your finished sculptures—purely intuitive at this point?

PB: I am usually in a conflicted position of having to deploy practicalities and expedience, which are then combined with the irrationality of guesswork to advance the transformation and translation processes. The "original" thing that initiated the chain reaction disappears in the face of the raw confrontation of how to make it—how to build it, with what, what size, what weight, what posture, where?—and as such the so-called "original" is consumed.

The catalyst for the work is through guesswork rather than intuition. Guesswork is a remarkable and hugely underrated process: it seems to rely on previous experience and knowledge but is also only too eager to challenge these and test them out with the conclusion always under threat. It promotes risk and a refusal to explain and justify, and a respect for a lack of logic.

GC-M: Your description of the deceptiveness of photography as well as your emphasis on the role of guesswork point to the challenges of picturing the installation you're going to make in the Museum space. So much of the experience of the sculptures is yet to be realized, but one thing we do have are some of the drawings you've done for the sculptures. Although they are schematic diagrams, they have an amazingly identical weight and presence. I've been thinking of them as kind of dreams or premonitions of the actual sculptures, but I'm interested in how they function for you during the sculptural process and what they are able or unable to convey about the sculptures once they are made and installed?

PB: It must be nerve-racking for curators trying to project proposals of work into the space. For the artist, it is an exploration—artist as explorer. The drawings are instructions. They provide information about materials, methods of making, and dimensions. Although they may not appear like this.

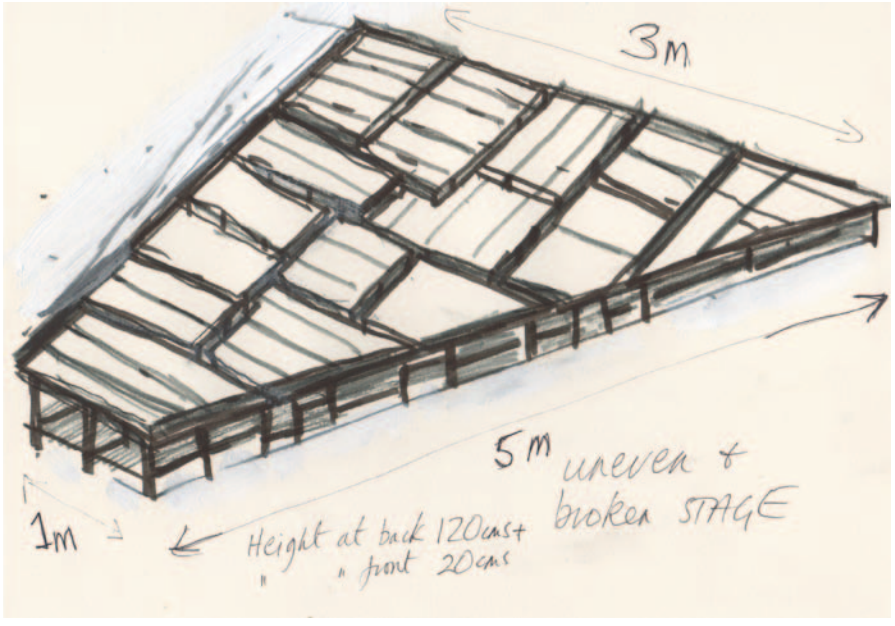
For some of the preparatory drawings there are connections to previous works. With these, I may have an idea as to how the work could look in its final incarnation. For new works with no back history, the drawings are speculative.

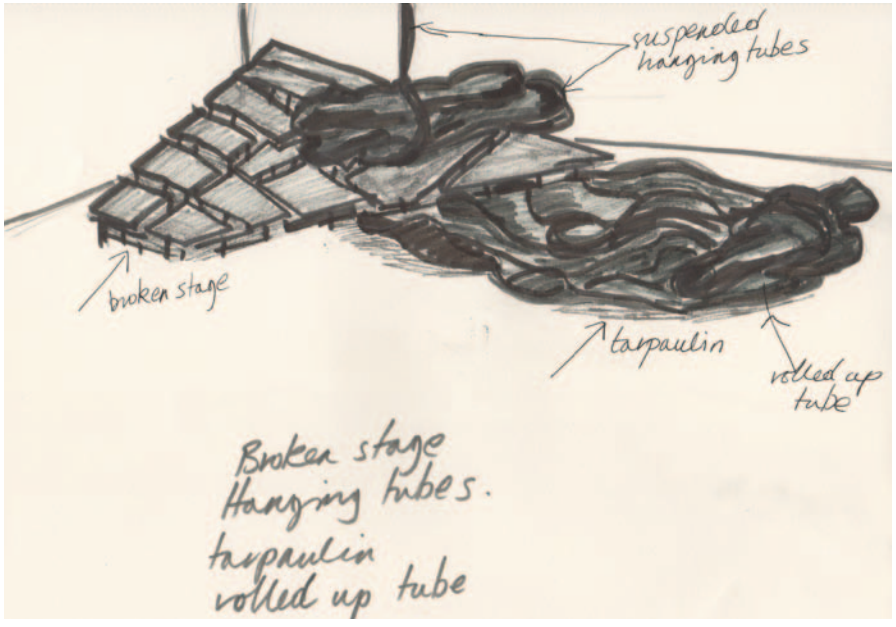
However, nothing prepares me for the confrontation of the space with the work. And it is in that order because in the initial meeting of the two, the space is dominant. I think my rather crude, simple drawing style, which I use for the preparatory drawings, emboldens the potential works as they appear on paper, giving them maximum strength as images, in preparation for this meeting between the space and the work.

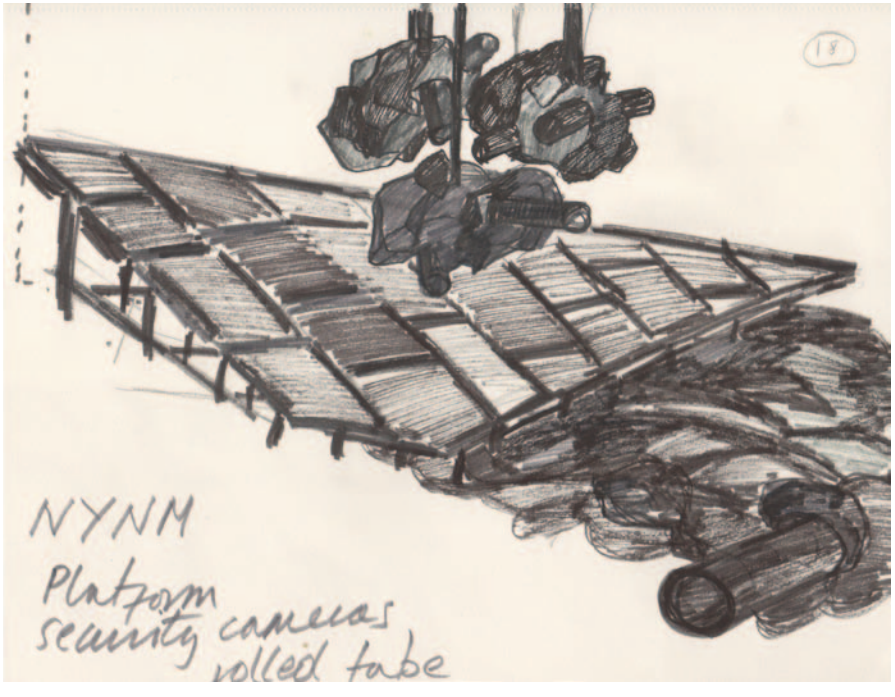
The drawings for the New Museum are intended to be as clear as possible about what is to be made. But they are premonitions. I had not thought of this word before. It is very pertinent and an exciting way of thinking about the drawings.

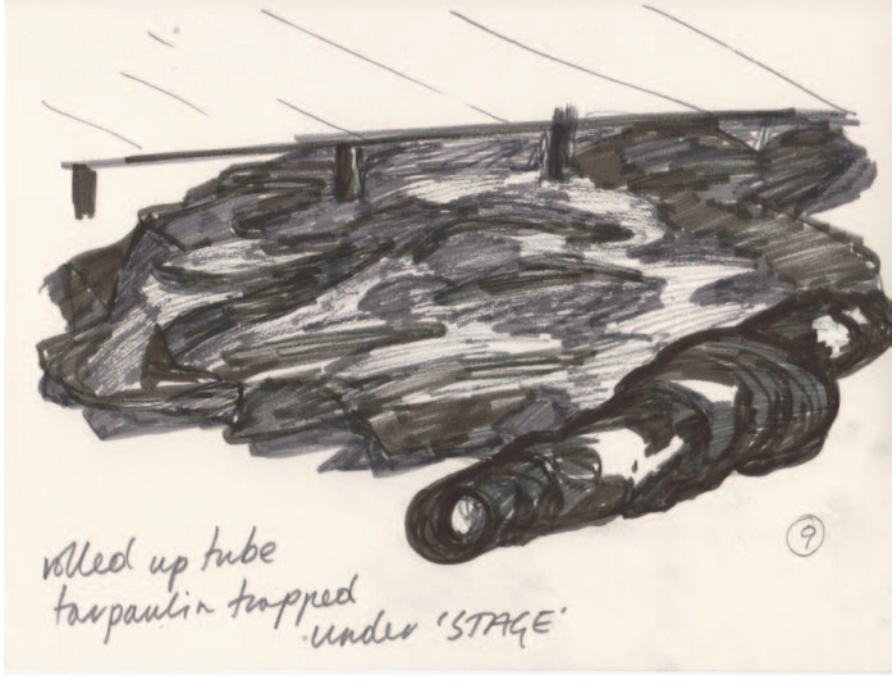
For me, a premonition has a psychic association. It's visionary, with a heightened awareness of something which is about to happen. There is even a sense of foreboding. Certainly, at the stage when the drawings are executed, there is no actual, physical work—it still has to happen, and the more ambitious the work is, the greater the sense of foreboding. The drawings seem threatening, demanding that they be fulfilled. In many ways the drawings are misleading. For example, the drawing of the arches cannot demonstrate the height of them. Instead, they remain cartoon versions of what I hope will actually emerge in the gallery space.

Perhaps, in an everyday sense, not many premonitions get fulfilled. But the expectancy and the strong sense of the impending event, and something which is "about to be," is dramatic. The drawings are produced with an intent that is full of hope.









Preparatory drawings for “Phyllida Barlow: siege,” New Museum, New York, 2012

The production process does erode that positivity to some extent. The reality of translating the drawings into actual, physical objects demands reality-checks, which can be at odds with what is on paper. I do encourage this process, where the original—the drawing and the premonition—have to meet the reality of the materiality of the production process and the resulting practicalities of weight, gravity, stability, structure, breakage, surface. And although that original flare of hope gets displaced, it becomes translated into the reality of the work itself.

I have always wanted to counteract the pragmatic activity and demands of making sculpture with the recognition of what goes on in my head—the absurd and unrealistic ambitions for the work, the juxtapositions of size, placing, and relationships between things—which, for me, often has filmic and surrealist references (Tarkovsky, Bresson, Resnais, Antonioni, Buñuel, Jancsó, Ernst, de Chirico, Picabia).

My drawings often originate from half-remembered things. I want to use the process of faulty memory as a way to allow these things to forget their origins and become something new. It is liberating to identify the preliminary processes of producing the work as a state of premonition. Importantly, and maybe this is a difference between a dreamlike state and a premonition, the latter has a sense of fleeting and ephemeral temporality. It is quick. Whereas a dreamlike state is slower and more enduring.

The drawn thing, whatever it might be, begins to play a part where its behavioral qualities offer a potential for enactment, playing a role, which is all in the future. As such, they cannot be anything more than an approximation of what might actually get made. Finally, when the work is actually being installed, what is there in the space—the works that make the exhibition—are approximations of a now remote "original."

I understand approximation as a creative act. It is an escape from truth, and permits lying and fibbing as a forceful resource. The objects, which eventually make it, are stand-ins, substitutes, and understudies for something barely remembered and usually forgotten. The final realization of the work is a premonition fulfilled, but surprisingly and unpredictably. There can be no relationship to the original thought, idea, or even the drawings. The premonition and the final event have a relationship but not a predestined one and I welcome this schism between the initiation of the work and its final realization.

Notes

1. Titled *Untitled: 21 arches* (2012).
2. Titled *Untitled: balcony* (2012).
3. From the work *Untitled: broken stage, crushed boxes, palettes, bound tubes, bunting, bundles, painted tarpaulins* (2012).
4. Titled *Untitled: compressed stockade* (2012).

this and following two pages: *untitled: stage*, 2011. Timber, polystyrene, paint, 129⅞ x 531½ x 196⅞ in (330 x 1350 x 500 cm). Installation view: "Sculptural Acts," Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2011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Object Lessons

Nicholas Cullinan

The word "sculpture" gives me pause in relation to Phyllida Barlow's protean body of work, implying, as it does, something one might put on a pedestal or feel compelled to walk around in order to contemplate its shifting planes and vantage points. Rather than capturing her practice, the term seems to close off her multivalent constructions and hermetically seal the meanings that could be brought to bear on them. "Thing" also sounds rather too provisional and casual for items which are, despite their haphazard appearance, thoughtful and considered. "Installation" isn't right either. That appellation calls forth what Rosalind Krauss has recently damned as "the spectacle of meretricious art called installation" in her most recent book, *Under Blue Cup* of 2011.[1] Instead, Barlow's assiduously ramshackle work is governed by the medium or technical support with which it is made and which in turn *makes the work*. Forces and materials are allowed to do as they will. Cloth and tarpaulin folds and sags, while lengths of timber remain erect and jut out at right angles. Process is tacitly inscribed upon all Barlow's objects. In this, I am reminded of Krauss's calls for a retrieval of the guild system of classifications, in order to effect a rigorous and clear-minded rethinking of what structures and constitutes any given work of art. As Krauss argues: "It was the medieval system of the guilds that presided over the arts as so many separate crafts: carvers in charge of stone or wood; casters responsible for bronze, either statues or doors; painters at work on stained glass, wooden panel, or plaster wall; weavers on grand ceremonial tapestries."[2] This litany of techniques and modes of facture speaks eloquently to Barlow's work. As she describes the making of her objects and their fusion of disparate materials: "The physical act of painting—the daubing, smearing, stroking, splashing gestures—can be done with many materials as well as paint. Those actions go back to my early encounters with making sculpture and using clay and plaster. With plaster, as with any liquid to solid material, there is limited time to do what has to be done before the material sets solid. There is an inherent urgency in using these materials."[3]

However, there is also artifice and illusion in Barlow's work, despite the rough schema of truth-to-materials that I have sketched out above. For example, Barlow has previously constructed a parodic and quasi-theatrical architecture of an imaginary city, as in "Street," her solo exhibition at Bawag Contemporary, Vienna, in 2010, where a fictive urban landscape was populated by props and mocked-up surrogates such as banners, parapets, store signs, and fallen columns. That which is apparently heavy is also made weightless, as in Barlow's remarkable solo exhibition "RIG" at Hauser & Wirth, London, in 2011. Confronting the viewer as they entered the double-height space of the wood-paneled former bank, was a forest of what looked like concrete blocks veiled in gaudy, multicolored scrim fabric and supported precariously, and seemingly impossibly, above the viewer's head on narrow wooden stilts. This tromp l'oeil effect evokes some of Barlow's principle concerns, such as the unifying relationship to gravity of both her wall-based and floor-based work, and games of scale and perspective.

In addition to such stretching of credulity, Barlow also plays with voids and the disappearing acts of objects. As she comments: "When I first started to work with clay, I was intrigued that you could make an object disappear. This was through learning the casting process where a mold takes a print of the clay object, the clay is then removed and the object has vanished. Then by filling the mold a different object displaces and replaces the original clay form. This was like a conjuring trick. It made me think of objects as both here and now—visible and physical—and also about to disappear, to vanish, to become invisible. I realized that this relates to the way we walk around objects, where the object constantly disappears because every view of the object is different: the object is constantly disappearing and appearing, of being displaced and replaced, changing itself as each different profile is revealed."*

Apparition and vanishing were also explored in Barlow's early works such as *Shedmesh* (1976). Here, a structural rapprochement between painting and sculpture, form and formlessness, was

enacted by covering a cuboid metal armature with an accumulation of tattered canvas remnants from two-hundred or so paintings which were tied and bound to this support. Inspired by the concept of "antiform," put forward by works from the 1960s, such as Robert Morris's sagging and drooping felt pieces and Eva Hesse's decomposing resin sculptures, the way Barlow outlines the dialectically interwoven aspects of making and unmaking, not to mention iconoclasm, of her actions in *Shedmesh*, is as both reconciliation and exorcism. She describes "a deep envy for the immediacy of the physical actions embraced within these works"* by Hesse and Morris, and describes the taking apart of scores of paintings in order to make a sculpture as "a release in terms of making processes. The remaking from this act of destruction through using the separate components of the stretchers and the canvases that used to be over the stretchers required quick, immediate actions. […] In this way I think I had taken the essentially flat form of the canvases and turned them into something solid and dense, which could be circumnavigated."*

It is worth saying something here about why a work like *Shedmesh* was startling in the context in which it was made. Barlow studied sculpture at the Chelsea School of Art in London, where she began teaching in the late 1960s before moving on to teach at the Slade School of Art in London. She vividly recalls both the parochial atmosphere of the British art world during the 1960s and her ambivalent relationship with the idea of sculpture as the impetus to adopting a more radical and hybrid approach to art making. As Barlow says: "My fury was directed at the tough, uncompromising methods that art schools insisted upon in their sculpture departments. Now I am grateful for having learnt those sculpture processes. But in the mid-1960s, when the challenges to defining all forms of art were so vital, so exploratory, so liberating, those sculptural processes of welding, carving, casting, and modeling seemed inhibiting and moral."* Barlow continues: "Eventually, in about 1964 I was lucky enough to see some images of Louise Bourgeois's work, then Eva Hesse, then Mario Merz, and gradually the extraordinary events that were going on in the US began to reveal themselves through the art journals."*

Shedmesh, 1976. Stretchers, canvas, foam, 71 x 71 x 71 in (180 x 180 x 180 cm). Camden Arts Centre, London

One way Barlow was able to defy such stultifying traditions was by daubing her "sculptures" with bright colors (when they ought really to have been left in monochrome, as both tradition and decorum demands) and gestural and decorative mark-making, which tend to be applied in a slapdash manner in gaudy industrial and synthetic paints. This relationship between sculpture and painting in Barlow's work plays on the long-standing tension between monochrome and polychrome in sculpture, by defiantly and exuberantly making *painted sculpture*. As Barlow states: "I remember the anarchic feeling of using an abstract expressionist painting style as a decorative 'finish' for these works, and the delight in doing so, but also realizing there was a link between using the paint as a surface in the same way as I might handle plaster or clay…The unsubtle colors are attention-seeking and theatrical. I want to embrace all those aspects of making that, historically, have been sort of morally questioned as not being within the domain of fine art, although of course overturned many times by artists such as Jeff Koons, Oldenburg, Niki de Saint Phalle, Bourgeois, Haim Steinbach—the list is endless."* Such transgressions of taste and parodies of museological modes of display are also evidenced in the pastiches of the ornaments and accessories of sculpture—both its trophies and tropes, one might say—such as plinths, or what Barlow describes as not sculpture *per se*, but "sculpture as a language." Her work flirts with a category we might deem sub-sculpture, in terms of furniture such as shelves, space dividers, and partitions. Not only this, but the installation of Barlow's works is often deliberately obstructive to the viewer. The way one is forced to make a detour to walk around them recalls Bruce Nauman's objectless corridors from the late 1960s, where the viewer instead is both subject and object of the work. Instead, Barlow's cumbersome constructions leave one unsure if her works are promenades which entice us to traverse them, or barricades to block our passage. Instead, perhaps they best recall the famous aphorism by Barnett Newman, that sculpture is "a thing which you trip over when you walk backwards to view a painting."

If Barlow's sculptures seem occasionally monolithic in size, they are also anti-monuments: her objects may adopt solid forms

RIG: untitled; blocks, 2011. Polystyrene, fabric, timber, cement, 283 ½ x 468 ½ x 409 ½ in (720 x 1190 x 1040 cm). Installation view: "RIG," Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

and appear monumental, but they are also contingent and ephemeral in appearance (and indeed many of her earlier works have not survived) and often constructed from deliberately shabby, simple materials in a maladroit fashion. The relationship between fixity and the shambolic or ephemeral in Barlow's constructions often seems to have something of modernism's failed utopias about it, and reminds us of the immersive nature of projects such as Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, constructed in a piecemeal fashion with whatever materials were available, and where the vision outstrips the means. For example, Barlow's installation at the Kunstverein Nürnberg, Nuremberg, in 2010, recalls Vladimir Tatlin's never-realized *Monument to the Third International*. As Barlow comments on this "combination of audacity and fragility" in such works by: "Gabo, Archipenko, Picasso…all these artists evidence a fearlessness in how to render their thoughts into immediate acts of making. Tatlin's monument/tower sustains all that—it is absurdly almost a helter-skelter fairground object, almost a Biblical tower of Babel, almost a skyscraper, almost a launching pad, and almost much more."* Tatlin's totemic and unfinished monument to the brave, new Soviet future, impossible in its scale and ambition and trapped in an eternal present through its failure to be realized, brings me to my conclusion. The tension between the finished and unfinished seems germane to all Barlow's constructions, which rely on and are unflinchingly honest about their expediency, method of making, and unapologetic revelation of process and imperfection. For Barlow, making a work of art is "a pursuit which does not have a finish." As she concludes, "I want to engage with possibility, not finality. The work is never finished. When time's up, I let it go."*

Notes

1. Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2011), ix.
2. Ibid., 3.
3. Author's conversation with Phyllida Barlow, September 2011, published in part as "The World is Never Finished: Phyllida Barlow and Nicholas Cullinan" in *Mousse*, Oct./Nov. 2011, 24, 63–71.

* Ibid.

STREET untitled: parapet, 2010. Plywood, timber, polystyrene, filler, paint, sealant, 78 ¾ x 47 ¼ x 94 ½ in (200 x 120 x 240 cm). Installation view: "STREET," BAWAG Contemporary, Vienna, 2010


ARCHES/NYNM

previous: Preparatory drawing for “Phyllida Barlow: siege,” New Museum, New York, 2012

RIG: untitled; hoops, 2011. Plywood, cement, paint, overall installed dimensions: 80⅜ x 141¾ x 110¼ in (204 x 360 x 280 cm). Installation view: “RIG,” Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

A Beginning

Thomas Houseago

The artist Jan Dibbets once told me that the British are natural sculptors—"look at Stonehenge," he said. There is something to this—something about a tradition of making, constructing, a mix of physicality and a weird, pragmatic beauty. The Forth Bridge is an amazing bridge, but more importantly it's a beautiful sculpture.

But there is also another image of the British landscape that I am familiar with. The way the city looks after violence, after struggle, after an attempt at resistance. Images I have of the miners' strike, the battles of the soccer hooligans, the poll tax riots. Strange constructions are made; weapons created; things destroyed; a strange kind of debris. I always saw the work of Joseph Beuys in this light and I see something of it in Phyllida Barlow's work, too. Her work almost seems to squat a space; does a sit-in; protests; raises a flag.

It takes tremendous energy, defiance, and discipline to achieve this. It can seem simple, stupid, rough, crude, ridiculous, and in a sense it is. But it is so necessary to bring this kind of physicality, sensuality, to a viewer—but also this resistance to a norm. An object should be compact, practical, well-designed, economic. These sculptures, with joy and anarchy, reject this and offer alternative experiences—without cool-hand irony or cynicism but also without pompous heroics.

Great monuments, in my opinion, have a sense of failure, collapse, absurdity within them. Rodin's *Balzac*, the *David*—they are strange, vulnerable creatures somehow. I think of the moment in *This is Spinal Tap* where the tiny Stonehenge prop drops behind the band as they play. There is a deep truth about sculpture in this sequence, concerning scale, monumentality, pathos, humor. I actually discovered Phyllida Barlow's work through a misunderstanding. I saw a drawing that I imagined was a study for a face or head; I mused on what a great mask this would make and it stuck in my mind. While writing this piece I realized it was actually a study for a turret and it made me realize I had projected the body onto Phyllida Barlow's work; I had, without thinking, felt heads, legs, tummies, crowds, as if the acts of sculpting and looking had fused the city, the defenses, the walls with the body—a strange kind of genesis.

untitled: pallettestarpaulinscylindersticksbunting, 2011. Timber, scrim, cement, calico, paint, tape, hardboard, MDF, 59 x 122 x 122 in (150 x 310 x 310 cm). Installation view: "Before the Law," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2011

untitled: balconies, 2011. Five balconies: wire mesh, scrim, cement, paint over steel frame, dimensions of each: 47 ¼ x 35 ⅜ x 47 ¼ in (120 x 90 x 120 cm). Installation view: "Before the Law," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, 2011

siege

untitled: arches, 2012. Acrylic on watercolor paper, 22¼ x 29⅞ in (56.4 x 75.9 cm)

untitled: compressedstockade, 2012. Acrylic on watercolor paper, 22 x 30⅛ in (55.9 x 76.6 cm)

untitled: balcony, 2012. Acrylic on watercolor paper, 22 x 30⅜ in (55.9 x 77 cm)

untitled: tube, 2012. Acrylic on watercolor paper, 21⅞ x 30⅜ in (55.7 x 77 cm)

About the Artist

Phyllida Barlow was born in 1944 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. She currently lives and works in London. Barlow attended Chelsea School of Art, London, and then the Slade School of Fine Art, London, graduating in 1966. She taught sculpture in London art schools for over forty years, retiring in 2008. She has had solo exhibitions at venues including the Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds (1995), Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, England (2004), BAWAG Contemporary, Vienna, Austria (2010), and the Kunstverein Nürnberg (2011). Barlow has participated in group exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Basel, Bergen Kunsthall, Norway, Haus der Kunst, Munich, and with Nairy Baghramian at the Serpentine Gallery, London. She is the recipient of the 2012 Aachen prize and has an exhibition at the Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany, also in May 2012.

Works in the Exhibition

Untitled: 21 arches, 2012
Polystyrene, cement, scrim, paint, and varnish
Dimensions variable

Untitled: balcony, 2012
Steel, wire netting, polyurethane foam, cement, scrim, paint, and varnish
70⅞ x 94½ x 126 in (180 x 240 x 320 cm)

Untitled: broken stage, crushed boxes, palettes, bound tubes, bunting, bundles, painted tarpaulins, 2012
Timber, cardboard, cement, scrim, paint, polystyrene, tarpaulin, wire netting, fabric, wadding, plastic, and tape
Dimensions variable

Untitled: compressed stockade, 2012
Timber, wire netting, paper, and cement
47¼ x 118⅛ x 118⅛ in (120 x 300 x 300 cm)

Untitled: hanging container, 2012
Timber, plywood, scrim, and cement
39⅜ x 39⅜ x 90½ in (100 x 100 x 230 cm)

All works courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

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