

The precarious shoring of creation

In the past decade, Chloé Desjardins has developed a coherent artistic practice based on an exploration of the material and conceptual possibilities of techniques in the field of sculpture, and an examination of the status, function and contextualization of objects within the art world. Using moulding and casting in particular, and the many paradoxes inherent in this traditional approach, the artist seeks to reveal the highly complex and indeterminate nature of artwork using strategies that focus attention on what shapes their existence *as artwork*, namely the various tools, materials, devices, structures, methods of presentation and spaces on which their artistic identity and identification depend and, consequently, the way in which this artwork is showcased and received. Based on minimalism and conceptual art, as well as the aesthetic heritage of the Renaissance, the reflexive approach advocated by Desjardins in her work makes use of a series of procedural operations (e.g., fragmentation, transfer of materials, inversion, recomposition, multiplication, deflection, recontextualization), which, by drawing attention to the margins of the creation, lead us to question our fundamental understanding of the works.

Chloé Desjardins first experimented with the moulding and casting technique by drawing from a familiar collection of everyday, industrial and manufactured objects found mainly in her studio. She used various substances to reproduce the objects and displayed them in ambiguous ways, obscuring our immediate perception of them. Several of the works that she presented as part of her Master's degree or immediately afterward, at the Parisian Laundry¹ and Galerie B-312² in particular, were made by replicating not artifacts or statues, as her use of pedestals and display cases to mimic museum convention suggests, but rather ordinary materials such as cardboard boxes and plastic packaging. The sculpture entitled *Relief* (2011) is an example of this approach, in which the artist, by moulding and casting an indeterminate volume and covering it in bubble wrap,

¹ *Collision 7*, March 18 to April 9, 2011, and *Summertime in Paris*, June 23 to August 6, 2011.

² *Quelque Chose*, October 11 to November 10, 2012.

places the “original” work, in the traditional sense, two steps away from the viewer. Evoking a sculpture wrapped for handling or storage purposes, this work made of Hydrocal white gypsum cement (a material similar to plaster) reverses the logic of technical reproducibility by serving as the sole example of an imitation process whose “model” (namely, the moulded and casted object), in this case, is not the work itself, but its physical supplement—the interface that serves to protect and consequently conceal it, rendering its content inaccessible.³

The importance that the artist places on the covering, packaging and lining patterns, as well as on the object display devices, stems from the reasoning behind a *parergon*, which, in general, underlies her interest in the outer structures that frame artistic production. Jacques Derrida defined *parergon* as something that is supplementary to a main work. It is neither simply outside nor simply inside; it borders, frames and delimits the work in an essential way. According to Derrida, “A *parergon* is against, beside, and above and beyond the *ergon*, the work accomplished, the accomplishment of the work. But it is not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside.”⁴ For Desjardins, this “*parergonal*” reasoning translates as the constantly repeated evocation of a central void, that of the “traditional” or “ideal” work, which is substituted by various elements thought to be “incidental,” but without which the work could not exist.

In her exhibition *L’atelier du sculpteur* presented at Maison de la culture Mont-Royal in 2013, for example, a full range of processes, tools, raw materials and equipment associated with the artist’s work space, including mounds of plaster and the moulds used to create her shapes, were featured instead of finished works. The display produced a mysteriously latent atmosphere, as though hypothetical or future works were deeply embedded within the exhibited objects. Also exploring the idea of potentiality, but on a more architectural

³ For a more in-depth analysis of this work, see my article “Manipuler les paradoxes techniques et théoriques du moulage,” *Esse*, no. 74 (winter 2012), pp. 18-25.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 9.

scale, the project entitled *Chef-d'œuvre* presented in 2015⁵ marked a transition in the artist's practice, as she shifted from sculpture to installation and, in a way, from studio to construction site. With this imposing woodwork structure, whose title and building method pay homage to the ideals of perfection and technical mastery inherited from the Renaissance, Desjardins created an initial variation on the theme of scaffolding, which she is revisiting in her installation at Maison des arts de Laval. *Chef d'œuvre* comprises a series of full-size wooden scaffolds erected without hardware and arranged around an empty space, again suggesting the absence of a work. The artist explains the installation as follows: "[A scaffold] is a device used in building construction or the creation of monumental sculptures. In this case, however, there is nothing to build. The centre is left empty. The structure, in a way, becomes the matrix, the mould of a potential work."⁶

This work with scaffolding is consistent with Desjardins' ongoing research on the reinforcement mechanisms and structures that characterize the artistic ecosystem. In fact, "scaffold" is a polysemic term meaning the action of erecting or building, as well as the result of that action. A temporary, fixed or mobile structure that serves as a support in the construction, reinforcement or repair of a building, a scaffold, in the metaphorical sense, also refers to a complex assembly of elements or something that supports a system in a more or less stable manner. In the current exhibition, the artist therefore chooses to explore scaffolding's formal and conceptual potential in order to examine the delicate interdependence between artwork and artistic institution. Designed in accordance with the physical and architectural properties of Salle Alfred-Pellan, her installation is composed of 24 adjustable support posts, entirely moulded and cast in plaster and skillfully arranged in the space in a manner reminiscent of a classical architectural layout made up of columns. From the outset, the choice of a craft-inspired building method and fragile

⁵ This project was designed for the exhibition *Orderly Objects/Unbuilt Spaces* (March 2 to April 10, 2015) at Concordia University's FOFA Gallery, featuring the work of Chloé Desjardins and Simone Rochon.

⁶ Chloé Desjardins, text accompanying the project *Chef d'œuvre*, 2015, available online on her website: <http://chloedesjardins.com/orderly-objectsunbuilt-spaces> (consulted February 23, 2018).

materials to reproduce industrial structural elements creates a certain experiential tension, since the mainly functional role of these support columns commonly used in construction has been removed, yet the columns remain for the sake of pure ornamentation. On the contrary, the way in which the posts are erected in the gallery creates the illusion that they are supporting the lighting grid, the structure on which they are actually resting, and on which their spatial layout depends, like the general framework of the exhibition space. This reciprocal reinforcement of artwork and gallery space suggests an allegory of the complex, uncertain and precarious relations inherent in artistic infrastructure.

Moreover, the installation is an ambulatory space, an environment to be explored both physically and mentally, combining multiple references to architecture and the history of sculpture—from Greek Antiquity to minimalist art and Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column*, to name just a few. The proportions and lighting (in this case, a combination of ambient and low-angle lighting), as well as the regular arrangement of elements in the space and the juxtaposition of moving bodies, highlight the overall architectural effect, revealing all at once, through reconfiguration, the structural elements of the exhibition space. With this imposing work—the most installation-like of her creations to date—Desjardins makes us aware of our active involvement in what minimalist artist Robert Morris called an “extended situation”⁷ (in opposition to the idea of sculpture as a discrete object), a situation that encompasses all the complexities and contradictions of our system for disseminating art. In short, while bringing to light the tensions inherent in artistic creation, her work inspires critical thought about the conditions, as much literal and contextual as historic and symbolic, that shape our perception of artwork.

Katrie Chagnon

⁷ Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, under the direction of Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 222-235.