

Over the last five years, Chicago-based artist Helen Mirra has established herself as one of the foremost practitioners of what Benjamin Buchloch once called “dense minimalism.” Her art is in synch with the formal qualities of 1960s Minimalist forebears yet inverts the ‘muteness’ of those artists’ works—with their resolute push of meaning outward onto the environment and viewer—by her use of materials and processes which load each of her objects with internal value. Mirra imbues her forms with notions of handicraft and labor, landscape, the body, and language; what results are restrained, formally elegant, and highly allusive fabric sculptures, drawings, text works, and films. They reward extended deliberation by acting as a prism through which to comprehend abstract concepts and disparate inferences. *Skywreck* (2001) is a telling example: it is an unfolded polyhedral form, with 110 triangular patches of fabric laid on the floor, each richly hand-dyed with indigo ink. The work folds together references to Dr. Bonner (inventor of the eponymous soap) and Paul Celan, R. Buckminster Fuller’s dymaxion maps and geodesic domes, and Carl Andre’s sculpture *Mons Veneris* (1975). Occasionally the complexity (or obscurity) of her allusion is too tough a nut to crack, as in the abstruse philosophical references—here rendered in two languages as disjointed concrete poetry—of her recent typewriter ink-on-cotton works, but for the most part Mirra ably weds form and content. Her spare works are suffused with but not weighted down by their symbolic meaning.

For her first solo exhibition in New York since a 2002 Whitney Museum installation, Mirra reinterpreted *65 Instants*, an artwork that debuted this past winter at the Berkeley Art Museum. At that museum, sixty-five wooden planks made of reclaimed shipping pallets—each cut to the length from Mirra’s elbow to fingertip and to the width of her hand, then laboriously painted varying shades of green-gray with milk paint—were arranged in an unbroken row around the gallery walls. The uniform arrangement, which called to mind the horizon line between sea and sky not far from the site of the exhibition, suppressed concerns with the presentation and instead allowed for other aspects of the work—notably process and material—to resonate. The title *65 Instants* refers to a Buddhist concept of time wherein sixty-five instants (only discernable through heightened attentiveness) occur every moment. Mirra’s symbiotically monastic, laborious process was symbolically significant: she extended those instants, making one work a day for just over two months, thereby turning her studio practice into a semi-sacred ritual. Nature’s imperfections, time’s markings, and the inability of human hands to exactly recreate their own gestures lead to a pleasurable variation from work to work. The planks ranged within a narrow palette of greens and grays; the putty that filled holes and cracks was in different locations on each; the wood’s grain ran in different directions; and the natural warp of each pallet gave each a slightly different relationship to the wall.

Reconfiguring the installation and placing it in another context necessarily altered part of the work’s meaning. Not all sixty-five planks were shown in New York, breaking the evenness of the West Coast presentation; here, individual planks and groups were spread around the room, interspersed with horizontally oriented thin cotton strips dyed with watercolor and imprinted with typewritten words. The proximity to her language works highlighted another aspect of *65 Instants*. Almost all of the planks have a two-word title, ‘third’ being one of them (a reference to Pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce’s concept of ‘thirdness’, analogous to the Buddhist concept of the middle way). Strung together, titles like *Third clover*, *Third acorn*, *Third smoldering*, *Third gap*, *Grounded third* (2003) or *Marsh*, *Sentient third*, *Beneficial third*, *Relational third*, *Non-thought third* (2003) have an incantatory repetitiveness. On the wall, the horizontal space between each plank assumes importance—not unlike the vertical space between units of a Donald Judd stack or the pause for breath in speech—and the staccato placement read as a visual Morse code. A third type of work, a small rectangle of knitted undyed wool approximately the same size as the planks and laid on a ledge between two windows in the gallery, connected this exhibition to the fabric pieces that thread through her career. Yet it seemed unnecessary given the conceptual rigor of her new project. In light of Mirra’s repeated use of specific materials from one exhibition to the next—a bench the artist installed at the Whitney two years ago was made of wooden pallets—perhaps it is less anomalous than harbinger of what is to come.



Helen Mirra measuring a plank for *65 Instants*
Courtesy of the Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley