

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Open" competition in 2006, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Open" was juried by Catherine D'Ignazio, (Co-Director, iKatun and Member of The Institute for Infinitely Small Things, Massachusetts); Omar Lopez-Chahoud, (Independent Curator, New York); and Rachel Berwick, (Artist, Connecticut).

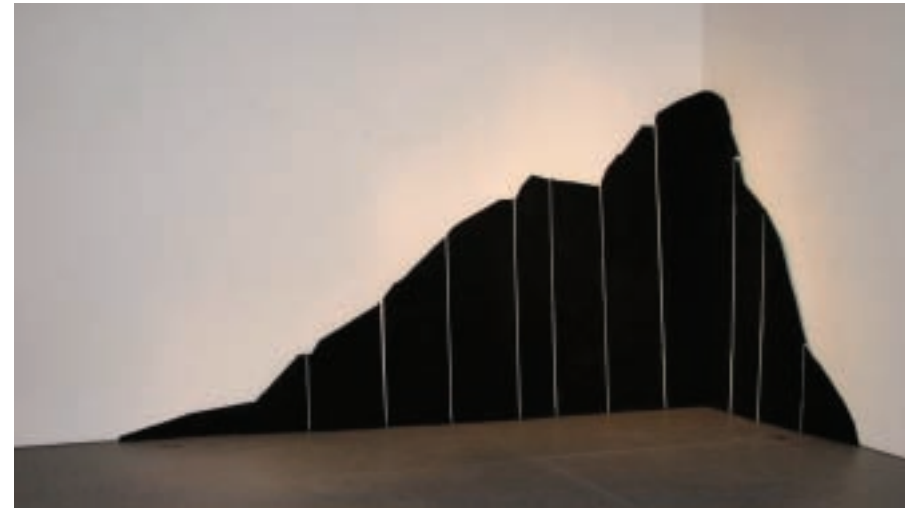
"Open" was made possible by grants from the Roberts Foundation, Goldfarb Memorial Trust, Helen M. Saunders Trust, Bank of America, and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include visual arts and public art projects, music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience, and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

On the cover: 2007 installation view at Real Art Ways of Gully, cardboard box, sequins, light, 6" x 14" x 7".

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

Jillian Conrad



2007 installation view at Real Art Ways of Heavy Light, charcoal, foam, paint, 14' x 28' x 10'.

Sequins and Cardboard

By Tom Sleigh

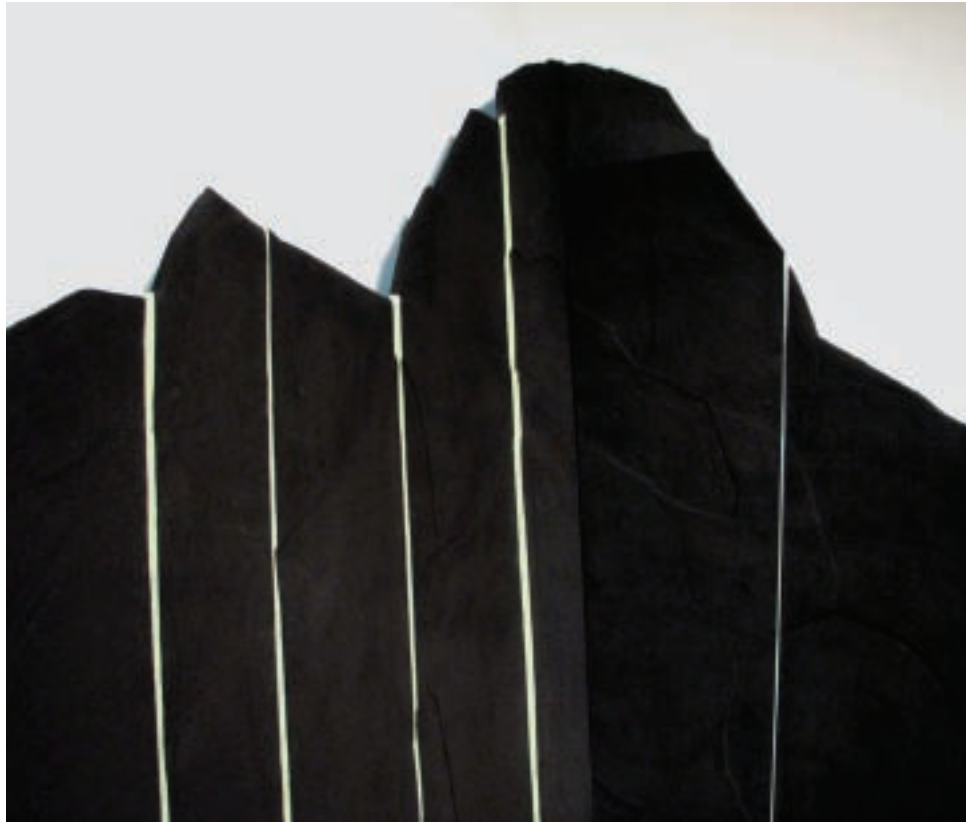
If you grow up in desert country, but looking up at mountains, then your sense of space will be affected by the interplay of sudden verticals launching themselves up from vast horizontals. Jillian Conrad grew up in such a landscape, near Las Cruces, New Mexico, and you can see in her obsession with natural forms the ghost images of that topography playing itself out in her art. On one level, her work is an homage to the processes of perception that such a landscape inspires, in which the scale of a mountain humbles us, even as we feel exalted by the vastness of the mountain's peaks and crags. In that sense, her artistic relationship to landscape is traditional, and deeply refreshing: she isn't hassled by a sort of *de rigeur* skepticism about what the French novelist, Romain Rolland, in a 1927 letter to Freud, described as the basis of religious feeling:

By religious feeling, what I mean—altogether independently of any dogma, any Credo, any organization of the Church, any Holy Scripture, any hope for personal salvation, etc.—[is] the simple and direct fact of a feeling of 'the eternal' (which may very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and as if oceanic). This feeling is in truth subjective in nature. It is a contact.

But in Freud's letter back to Rolland, he confesses that he himself doesn't experience "the oceanic feeling," and theorizes that such sensations can be put down to a kind of psychic hangover, a persistence into adult life of an infant's lack of ego-boundedness. Whatever you

Jillian Conrad was born in Farmington, New Mexico, and currently lives and works in New York City. She received a BA in Liberal Arts from St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico and an MFA in Sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design. Jillian has participated in group exhibitions at the Bronx Art Museum, Fresh Greens in Providence, and the Grant Selwyn Gallery in New York. She is the recipient of grants from the Joan Mitchell Foundation and Colorado College, and has given lectures at various colleges and art associations across the country.

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Heavy Light, charcoal, foam, paint, 14' x 28' x 10', 2007 (detail).

make of Freud's theorizing, his skepticism has a hard-headedness about it that is consistent with Conrad's own notions of how you represent such feelings: a clash between the utilitarian nature of her main materials—cardboard, plywood, charcoal, foam, plaster, paint—and the effects that they give rise to: vastness, radiant light, sensations of the void.

But to characterize Conrad this way makes her seem like a closet mystic. In the presence of her work, what you experience on a formal level is pretty much Freud's side of things—which could be translated into less psychological, more down and dirty formal terms: as I suggested earlier, Conrad's relationship to her materials contradicts the oceanic feeling that she seems interested in exploring: not evoking, but exploring. I think that as a maker she would feel at home

with what Charles Baudelaire once said about the ocean: "I find unenclosed water intolerable. I like to see it imprisoned in a yoke between the geometrical walls of a quay." And when you look at her constructions, they possess a schematic quality that pushes against our traditional feelings about what used to be called "the sublimity of nature," even as they seem to want to point to something larger, more ample, than the spaces that the materials themselves define.

This dual way of responding to landscape seems especially true of her piece, "Heavy Light," in which the oxymoron of the title characterizes "light" as being, in Cheech and Chong slang, both physically and metaphysically

"heavy." Formally, this paradox of heavy and light is borne out by how Conrad cunningly deploys her materials to evoke the vastness and solidity of a mountain range, the lower slopes rising upward to the crowning peaks, while the whole range, in the airy simplicity of its construction, seems to float above the gallery floor. In her choice of materials, Conrad's mountain range—thin panels of house insulation foam mounted on wooden supports—is strictly Home Depot. But by using chalkboard paint to paint the panels black, and then covering this surface with finely ground charcoal, Conrad's mountain range appears so luminously reflective that its massive silhouette looks on the verge of vanishing into its own aura of darkness. The whole assemblage seems like an emanation of pure black light, gravityless and formless in its essence.

This effect is heightened by how the artist has placed the panels side by side so that the two ends of the range meet in a peak in a gallery corner: as your eye climbs the range, your ascent is interrupted by the slight gaps that separate one panel from the next. This subtle disruption makes it difficult for your eye to find contemplative rest in the utter blackness of the surfaces, and so the light in the piece literally becomes heavy: the synesthesia of the title makes blackness and the void seem like a form of light, and not its negative. And because the mountain range is only fourteen feet high by twenty-eight feet long, it gives you the feeling of a mountain in miniature—an uneasy accommodation between our spatial expectation that mountains be huge, and the comparatively diminutive size of Conrad's construction. There is something sinister about this mountain, as if it were consciously playing a trick on the viewer, and not of pictorial perspective only: but a trick on our own interior sense of space, such that, if the mountain itself looks so small, we ourselves must have grown eerily large. It's as if the mountain's slopes are only waiting for us to turn our backs so that they can revert to their original scale: vast, impersonal, far above the human.

These unsettling shifts in scale take the viewer by surprise in the way the two other pieces in the show imply, through subtle effects of light and shadow, vast interior spaces. Conrad accomplishes this in "Lay of the Land" by delicately balancing lengths of plaster-coated plywood on supporting sticks, one length on top of another, so that the whole construction gives off an air of fragile equilibrium that could come toppling down at any moment. This air of fragility is heightened by the grid of shadows cast by the sticks inside the confines of the construction to create a sense of vertiginous inner space, almost like looking into the depths of a canyon.

The tension between an implied vast inner space and a containing form also characterizes "Gully." This piece consists of a cardboard box tipped toward the wall by a small block of plywood—that is, until you really look at it, and see a haunting turquoise and powder-blue light emanating from the box and shimmering up across the wall. When you come near the box to look inside it, you see hundreds of sequins, laid on top of each other like fish scales, causing this auroral display. And in keeping with Baudelaire's stricture about the ocean,

the sequins are "imprisoned" between the bottom flaps of the cardboard box so that they run widthwise across the middle of the box in a luminescent, but geometrical, four inch rectangular band.

Conrad's adroit use of clashing materials—utilitarian cardboard, flashy sequins—to suggest deep inner spaces projected outward into the world, gives her work not only formal wit and rigor, but a deeply emotional quality, almost a devotional sense of wonder and awe. But the encroaching grid dramatizes the fragility of these perceptions, and it's precisely that fragility, the way it can be destroyed, that makes Conrad's work dynamic: for her, wonder and awe are part of an unfolding process, and never an achieved goal. Her work embodies not so much our oceanic feelings, as the difficulty in perceiving such feelings; and once those feelings have been perceived, the more complex difficulty of knowing how far, and in what way, to trust them.



Lay of the Land, wood, plaster, paint, 6' x 8' x 5', 2007 (detail).

Tom Sleigh is the author of nine books. His most recent volume of poetry is Space Walk, published by Houghton Mifflin in spring, 2007. His book of essays, Interview with a Ghost, was published by Graywolf Press in 2006. He has won the Shelley Prize from the PSA, and grants from the Lila Wallace Fund, American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Guggenheim and NEA. He teaches in the MFA Program at Hunter College.