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Jen Durbin

SILAS VON MORISSE GALLERY

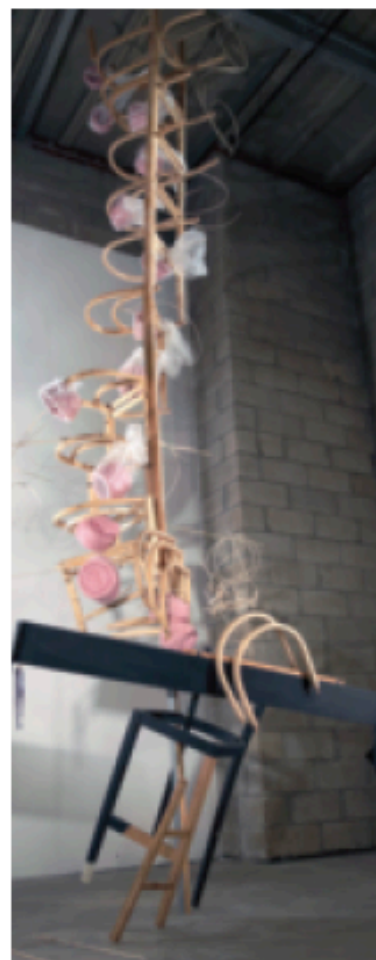
The title of Jen Durbin's 11-part installation *90 Moves in Nine Seconds* (*The Jackie Series 2001–2017*) refers to the actions of Jackie Kennedy in the immediate moments after her husband, President John F. Kennedy, was shot in Houston. Durbin's immensely complicated, immensely ambitious project follows the movements of Jackie's pillbox hat, as captured in nine seconds of film, in a sequence of sculptures that rise as high as 30 feet. Made of cast-off poles and other random pieces of wooden debris, the sculptures are improvisatory and informal with-

out yielding to chaos. Their formal discipline derives from the highly detailed micro-history of their origins. They feel inexorably, quintessentially American — embodying the classic mix of pop culture, violence, and melodramatic tragedy that has long characterized U.S. political culture. We are perhaps no longer quite so taken with conspiracy theories concerning the shooting (supposedly facilitated by the Russians or the Mafia), but something unknown lingers, even though time has pushed these theories into a place where their urgency now seems slightly silly.

So why would a highly trained artist (the Art Institute of Chicago and Yale) like Durbin revive something essentially moot? The first point that many people would make is that the controversy is not really dead. Second, Durbin's reconstruction renews our sense that art can transform historical fact into something more intuitive, more resonant of emotional than actual truth. The individual pieces, almost too complicated to describe, are deeply sculptural — individual dowels of wood poke out at the viewer from every direction, sometimes gathered into bunches. The pink hats are everywhere, garnishing the baroque complexities of individual works while providing a concrete historical reference point. This project is truly an elegy, but it also possesses the living force of a present time at some

distance from the event. In *'The 1-2'* (*Scattershot*), balance results from a chaos in which wooden strips, extended black supports, and the inevitable hats develop intuitive relations, form and linear extension supporting each other. Rather like a house of cards, the disparate elements construct an overall view that works remarkably well.

Exhibited in a long, slightly narrow space, *90 Moves in Nine Seconds* was overwhelming. Though the individual pieces did not follow the



sequence defined by Jackie's movements, the narrative implications were clear. A work such as this raises the question of just how much background detail we need to know to make sense of what we see. Is all the available historical material a strength or a disadvantage? Durbin has taken on the challenge of narrative, always difficult to achieve in sculpture. We can appreciate the work as a purely formal exercise, but that would lessen its achievement. Its factual basis lends

it weight, and we must see its intricacies as inspired transformation of a sordid event.

—Jonathan Goodman



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