Dove Bradshaw: Between Science and Poetry

Both technical and artistic explanations attach to this New York artist's process works, which are perhaps most deeply influenced by John Cage's engagement with change and chance.

BY JANET KOPLOS

The exhibition “Dove Bradshaw: Formulations 1992–2002,” mounted at the Minikahda Gallery of Baruch College in New York, covered a great deal of ground in its 21 works, done in mediums from gold to photography to video. There was a red-painted steel mounted high on one wall, and a photograph of a seated female nude on whose back was painted a list of the elements found in the human body, in type sizes used to their proportional precision. Bradshaw is clearly curious and exploratory. Several possible understandings suggest themselves for the variety of pieces shown. One is a scientific explanation, for various works involve beakers, substances dripping from glass flasks, surface crystallizations and evidence of careful procedures that might be more native to the lab than to the studio. There was a chasm of rock out eaten away by water, a marble mass stained by a nugget of iron pyrite placed on it, a strip of copper mounted high on the gallery wall, leaving a pattern of vomiting drops down the entire surface; but other pieces more clearly speak of the studio: large two-dimensional works on paper or linen have blotsches, stains, impervious encrusted accumulations and shrubs reminiscent of the formal fluctuations and swelling ambitions of Abstract Expressionism. They are also lush, atmospherically beautiful.

What seems to link most of these works is a certain inner logic leading to reactions, but ones without perfect predictability, allowing for nature to participate as it will. These processes involve open-ended transformations, so that printed images of the works are noticed with the date when the work was “activated” and also the date when it was photographed. If one were to see the work later, it would not look the same. The painting-like pieces (from an intimate 17 by 14 inches to the more imposing 32 by 66 inches) are titled Contingency or Uncontingency. Exhibition labels theorized that they involve silver, gold of sulfur and varnish on linen or canvas. These may evoke clouds or splotches, celestial views or microscopic details. The language is nature’s, wide large or small. The artist has chosen the conditions and decided when to start and stop the process, just as in any painting but has minimized her hand in the interim.

The show was accompanied by Thomas McEvilley’s book The Art of Dove Bradshaw: Nature, Change and Indeterminacy, which describes Bradshaw’s interest in alchemy and her long engagement with the Eastern-foxed ideas of John Cage. McEvilley, in his broadly learned and fascinating style, emphasizes both the conceptual nature of her endeavor and its symbolic references. He provides a deep context reaching back not only to Duchamp but to Buddhist ideas.

Bradshaw’s current conceptual project was represented in the show by a simple photograph: one must turn to the book for the story. In 1976, she affixed a label next to a fine hose in the Metropolitan Museum that identified it as her work, and took a picture that she subsequently made into a postcard. She sealed the postcard into a rock in the museum store, and over several years continued to replenish them as they were sold. In 1980 the museum, aware of the scheme and desirous of it, purchased the postcard and issued its own postcard, which included a printed explanation.

In light of Bradshaw’s later work, the duration of that project is significant. Much of her art has required a substantial measure of patience in its extended procedures. Condensation, percolation, the accumulation of dust, tarnishing, erosion, staining and other indications of change and chance are not quickly realized. She has a light hand here, and also in those few works, mostly two-dimensional, that involve measurement and placement, such as clusters of wax or plaster triangles or lines. Ephemeral-ity is captured and held in a few other works, such as the spent bullet she cast in precious metal.

Bradshaw’s best work captures a certain aura of magic that hovers between science and poetry. Her own comments in the catalogue text, that she essentially exhibits “materializm as thematism, without working them extensively,” is as true and unformed as her art.