

sara bremen

All of This and Nothing, Hammer Museum

<http://www.sarabremen.org>

March 14, 2011

The current exhibit at the Hammer has a lofty and somewhat general intention: to encompass all of life, and nothing of it. That is, the artwork is to touch on daily and personal ideas while also focusing on form and process.

It was the focus on process that caught my attention. Process could be a very good focus for an exhibit when the artwork itself might be more elusive, harder to understand at first. Unfortunately, the process of these artists was presented either vaguely or in a way that was so separated from the artwork itself, it was hard to follow.

For the first time, it was very clear to me how disconnected the wall text in an exhibit can be. Looking at artwork and looking at words to describe the artwork, especially in terms of the artistic process, was very hard for me to follow. Dianna Molzan's canvas sculptures stood out. The work itself was interesting and clearly process-heavy. She had cut intricately thin strips out of a typical artist's canvas to create three-dimensional, deconstructed sculptures. The text that accompanied her work, however, was just too hard to follow. Maybe my brain just isn't quick enough, but if I'm looking at sculpture and then being asked to read in great detail how it was made, I can't make the leap. At the very least, I need a diagram. "We are visual creatures," my high school math teacher used to say and when else are we more attuned to looking, not necessarily reading, than in a museum. I don't think that a step-by-step explanation with each stage of the canvas laid out would be always necessary, but for a show to focus on process and then make it so hard to follow doesn't make sense. I'm curious now how we can make a successful visual description, as opposed to a textual one.

I found myself drawn to the more narrative pieces in the show: they were easier to get a hold onto before pulling yourself in. I was particularly taken with Fernando Ortega's *N. Clavipes Meets S. Erard, Movement 3*. His three photographs depicted a harp whose strings had been replaced by a spider's spun web. And the little spider was there, sitting on top, posing for his picture. Here, the work's process is very clear in the work itself. All I needed to be told was that he actually put a real spider in a room with a real, empty harp.

Mateo Tannatt's movie set sculpture was similarly pleasing. The found objects told a clear story — what that story was, I'm not sure, but the recognizable objects were familiar and reminded me of creating hours and hours of stories with dolls and pillows and a deck of cards and my brother's Matchbox cars.

Kerry Tribe's *The Last Soviet* was outstanding. The ruleset around her film was so clear and her storytelling so compelling that the two — form and narrative — worked seamlessly

together. Part of it was a great story and part of it was fascinating visuals and juxtapositions. The descriptive text for her work was similar to that of Molzan's and I wonder why it was easier for me to read about a film than about a sculpture. Perhaps it was the words of the voice-over? I think actually it was because the film takes up time in a way different from sculpture. I was able to read the description and almost follow along with the film as an example of itself. With the sculpture, I had to stop and switch and look at/for something I wasn't sure about.

Karla Black's white sand and plaster sculptures were really interesting. Like Molzan's, Black's work is very process- and form-driven. I missed the same kind of visual description and understanding I looked for with Molzan's work. At the same time, Black's serene desert of white sand brought such an emotional reaction on a gut-level for me personally, that the description, visual or textual, didn't seem as necessary. Part of it, admittedly, was smelling something so sweet and peering over and being convinced that she had used Lush bath bombs and then being so giddily surprised when I read the materials used. The aroma and the brightness of the sand created a truly environmental experience.

It was only as I was leaving that I caught Charles Long's interactive piece: a plexiglass box of real leaves with instructions printed on each one. Maybe I would have felt differently had I picked up a leaf on my way in instead of out, but I couldn't get into it. The printing was dark and smudged and besides being hard to read, the disconnect between the leaf and the words made me feel icky. It was this very permanent text on a very ephemeral, natural object. And you weren't even supposed to take the leaves with you... The instructions themselves felt forced and condescending: think about your body in the space of the exhibit, think about your day from morning until now. It's cute, I guess, but nothing I actually want to do. I wonder what would've happened had the leaves directed you to interact with other people in the gallery. Or given you space to draw. Anything but read.