

NEW ART EXAMINER

ART & VISUAL CULTURE FROM THE GREATER MIDWEST

CHICAGO

HELEN MIRRA

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HELEN MIRRA GAVE US A PIECE OF THE SKY. Elegantly laid out on the uninterrupted floor and made of sections of hand-dyed indigo fabric, this bit of sky undulates softly across the expanse, evoking a fresh spring morning of solemn promise. Neither too clinical nor overtly sentimental, the piece seems to hover gently between science and poetry, offering more the viewpoint of a generous beneficent god than the violent realization of Chicken Little's famous hysterical warning. However, Mirra's piece, titled *Sky-Wreck*, does intimate that our romantic notions of space, and our attempts at the orderly arrangement of it, tell us more about our own desires for stability and control than about the possibility of objectively representing nature.

Mirra's model of the sky is an exact segment: one-eleventh of the domed hemispherical view of the sky visible on flat terrain, at a scale of one to 333. On the installation's accompanying poster, the artist evokes the Bible, Walter Benjamin, Marcel Duchamp, Max Planck, and Paul Celan (from whom the title of the piece is borrowed). From various disciplines, all of these thinkers use an understanding of the sky as a space/time continuum to cogitate on art, history, death, and science, indeed the very exigencies of Modernism itself. The form of Mirra's piece is taken from Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, a popularized version of an earlier experimental model designed to replicate the sky. Mirra's is 110 triangles made of blue cotton woven in India, where the artist spent time developing the piece. Most of the triangles are sewn together, though some edges are left alone, to allow the work to lie flat. The triangles vary slightly in size, true to the geodesic model, so that if completely fastened together they would make a faintly curved, dome-like surface. To explain the orientation of *Sky-Wreck*, Mirra said, "You can see the sewed seams [joining the triangles] because we are looking from above, like God." From below, in our human sphere, the sky is seamless.

A viewer might be seduced into following Mirra's historical research in replicating this utopian model of space, and consider the way historical and personal circumstance determines reception of poetic metaphor (i.e. Celan's resuscitation of poetry after World War Two). But the piece inspires a more visceral response. There was a certain quiet reverence to the presentation, the aura of a prayer rug or precious artifact wafting over the expanse, even as Carl Andre's metal squares and Robert Morris's droopy felts are duly referenced as antecedents. Minimalism privileges the viewer's bodily interaction with the work as central to the understanding of an artwork's challenge. In previous work, Mirra has consistently married this aesthetic's pared-down presentation with an injection of hand-made folksy materiality, for example exhibiting the earth-toned clothes she determinedly wore for a decade in a block of neatly folded fabric or weaving a covering rug to comfort a section of railway track. Weaned on the failures of Minimalism and Modernism, Mirra has developed a material conceptualism that is a signature pose for her generation.

There is a danger that this stance will be interpreted as banking on the nostalgia of the audience for a coherent avant-garde galloping along toward Modernist utopia. But for Mirra, nostalgia's uncritical evocation of things past is neither pro nor con but Postmodernly illustrates the subtleties and complexities of twentieth-century thought. Even though it may seem retrograde, Mirra's evocation of historical Modernism signals a renewed belief in that movement's claims for arts' relevance to contemporary life. In its gentle, mournful resonance—of form, materials, and historical reference—this hope is beginning to take on a more distinct form. *Sky-Wreck* is, by far, this artist's most successful attempt to bring her vision of Minimalism and the Modernist utopia embedded within it to a physical manifestation.

Kathryn Hixson is the editor of New Art Examiner.

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Sky-Wreck, 2001. Dyed linen, dimensions variable.