

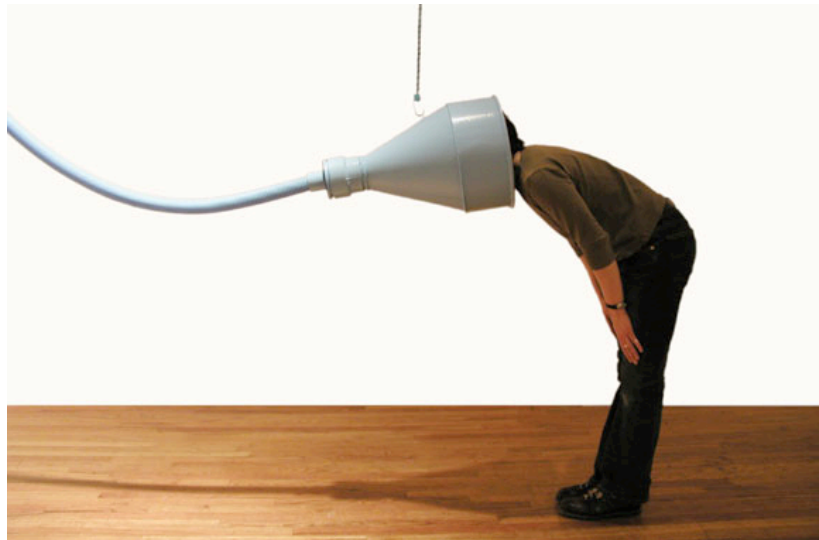
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Works as fragile as how we see ourselves

ART REVIEW

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Julianne Swartz, *How Deep Is Your*, 2012, plastic tubing, Plexiglas tubing, PVC tubing, CD player, funnel, mirror, LED lights and 2-channel soundtrack, Site-specific, Originally commissioned by MoMA PS1, Queens, New York, 2003

LINCOLN — You can do it. You're a magnet for success. Your existence matters. You're fascinating and interesting. You're a winner. People like you.

No, these are not sarcastic barbs aimed at art critics. These whispered reassurances, emitting from invisible speakers, are audible from the comfort of a black couch situated in a lobby at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. You can hear them, disconcertingly, in the bathrooms, too. They're part of a work called "Affirmation," by Julianne Swartz, who was born in Phoenix in 1967 and lives in Stone Ridge, New York.

For a few moments, listening in from my perch on the couch, I felt good about myself. But then something negative wound its way into my brain.

Not skepticism about the art: By this point, Swartz had utterly won me over to her smart, heartfelt, delicately frayed aesthetic. It was that I stopped feeling affirmed by the disembodied voices whispering random kindnesses and came to feel instead like a patient on suicide watch.

The compliments, after all, were arbitrary, and a little too insistent. They had, it seemed, just one goal in mind. Could it be that that goal was simply to pull the listener back from the abyss?

Dark thought. But this kept happening in Swartz's show. What I thought was one thing kept twisting like a mobius strip and turning into something else. It wasn't necessarily that light things turned dark, or warm things cold. It was simply that Swartz has a most beguiling way of quietly turning the tables.

Take, for instance, "Open" — a wooden box with a lid that sits in the middle of the main gallery, surrounded by delicate works made from wire, feathers, transparent tubing, magnets, and so on. Sitting there in the center of things, the box is conspicuously solid. It has its own weird charisma.

So you go up to it. You bend down. You open it. Suddenly, a voice coming from within starts telling you she loves you. The voice begins in whispers. But it gets louder — "I love you, I love you, I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU!"

You can't suppress a smile at first. But then — oh boy — it gets awkward. This shouldn't be happening. Not in a gallery. There are people around! You feel simultaneously smothered and exposed. The box is closed.

The conceit — Pandora's box, unleashing the chaos of love — is winning. But for those of you who feel allergic to this kind of interactive art-as-embarrassment, rest assured: In Swartz's hands, these touches are subtle, subdued. In fact, for the most part, they're secretive. Never have I seen an exhibition that seemed so taken up with imparting intimate secrets.

Most of the rest of Swartz's work is bewitchingly, beautifully formal. Which is to say, it's about forms in space and how we perceive them. It's about materials and textures. It's about gravity, air, light, shadow.

Take “Air Breath,” one of Swartz’s earlier works. Slender white rings, suspended in the air like attenuated smoke rings, move with the air currents. They seemed to be formed all from the same substance. In fact, the materials change: silk fiber, feathers, quills, and wire.

The vicissitudes of perception — all of them always in flux — are at the very center of what Swartz does. One of her larger works, “Excavation,” resembles a roller coaster of transparent plastic and Plexiglas tubes winding its way around the room, suspended from transparent cylindrical columns.

Where the tubing meets the wall, there is a messy-looking hole, surrounded by broken plaster. You walk up to this tiny crack. And what you see when you peer in is an intense little rainbow.

It’s entrancing, in part because you don’t know how it has been manufactured. The surrounding hole and the lumbering sculptural machinery (those tubes, it turns out, carry a fiber-optic cable) give it an accidental, anomalous air. The effect is hallucinatory.

The exhibition’s tour de force is “Line Drawing,” a site-specific work that was first made in New York in 2003 and has been brilliantly restaged at the deCordova. A blue line, made from thin blue tape, meanders across several adjacent gallery walls and in and out of orifices. As with “Excavation,” you are lured in to peering into those holes. And when you do, your perceptions are quietly confounded.

It’s difficult to say what happens, exactly. But the line seems to continue in three-dimensional space on the other side of each hole. (One imagines Harold, of “Harold and the Purple Crayon,” hovering gaily in these strange, ancillary spaces behind the wall.) That space is distorted or turned on its side. The line, meanwhile, grows large, then thins out again. It goes up and down and all around, and before you know it, it’s back on the gallery wall, making its way over to another hole in the wall.

All this is orchestrated by Swartz with lenses, mirrors, lights, and fans. It delights. But it also extends themes — both formal and conceptual — seen elsewhere in her oeuvre. One such work, not included in the show but addressed in a catalog essay by curator Rachael Arauz, was simply a red sewing thread that Swartz extended through Harrisburg, Pa., in 2001, starting at the Susquehanna Art Museum and ending at the Jewish Community Center.

On its journey, the thread extended across parks and community buildings, down sidewalks, along fences, and even through private homes and businesses. The work, “Link/Line,” was made on commission in response to an anti-Semitic hate crime committed in Harrisburg. It called not just for a degree of interactivity, which Swartz’s work frequently summons, but an actual coalescing of community: In this case, members of the local community operated as caretakers, and were responsible for tying the thread back together if it broke.

If, as Arauz points out, it alluded directly to the Jewish tradition of an “eruv,” a symbolic line delineating an Orthodox community, it also, like “Open,” alluded to Greek mythology — in this case Ariadne’s magic ball of thread, given to Theseus to help him find his way to the Minotaur in the labyrinth at Knossos.

Both works — “Link/Line” and “Line Drawing” — also made me think of Paul Klee’s influential definition of drawing as “taking a line for a walk” and of the contemporary Belgian artist Francis Alys, who specializes in fleeting gestures that subjectively map territory with continuous lines. (Alys, for instance, has walked across the armistice border in Jerusalem, known as the “green line,” carrying a tin of green paint with a hole in the bottom, so that it dripped continuously, leaving a skittering line on the ground.)

Most of Swartz’s work is marked by a modesty that’s in line with its feeling for human connection. It’s work that, ultimately, is about love, and about what Wallace Stevens called “the difference that we make in what we see.” It can seem incomplete when first encountered — lacking a necessary component that’s hard to put your finger on — until you realize it is you.

“What I lack is this me that you see,” wrote Paul Valery, and the insight holds here: How you see Swartz’s work draws attention not just to how you see, but how you are seen. Her aesthetic achievements are just as contingent, just as prone to fluctuation and reversal, just as fragile.



“Loop” (2010) is like a three-dimensional Jackson Pollock painting that emits beneficent sounds.

Some of the other works that stood out for me were “Loop,” which is like a three-dimensional Jackson Pollock painting emitting beneficent sounds (running water, children’s laughter, wind chimes, chants, insects, whispered chatter); “Corner Moon,” which uses a simple mirror, light, and clock movements to create the effect of moonlight, obscured and eclipsed, in the corner of a gallery; and a set of four exquisite works called “Hope Studies,” involving thin wires, paper, and clock movements.

Don’t miss, too, “Elevator Music,” which transforms the deCordova’s elevator into a chill-out space with shag-pile carpet on the floor, and the work that gives the show its title, “How Deep Is Your.” This last is a meandering construction of blue tubing that runs from a back room on the museum’s lowest level up to the main gallery.

Two songs — the BeeGees’ “How Deep Is Your Love,” and John Lennon’s “Love” — are pumped through the tubes by a speaker downstairs (visible but inaccessible to the public) and can be heard from a listening trumpet at the other end of the tubing. Of course, the sound is not clear. Much of it has leaked out along the way.

But this is deliberate. The desire and nostalgia the two songs may prompt is disrupted by their detour-filled delivery. Love, too, can get disrupted, and must needs go for walks.



“Surrogate (JS), Surrogate (KRL), Surrogate (ARL)” (2012) is made of cement, mica, and clock movements.