

Dilated Reflections: Anne Libby Philipp Hindahl

Anne Libby's sculptures do singular things. They make levels of reality meet in a hallucinatory way, and create analogies to the architecture of late capitalism. By bringing together disruption and mimesis, the artist seeks spaces of subversion.

Libby's wall pieces in *Dilated Sky* (2020) at Soft Opening—an art space located in the subway station under London's Piccadilly Circus, one of the world's most traveled intersections—soften the strictness of the grid. The depictions of glass facades, made of polyester padding, waver as if in heat. The artist quilts them in a manner that resembles the fleetingness of a mirage. The upper material is a retroreflective fabric. One of its features is the ability to return a maximum of light in a perpendicular line, which makes it very apt for use in nighttime security gear: the surface appears brightest to an observer located near the original light source, for instance a car's headlights. Libby uses the fabric to cover the padding of her pieces, to a mimetic effect. The upper is taut, slightly wrinkled, which adds to the destabilizing, mirage-like effect.

Libby's latest work takes on the modernist tropes of glass and steel. Her wall pieces make illusionistic space meet sculpture; the means of depiction and the thing pictured overlap. Quilting melts into grid, retroreflection imitates reflection. They mirror something that isn't there and lead the eye to confuse levels of reality, like a painterly trick.

The practice of this artist, born in 1987, has gone through several phases. Very little about her current work recalls the starkness of her earlier output: sculptures that partition space and impose their presence like disciplinary architecture. Most striking is their symmetry, which invites comparisons to the organic patterns of Art Nouveau, or the mystical fantasies of Hilma af Klint. Libby's interest is a formal one. The pieces are based on cutouts of picnic tables: "I thought about questions of ornamentation, design, and what is important to functionality."¹ The work led her to consider the space of manufacturing, "from desktop space to the digital space and the vector drawing"—which is the starting point, before an object enters the material world. The tables, seemingly utilitarian objects, turn out to have ornamental qualities. Libby drew on their undersides to make the supporting structure appear.

Her subsequent creations are more sculptural in the classical sense; they don't separate space, but inhabit it. Viewers can freely move around them instead of having their trajectory dictated. They teem with small cylinders—intricate details cut from Formica tables—while the vertical structure is made from plywood and repurposed Venetian blinds. Some nod to organic matter and have laminated garlic peels at their feet, like flower petals that never rot. The arrangement seems in constant, mechanical movement, a trypophobe's nightmare. This is not an atavistic take on industrial repetitiveness, and much less a nostalgic nod to Art Nouveau, but rather a profoundly dehumanized structure. And yet, an element of anarchy is present. In an *Artforum* review, Libby's freestanding sculptures were once described as "a kind of concretism whose late place in genre history reminds

me of a postapocalyptic settlement, both decadent and thriving,"² as if the only way to comprehend the pieces is to insert them in a narrative: a post-human condition, after sculpture and the narrative of progress have somehow come to a halt.

The objects, which were on view in the lofty spaces of Night Gallery in Los Angeles in 2018, continue the structural rigidity of Libby's early sculptures. They stand tall, like the skeletons of skyscrapers, while "the quilts are the skins to a building," says Libby, and this sort of literalism is a little surprising. Yet in the Underground station beneath Piccadilly Circus, the diluted grids, and their relation to commercial urbanism, make sense.

The grid is the ideal and the dread of modernism. In late nineteenth- and twentieth-century urbanism it marked the departure from the medieval, pedestrian city and became the matrix of progress. Then it stood up and was vertically reproduced in the facades of skyscrapers. High-rises and office buildings became shorthand for twentieth-century commerce. The grid was turned into a metaphor for standardization, and modern life aligned to it. But then the plane of squares and right angles dissolved. The reflective surfaces and glass curtain buildings turned out to create fleeting fata morganas, just like the crumbling mortgage bonds that ushered in the 2008 financial collapse and turned out to be fictional: castles in the sky, made of reflections. By an unlikely dialectical swirl, in the past two decades, swaying, curved buildings appeared in cities as if the architectural symbols of these phantoms were placed right in the heart of contemporary capitalism.

The wobbly structures, the sunset variations, all play on the anarchic potential of architecture. Libby observes: "I hope that these reflections on their own are a reminder that there are spaces for subversion and disruption." Inadvertently, one is reminded of something Walter Benjamin wrote ninety years ago about architecture and reflections: "What [. . .] makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt."³

- 1 All the artist quotes in the text are from the author's conversation with Anne Libby, July 29, 2020.
- 2 Abraham Adams, "Critics' Picks: Anne Libby," *Artforum*, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/anne-libby-75862>.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "These Spaces For Rent" (1928), in *One-Way Street* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 77.

117 Anne Libby, *Collerette*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson

118 Anne Libby, *Multiplexer*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

119 Anne Libby, *Green Diaphragm*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London

120 Anne Libby, *Afocal (system)*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London

121 Anne Libby, *Rollbacks* (detail), 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Magenta Plains, New York









