

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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Martha Bone and Janice Caswell: Two Solo Shows at Garrison Art Center



Martha Bone, *Mapping the Invisible #3*, 2020, acrylic, aluminum enamel, charcoal, joint compound, pastel on pieced paper, 63 x 88 in., photo courtesy of the artist.

Two artists currently showing at Garrison Art Center use scale, structure, and geometry to examine and reinterpret their respective environments. Martha Bone's large-scale paintings and assemblages express a sweeping view of the cosmos, bringing the macrocosm within our reach, while Janice Caswell's small-scale sculptures find the infinite within the microcosm, showing us the vast potential in all forms. Both Bone and Caswell photograph their natural and man-made landscapes, later referring to these images when creating their works. And both artists construct their forms as improvisations inspired by their observations, although neither artist is interested in a literal interpretation of nature. But this is where the similarities end, their distinctive styles diverging toward an expansive contemplation of form and space and an intimate exploration of the fabricated structures that inhabit our lives.

Martha Bone's solo show, *Liminal Spaces*, occupies the larger gallery, and as the show's title suggests, each painting is a portal into a vast, ambiguous space. These pieces, entitled *Mapping the Invisible*, are human size and larger, enveloping us in an odd combination of organic, geometric, and industrial shapes. This is the space of myths and dreams, where we may connect with the more primitive aspects of our human nature. It requires an excavation of sorts, and Bone initiates it by digging into the surface with worn brushes, scraping and sanding the paint, and adding paper or canvas to the existing structure as needed. The result is a controlled increase of the form into unpredictable shapes, like an organism expanding its real estate through proliferation.

There is nothing formulaic in Bone's work; it is intuitive and spontaneous, in response to the exigencies of the moment. The movement and anatomy of the shapes are perhaps influenced by Bone's background in modern dance, as the forms knot and coil in a tightly orchestrated dance. The artist incorporates nuts and bolts that appear to attach the paper and canvas to its support, a reverse *trompe-l'oeil* in which a real-life object is mistaken for its rendering. Given the variety of shapes and textures, these transitions are remarkably seamless, and the emerging structure is an integrated continuum of two- and three-dimensional space.

In *Mapping the Invisible #8*, a rendered industrial form is attached to the support with actual bolts, blurring the demarcation of real and imagined space. The form possesses the graceful beauty of a machine part whose practical use has expired and whose spare elegance surpasses any former associations. This machine-fabricated element stands in relief to the dreamlike space that envelops it, and the incongruity between the two seems insurmountable. But Bone integrates the industrial and mythical in such a way that they are of a piece, destined to come together in this liminal expanse.



Martha Bone, *Mapping the Invisible #8*, 2021, acrylic, charcoal, joint compound, pastel on pieced paper on wood panel, 65 x 91 in., photo courtesy of the artist.

In *Mapping the Invisible #3*, the dominant forms suggest body parts and processes, with intestines looping and digesting the geometrical diagrams overlaying them. These blueprints map the contours of emotional space as if calculating our capacity to carry its contents. Bone invites us to experience as much as we're able or inclined, and thus, we choose our level of engagement: metaphysical flow charts, psychic knots, or rusty car parts; her work is a litmus test to gauge our emotional width and psychological depth.

Three charcoal drawings in the show, entitled *Karmic Loops*, speak to the artist's fascination with the body as a container of mysteries connected to the divine but entangled in karma. Since the dense psychic knot cannot be unraveled, we must choose whether to convey it through life as permanent baggage or sever it like a Gordian knot, freed from the burden but indelibly marked by its imprint.



Martha Bone, *Karmic Loop #3*, 2020, charcoal, conte crayon on watercolor paper, 22 x 30 in., photo courtesy of the artist.

In the smaller gallery, Janice Caswell's solo show *Off-Kilter* explores a more intimate space by drawing upon her observations of the urban landscape. Caswell obsessively collects and categorizes her visual information, photographing the textures, patterns, shapes, and shadows she encounters on regular walks through cities and towns. These thousands of visual references find their way into Caswell's cardboard constructions, first as fragments of ideas, then as three-dimensional sketches for future works. Many of these notions are attached to a wall in her studio, a repository of visual information that evolved into a site-specific wall installation at Garrison Art Center. *Notions* is a work-in-progress, allowing us to see the artist's process, with all its unpredictability and improvisation.



Janice Caswell, *Construction 160*, 2022, acrylic, ink, paper, cardboard, 33 x 15.5 in., photo credit: John Berens

Caswell's two-dimensional works are meticulously constructed and painted, often using fragments leftover from previous works. The color and geometry are calibrated with an intuitive eye from years of observation and practice, giving the work a subtle refinement. This deceptive simplicity derives from the direct, unadorned forms and spare use of color, as seen in *Construction 160*. The color has been reduced almost to a grayscale, with vertical bars of pigment hovering on the margins. Caswell's composition recalls the *contrapposto* of Greek statues, off-kilter indeed but in perfect equipoise.



Janice Caswell, *Construction 156*, 2022, acrylic, ink, paper, cardboard, 14 x 13 x 2.5 in., photo credit: Paul Takeuchi

In her three-dimensional works, Caswell plays with light and shadow, including the shadows cast onto the wall by the sculpture itself. This becomes an element of the piece, shifting as we move about in the space. In *Construction 156*, Caswell leaves a large section of the cardboard unpainted, reminding us that the sculpture is made with a modest, ubiquitous material. This dichotomy is essential to her work, as it challenges the art world's perceptions of high versus low art. Caswell's constructions are exquisitely conceived and beautifully crafted from a material generally used to package and ship fine art, an irony that the artist seems to embrace. Like Martha Bone, Caswell asks us to consider the liminal spaces that art occupies and open to the deeper paradoxes therein.



Janice Caswell, *Notions*, 2023, Acrylic, ink, paper, cardboard, installation size variable, photo credit: Meg Hitchcock

***Liminal Spaces* and *Off-Kilter* run through Sept. 10 at Garrison Art Center, Garrison, NY.**

[Meg Hitchcock](#) is a painter and text-based artist living in the Hudson Valley. She uses sacred texts in her work to explore the relationship between religion and psychology as it pertains to human consciousness. Her work has been shown at MASS MoCA, Currier Museum of Art, Crystal Bridges Museum, CODA Museum (Netherlands), and Virginia MOCA. Her work has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *ArtCritical*, *The New Criterion*, *Huffington Post*, and *Hyperallergic*. She studied classical painting in Florence, Italy, received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, and is author of the blog [IN THEIR STUDIOS: Conversations with Women Artists](#).



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