



From Land and Sound to Thought

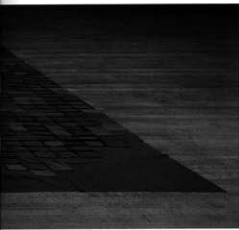
In his reminiscence of the radical Quaker preacher Elias Hicks (1748–1830), Walt Whitman quotes the abolitionist and visionary's exhortation regarding the difference between superfluous oratory and meaningful insight. "I don't want to express a great many words," Hicks is said to have remarked. "But I want you to be called home to the substance."¹

Helen Mirra's art is not unlike Hicks's philosophy—stripped bare, yet strangely tinged with elemental familiarity. Beginning with such workaday realities as trees and ships, railroads and maps, Mirra blends a broad array of historical, scientific, and aesthetic references, generating installations whose quiet holism belies their intellectual and sensory variety. Specially commissioned by the Whitney, *Declining Interval Lands*, which incorporates floor sculpture, wall work, sound recording, and a rich compendium of allusion and quotation, draws upon the art historical vocabularies of Minimalism, Postminimalism, Conceptualism, and Land Art. Despite this complexity, the project—with its wool and cotton fibers in moss green and blue-gray—remains ineluctably material, enigmatically intimate. For Mirra, labor is a mirror for the mind; her precise, repetitive actions, such as cutting and sewing interlocking fabric bands and panels, or parsing out a sonic mapping of the "interval lands" (the narrow zone of northern latitudes where elm trees grow), provide a lens through which to focus thought. In *Declining Interval Lands*, Mirra's subjects are American elms and Dutch elm disease, but her interest radiates outward to encompass commerce and colonization, displacement and the traces hewn into the landscape by migration. Scrubbed clean of preconceptions, these ideas take body in art objects, establishing a visual mnemonic for natural and historical phenomena.

Like a forest—or a culture—*Declining Interval Lands* comprises multiple parts that appear to be separate but in fact interlock: the wall work *Elm/Elias*, the floor sculpture *elm dropcover*, and the sound recording *Maps of Parallels 41° N and 49° N (at a scale of ten seconds to one degree)*. Also integral to the installation are the sky-gray walls and the bench made from recycled shipping pallets. Together, these disparate elements explore metaphors of the "declining interval," a motif integrating the musical interval,



Shipped bench. 2002. Reclaimed wood and milk paint. 16 x 79 x 16 in. (40.6 x 200.7 x 40.6 cm). Collection of the artist



elm dropcover, 2002. Wool felt, 156 x 180 x 4 in. (396.2 x 457.2 x 10.2 cm). Collection of the artist

the interval between degrees of latitude, the often destructive intervals of history, and of course, the decline of the elm.

The wall work, *Elm/Elias*, wraps around two gallery walls on a narrow band of cotton cloth. With its discontinuous, allusive text and 16-millimeter width, the banding functions as a stationary movie, a cinema of associations whose movement arises as the reader/viewer walks along its length. Investigating the elm as embattled species and American icon, *Elm/Elias* cites varied ways in which the shade tree and its hardwood have been put to use, from the planting of ornamental avenues to the manufacture of longbows, gunboat keels, and railroad ties. Mirra's text appropriates and adapts selections from a variety of sources, among them Hicks's sermons and the writings of the Shaker feminist and abolitionist Lucretia Mott (1793–1880); the *Timber Merchant's Guide* of 1823; the 1931 WPA *Guide to New York City*; Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* (1955); and "Pythagorean Silence" (1982) by poet Susan Howe. The text limns a

cycle of deforestation beginning with the American colonial expansion of the eighteenth century and cresting in the land rushes of the nineteenth. Despite concentrated replanting programs in the early 1900s, domestic lumber production could not meet demand, and importation of elm timber began. In the 1930s, shipments from Europe arrived fatally infested with both elm bark beetles and Dutch elm disease (so called because the pathogen was first described by a Dutch biologist). Richard Wolkomir writes in his 1998 article on the elm in *Smithsonian Magazine*:

As the freight cars rolled toward Ohio, the hatching beetles, their legs and carapaces smeared with fungus, abandoned the dead logs for the bark of living elms....A death trail ran along rail lines from the New York docks to the midwestern furniture factories. And the plague spread fast. One year a tree would yellow and wilt. The next year it would be dead.²

By the mid-1960s, the infestation had become an epidemic, and throughout the 1970s the Eastern and Midwestern United States were marked by rows of sickly, thinning elms, bleak road shoulders, and field boundaries where dead stands had been cut down. *elm dropcover*, with its leaf-size panels of army-blanket wool in shades of drab and forest green, might be a gravesite for, or monument to, these lost woods. An abstraction of a tree's crown, the irregular grid makes cups or compartments, open yet empty, their seams serrated with pinkish shears like the double-toothed edges of elm leaves. Wrinkles in the felt mime a root network. A mound or hummock bulges slightly in the center, like the material ghost of a tree stump that has rotted back to soil. Actually a pile of blankets, the hummock incorporates multiple resonances, gesturing not only toward the death of trees, but—metonymically—to the brutality implicit in warships and wooden weapons, and to the westward movement of immigrants and the subsequent felling of virgin forest. With its streamlined, condensed forms and use of military materials, the piece might also be read as an oblique homage to the Minimalist sculptors and Vietnam-era soldiers whose ventures coincided with the worst period of Dutch elm attrition.³

Taken in this spirit, the sound piece *Maps of Parallels 41° N and 49° N* (at a scale of ten seconds to one degree) insinuates itself into the installation as both dirge and ode, a passage via land and sound to thought. A

Elm/Elias, 2002 (detail), ink on cotton banding, 5/8 in. x 49 ft. (16 mm x 14.9 m). Collection of the artist

g small pieces complete to the absence of that year,

inquiry



Sky-wreck, 2001 (installation view). Handwoven, indigo-dyed cotton cloth, dimensions variable.
Collection of the artist; courtesy The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

collaboration with the musician Ernst Karel, the recording traces the forty-first and forty-ninth parallels, translating their geography into sound. Mirra explains:

Each sound work is a map of a latitude line, going westward. There is a sound of wind which changes, depending on whether the piece is moving over land or sea, tundra or mountains, or coast or open ocean. The pace/texture of my guitar shifts as an analogue to the topography, and over flat lands there is also a railroad-like sound, actually a 16mm film rewind crank. Every river is a silence.⁴

Now grating, now meditative, *Maps of Parallels 41° N and 49° N* follows what geographers call "imaginary lines," scoring litting but disembodied journeys. Mirra's interpretation of the forty-first parallel departs from Pórtó, Portugal, continues into the Atlantic, through New York to Lincoln, Nebraska, and Eureka, California, over the Great Wall of China into Uzbekistan, across the Sea of Marmara, and travels full-circle to Portugal. Eight degrees farther north the sound shoots off the coast of Brittany to Newfoundland, skims the U.S.-Canadian border west of Lake Superior, touches the Bitterroot Mountains, traverses the Pacific and the Da Hinggan Ling mountains of China, crosses Ukraine and the Czech Republic, fords the Seine, and returns to Brittany. In intervals both physical and metaphysical, the ambient pulses and static in this work produce a soundtrack for associative motion, what Mirra calls "an invisible silent film."⁵

Like Elias Hicks, who sought unhampered contact with transcendent reality, or Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), the founder of kindergarten and another of her touchstone visionaries,⁶ Mirra approaches knotty representational problems with the freshness of a beginner's mind. Such primary engagement with the stuff of art—color and texture, felt and film, music, language, and ultimately, consciousness—derives as much from art history as it does from innocence. The visual and tonal geometries of Carl Andre or John Cage and the wrinkled, unstretched canvas floor pieces of Richard Tuttle are antecedents to her austere sensuality. But Mirra is not merely a materialist. Intrigued as she is by systems of production and measurement, she also enjoys the anecdotal ramifications of simple objects and routine tasks. The mix of indirection and emotion in the Conceptual performances of Bas Jan Ader, for example, or the panoramic engagement practiced by Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark appeal to her. Like these artists, Mirra leaves her installations open to metaphysical interpretation, permeable to narrative and

digression, prone to readings both quizzical and elegiac. She exploits a delicacy of scale and facture, a concern with low-tech, manual processes like sewing that still carry the connotation of "women's work." Yet in scope, her art addresses the majestic sweep of continents and oceans, the extravagant, often violent adventures of building a railroad or going to sea, and technological triumphs like trigonometry, cartography, or audio recording.

A good example of this plenitude of connotation inside reduced form is Mirra's *Sleepers* series (2000), which looks at first glance like a group of classically Minimalist floor sculptures. The term "sleepers" is railroad slang for the ties that support the track, and Mirra's rhythmic horizontals of creamy, undyed wool and ruddy wood hint at sagas of frontier hardihood and storied travel. Graphing a similarly nuanced meshing of matter and action are Mirra's 16mm films of latitude lines—clear film leader painted in watercolor according to mapping principles similar to those of *Maps of Parallels 41° N and 49° N*, with blue for water, brown for tundra, green for grass or forest, light blue for ice, and white for snow.

Mirra often questions human ability to measure and represent the physical world. The installations *Beforsten* (2000) and *Miller's Views* (2001) condense, respectively, the flora of the Black Forest and the blades of a windmill into ordered yet ambiguous visual rhythms. Another recent work, *Sky-wreck* (2001), is a 1:333 scale model of the atmospheric vault as seen from Earth, shattered and transmuted into 110 tidy triangles of handwoven indigo cotton, fanned out across the floor like the flayed skin of a geodesic dome. Splicing the proto-scientific thinking of the Milesian philosophers (sixth century BCE) with the ideas of mathematician and social theorist Buckminster Fuller and the poet Paul Celan, *Sky-wreck* proposes a scheme for charting illimitable space, a gambit that is both knowingly hubristic and genuinely awe-inspired.

Between the sky of *Sky-wreck* and the land of *Declining Interval Lands* stands the human realm of curiosity and intellect. Circumspect, methodical, soberly and probingly romantic, Mirra's explorations in this area call each material she makes use of—wood, sound, textile, text—back to its thingness, its bare being. Her meditations are reverent but skeptical, like Hicks's. She treats materials as if they had intimately observed and idiosyncratic personalities, manifold histories that she seeks to explicate. As a friend of that Transcendentalist contrarian, Thoreau, remarked, "I love Henry, but...as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree." For Helen Mirra, the thought of extending friendship toward aloof and silent matter makes perfect sense. Her myriad allusions crystallize in work that is acute, compressed, and almost startlingly passionate.

—Frances Richard



Sleepers (four), (three), (four), 2000. Handwoven, undyed wool and wood, 84 x 84 x 2 in. (214 x 214 x 5 cm) each. Collection of the artist; photograph courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert

NOTES

1. Walt Whitman, "November Boughs," *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 1,236.
2. Richard Wolkomin, "Racing to Revive Our Embattled Elms," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 1998, pp. 40–49. Quoted in letter from the artist, May 2002.
3. Conversation with the artist, May 19, 2002.
4. Letter from the artist, May 2002.
5. Conversation with the artist, May 19, 2002.
6. See Mirra's CD *Held Geometry* (Explain: 2000, which acoustically investigates "Froebel Gifts," a series of twenty activities developed by Friedrich Froebel to teach manual dexterity and geometry through folding, cutting, weaving, etc.
7. Quoted in Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: Signet Classics, 1965), p. 415.