

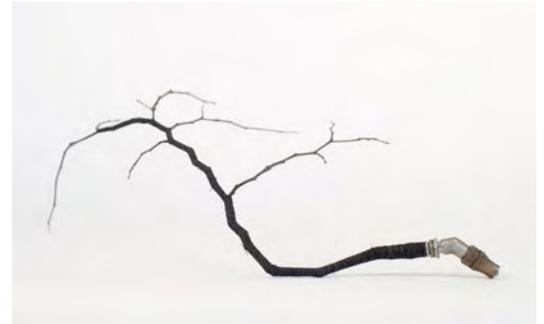
Housing Projects

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in and as contemporary art

Blue McRight: Quench at Samuel Freeman

by Farrah Karapetian
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I didn't think about water when I walked into Blue McRight's show, Quench, at Samuel Freeman in Culver City. This is perhaps surprising, since the show's title refers to water, the press release describes water as central to the exhibition's premise, and most of the objects have as their primary materials scuba tubing, garden hoses, hose nozzles, and sprinkler heads. I didn't read the press release until now, nor notice the show's title, which is my excuse for missing the first two clues; and the precise physical relations between the parts of each sculpture is my excuse for the latter clue. Fascinated and torn by each object, I didn't think about any of their special relationships to water.



Instead, what stays with me from McRight's work is the domestic tidiness of the craftsmanship, indeed the craftsman's attitude towards collection and association at all, and the turn that makes for a contemporary handling of modernist sculptural premises. The sculpture is carefully done for either universe – the art or craft context – and so doesn't condescend to either. I see nods to the poetics of the workshop as much as I do to conversations around the work of Anthony Caro, but also I see free association of a sort not fully indulged in either context. The combination of each system perverts both, which is what makes these sculptures productive.



There is a kind of futzy intimacy implied by this work that suggests a universe of barns and garages, wherein folks collect old parts they wouldn't begin to call "vintage." Over time, the parts begin to suggest second lives: some animate, some abstract. Utility drives chance associations; someone happens to have collected a certain number of small parts because of one type of project or another. That person

has looked at these parts long enough to want to amuse themselves by putting them together, and does so with care. McRight makes these associations between objects and matches them up to charming and convincing effect. Less necessary and more labored than the matches themselves are sometimes the acts she has used to link the parts, binding each with fabric and thread of the sort used to repair racehorses' legs. These acts do chalk one up for the workshop aesthetic, but slightly detract from the poetry of the everyday connection between two found objects.

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McRight's use of spigots and nozzles is decidedly and poetically associative. Each nozzle is designed for commercial purposes to incline in a particular way, both to direct water out and to sit in the hand or on the ground in an equally particular way. In the quiet and gestural pieces *South Branch* and *North Branch*, McRight has taken a couple of these nozzles, gauged their inclinations and matched the nozzles with twigs. The stems of these twigs not only fit perfectly in the nozzles' apertures but also extend the line begun by their metal partners; it is as if the angles of each twig and nozzle pair were made for one another. The artist's delight in that match is elegantly communicated and shared.

This happens too in the more animate of the sculptures, to varying effect. *Small Dowser* is not modeled to suggest too literally an animal form, but behaves as such, with two twiggy legs.

Long Spine and *Rachis* suggest what their names imply: respectively, yes, a spine and a rachis, or the articulated vertebrae that can encase spinal cords. In these pieces, the animistic association is not rendered too literally. *Small Dowser* opens up the associative process for a viewer to reach his or her own conclusions. *Spine* and *Rachis* take advantage of repetition: many small and useful parts form an iterative whole along a

tubey tail that can't help but suggest the life (and death) of an animal.

In other pieces, the animism goes so far that the tubes actually morph into the bodies of animals, such as in *Rainbird Variation (Cardinal)* and *(Bluebird)*. These bodies refer back to the environment from which all of these materials might actually be sourced: a domestic environment, and one in which animal bodies are frequently found, whether real or fabricated. Commercially fabricated animal bodies actually do enter into these sculptures as well, as in a piece comprised of an animal-shaped sprinkler. These totally referential pieces seem genuine, but also seem to have arrived somewhere, as would a fantastic children's book illustration arrive. Other less literal pieces, though finished, are still on their way to total representation and finish themselves in my mind.



Many of these pieces – especially the ones that are deployed at the edges of plinths or in specific relation to a wall – go beyond association and certainly beyond illustration. One of the ways that they do this is in their concerted reference to 20th century sculpture, despite the domesticity of their material references and handling. In his essay of 1970, “Caro’s Abstractness,” Michael Fried unpacks recent work of Anthony Caro. Many of the observations Fried makes of Caro’s sculptures are applicable to those of McRight, and not, I think, in a way that forces or makes moot the parallel.

Walking into Samuel Freeman’s largest gallery, the sense I get of the artwork is its linear traverse of that room’s landscape. Black lines are everywhere – some like isolated punctuation marks and others like flow-

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charts, describing the space of the room. As a whole the installation of works is like a giant gesture drawing; individually, the works also lean towards a kind of three-dimensional draftsmanship. In the end, however, the twisting, turning, and traversing of these lines defines the work as adamantly sculptural; there is no way it could be rendered to the same effect if flat. This is one of the first ways in which the show reminds me of Fried's writing on Caro.

Fried describes the way that an artwork of Caro's called Orangerie is specifically sculptural – rather than pictorial – despite the fact that it functions in terms of a juxtaposition of planar shapes usually associated with painting; Orangerie's shapes twist, and so necessarily exist in three dimensions.



The second way in which the work reminds me of Fried's writing is in the specific relations between quite a few of the sculptures and the plinths upon which they're situated. Skinny Pisher is one such work, which begins on a horizontal plane of the tabletop with an antique sprinkler head and then continues via tubing over the edge of that plane. Crucial to the sculpture's effectiveness is the distance between the sprinkler head and the edge of the plinth; if the head were not x number of inches away from that edge, and if the tubing were not y number of inches long, the sculpture would have different relations to both the floor beneath the plinth and to its own internal rhythms.

Fried describes Caro's ambition in making table sculptures as the challenge of making "small works that could not be seen merely as reduced versions of larger ones – sculptures whose smallness was to be secured abstractly... instead of remaining simply a literal, quantitative fact about them (Fried 189). Caro, he says, accomplished this in two ways. The first was to incorporate handles into the pieces "in an attempt to key the scale of each piece to that of graspable, manipulable objects" (Fried 190). The second way in which Caro strove to make abstractly small works was to "set at least one element in every piece below the level of the tabletop on which the sculpture was to be placed, thereby precluding its transposition, in fact or in imagination, to the ground" (Fried 190).

Fried's writing fits with McRight's work: she uses in her sculptures "graspable, manipulable objects", and she does place at least one element of these pieces "below the level of the tabletop." The pieces are necessarily their size, because of where they're situated. What's interesting is not only the potential reference here of her work to Caro's or to a modernist discourse about the specific nature of sculpture, but also the retooling of that discourse along the lines of domestic objecthood rather than industrial.

There's no way McRight's a modernist – nor can that word be thrown around too lightly, anyway – but her sculptures assert themselves as sculptures in a way Fried insists is present in Caro's work. He says that in Caro's work the "internal relations



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(or syntax) of the sculpture alone” create its abstract argument, and that this argument does not depend on the viewer’s particular perspective – whether standing in front of a tabletop sculpture or beneath an overhead sculpture such as *Deep North* (Fried 191). For Fried this would have been proof of Caro’s work’s antitheatrical character: the work does not perform with or for a viewer, even if it is possible for a viewer to stand ostensibly in the piece.

McRight has lived and worked through a period of art history that includes the viewer very much in the constellation of meaning attributed to any one piece or practice; what’s funny is that in turning to the tool shed and the craftsman collector for a part of the attitude that generates this work, she finds her way back to objecthood, but with a domestic subjectivity that is funny and playful even as it makes its point.

Works Cited:

Fried, Michael. “Caro’s Abstractness.” *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. 189-192. Print.

Images:

Blue McRight, *North Branch*, 2011. Mixed Media. 17 x 6 x 13 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Blue McRight, *Small Dowser*, 2011. Mixed Media. 28.5 x 4.75 x 13 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Blue McRight, *Long Spine*, 2011. Mixed Media. 8 x 102 x 3.5 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Blue McRight, *Rachis*, 2012. Mixed Media. 7 x 52.5 x 2.5 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Blue McRight, *Rainbird Variation (Cardinal)*, 2012. Mixed Media. 2 x 11 x 6.5 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Blue McRight, *North Branch*, 2011. Mixed Media. 17 x 6 x 13 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Quench, installation view. Courtesy of Dawn Blackman.

Anthony Caro, *Orangerie*, 1969-1970. Welded steel, painted. 88 5/8 x 82 1/4 x 68 in. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Blue McRight, *Skinny Pisher*, 2011. Mixed Media. 7 x 29 x 22.5 in. Courtesy of Blue McRight & Samuel Freeman.

Sir Anthony Caro, *Table Piece XXVIII*, 1967. Steel. 590 x 1040 x 420 mm. Courtesy of Anthony Caro and Barford Sculptures Ltd.