Surface Tensions

GELAH PENN

BY PATRICIA ROSOFF

JOHN GROO, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND REAL ART WAYS

Left and detail: *Clash by Night*, 2009. Monofilament, plastic mesh, mosquito netting, vinyl and rubber tubing, vinyl lanyard, Dacron line, plastic beads, pipe cleaners, rubber ball, upholstery needles, and t-pins, dimensions variable.

Gelah Penn's approach to sculpture is distinctly existential in character. In a career trajectory that moved across the country and back, from painting to sculpture, to drawing-like forms installed in architectural space, her progress as an artist has been driven by conscious decisions to step outside of convention. Defined less by what it is than by what it is not, her work treads a middle ground (neither here nor there) that keeps her attentive to nuance by denying any kind of well-worn path.

Encountering Penn's work is like stepping into a three-dimensional drawing: linear passages of mosquito netting hurl themselves wall to wall with heady abandon, and knotted strands of glistening vinyl lanyard and delicately knotted monofilament pirouette independently in an expanded spatial plane that hovers close to the wall. Poufs of plastic mesh constitute what Terry Winters once termed "events." Interspersed within this scribbled visual hum, calligraphic gestures, in strokes both opaque and transparent, dandle shadows and glints of light in web-strand arabesques as immaterial as a tatted veil on an old hat.

There is something very Baroque about Penn's work (evanescent light-play, a confounding of two and three dimensions), as well as something faintly film noir (mesh stockings and crinkled tulle). There is also something intimately resistant to narrative translation. Penn's site-specific installations, whose forms percolate from (but never exactly mimic) her exploratory sketches, are developed off-site and then rolled up, transported, and readjusted in situ. As such, they exist wholly in the moment, remarkable for their adaptation rather than execution of a plan.

Planning, however specific to a space, is hypothetical to the final event, which Penn determines on site. For this reason, her works are staged rather than sculpted, inveigled rather than forced. Neither fixed nor finite, her installations are merely rehearsed in her Brooklyn studio amid the bales, bags, and bins of synthetic materials with which she works. Penn's studio is a think-tank, replete with cobweb-like constructions suspended in front of walls and evolving works in various stages of progress.

Some, like the early collage-constructions of Picasso and Braque, bridge a corner rather than accepting the constraints of a picture plane. Others are more planar, with wiry black monofilament "whiskers" that launch from pinhole pores in the synthetic sheets that serve as paper. Penn's development was influenced by the work of Henri Michaux (1899–1984), an idiosyncratic Belgian-born poet, writer, and painter who experimented with a kind of automatic writing, which he famously characterized as "a new language, spurning the verbal."

The wiry, sculptural "gesture"—skittering in tiny somersaults across empty space and hard surfaces—is unique to Penn. It represents a remarkable dialogue between drawing and sculpture, as well as between Eastern and Western pictorial traditions and philosophies. Literally speaking, it also calls into relief the whole idea of surface tension.

Nuanced positioning energizes Penn's work, which opposes customary assumptions about contemporary art. Her strategies are formal rather than representational, perceptual rather than conceptual, offering tender and extravagant spatial embroidery rather than heroic statements—even though gesture itself is at the core of her approach. Penn's work embodies essentially Modernist principles: resolutely abstract, it firmly renounces narrative, representation, and autobiography. Profoundly materialistic, her compositions, are, as she puts it, a matter of "eking out every possibility of the materials."

Clash by Night, a recent 40-foot, site-specific installation at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut, is a long way from Penn's first sculptural ventures employing old industrial hat molds and rusty wire birdcages—although such found objects, "events" that caught her eye, first drew her

Left and detail: *The Naked Kiss*, 2009. Monofilament, plastic mesh, vinyl and rubber tubing, vinyl lanyard, Dacron line, plastic beads, pipe cleaners, rubber ball, upholstery needles, and t-pins, dimensions variable.

away from the hair-encrusted tactility of her early paintings. Once she made that leap, she moved rapidly away from the organic (and its implied personal narrative). "When I worked with human hair, it was a problem," she says, "people read fetishism into the work. Plastic is inorganic; it avoids these issues." After replacing human hair with synthetics and then vinyl tubing, she abandoned painting altogether in favor of constructed sculptures.

It was then, Penn says, that "I realized I really hate building stuff." She began to use found objects, especially open structures (bird cages, fan grills), as a kind of three-dimensional loom to weave into and then completely eliminated such underlying structures in favor of working directly on the wall, employing incongruous objects like foam rubber, ping-pong balls—even ear plugs—to punctuate her scribbled, linear, drawing-like contexts with what one critic calls "incidents."

Though Penn creates energetically linear work that knots itself up and flings itself into the corners of architectural space, there is no "action painting" here. Unlike Judy Pfaff's installations, Penn's works do not inhabit space like three-dimensionally animated Jackson Pollocks. Instead, they hover in nuanced dialogue with their architectural context. Like Gothic sculpture, they exist in reference to their spatial frame, rather than standing on their own.

With respect to meaning, Penn takes a similarly ambivalent stance. Neither a Surrealist nor a conceptualist, she resists expectations in either direction. She describes the dynamic of her compositions simply, in terms of reading, though she provides no guidance for this act: "My eye travels and sometimes it lands. There is no conventional narrative structure; I don't care about your way in…Each mark is an active form. Viewing the work is a process of going in and out of focus."

"I'm a creature of ambivalence," she says, "comfortable in the spaces between drawing, painting, and sculpture. Irresolvability is part of the dynamic. If a viewer is confused, I'm OK with that. I'm drawn to the ephemeral nature of installation because it's not only appealing, but fraught with risk. I'm dependent on the wall as a proxy for paper as well as an armature for stretching into sculptural space. When I talk about territory, it's the physical territory of a space, but it's also an interior landscape. I have to physically mark the space to understand it, but I'm not interested in a story. Abstraction is rich, wild, and allusive; it doesn't need a story line."

Penn's artistic evolution has been a process of shedding conventional definitions (two-dimensional, three-dimensional) and methods (additive, subtractive), abjuring conventional materials (stone, wood, clay, plaster), and finding comfort in a particularly nebulous middle ground. Any perceived narrative thread is artistic backstory, stemming from how she got to where she is rather than what the forms themselves suggest. For these reasons, her choice of materials leans toward the inorganic and the immaterial and deals with space-activating ("mark-making") elements that etch the support wall with shadowy traces. The two impressions cannot be disentangled.

KEN FERDMAN. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Shadow of a Doubt, 2010. Monofilament, mosquito netting, plastic mesh, copper mesh, upholstery needles, plastic dots, and t-pins, dimensions variable.

***Blackfil #10*, 2008. Monofilament, plastic mesh, and acrylic on Yupo, 26 x 43 x 2 in.**

TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CARL BERG PROJECTS / BOTTOM: JOHN BERENS. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Born in Pennsylvania and educated at the San Francisco Art Institute, Penn moved to sculpture because she felt that painting was insufficient to realize gesture. She has come to understand the world in terms of flux, by placing its markers in the periphery and redoubling its suggestive means. A self-described "film nut," she chooses her titles from film noir in order to underscore the inherent double-entendre of her work, its "psychological undertow."

The compelling interest—and common thread—in Penn's work is drawing, the means by which she explores gesture in a relatively shallow, bi-axial manner, investigating forms that she then constructs in largely translucent (or perforated) materials in close proximity to the wall. Enriched by subtle plays of light and shadow that multiply and magnify their effects, her works are driven by things-in-opposition: marks fluid or strident, taut or lyrical, mundane yet risqué. Her entire process is engaged with drawing (the filling of a blank space with the immediacy of gesture), with abstraction (launching into areas unknown and unpredictable, dealing with the permutations that arise), and with the cinema that is installation (light, shadow, improvisation). Penn calls this quality "ambivalence," but in her vernacular, ambivalence means nothing less than emphatic precision.

Patricia Rosoff is a writer living in West Hartford, Connecticut.