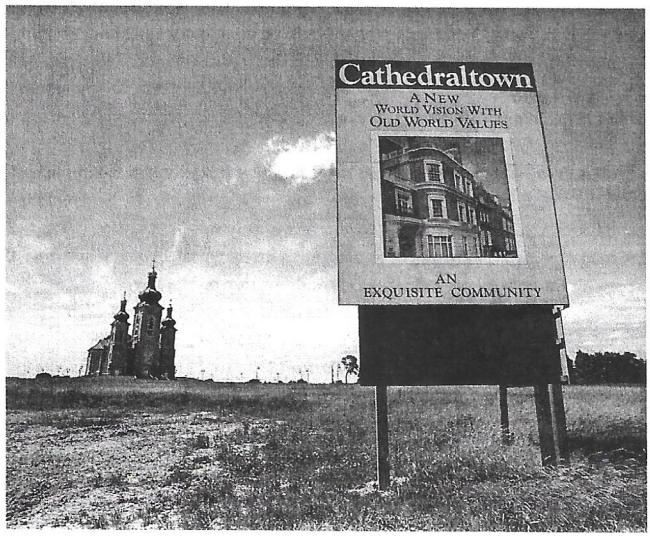
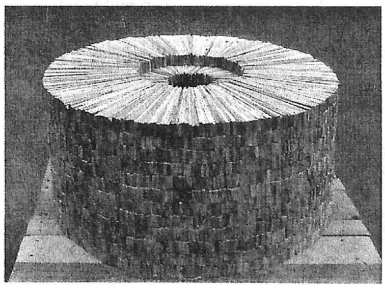
Sense of Place:

Architecture and the Built Landscape in Contemporary Connecticut Art

by Marisa Angell



Martin Kruck, *Geomancia, Phase II: Cathedraltown*, C-print backmounted on Diasec, 20 x 30", 2003.



Matthew Weber, *Stepped Shim Shack*, 22 x 33" diameter, loose stacked cedar shims, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

A host of recent exhibitions in New York, Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco spotlighted emerging artis current fascination with architecture. In *Out of Site: Fictional Architectural Space* at the New Museum Contemporary Art in New York, *Bitstreams*, exhibited farther uptown at the Whitney Museum, and at *010101* San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, visitors were surrounded by contemporary work in all media that min new digital technologies to create virtual environments.

Other exhibitions, such as *Out of Place* at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and *Artists Imagi Architecture* at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, explored less technologically driven approaches to t sculptural possibilities of architecture models. There has been no lack of exhibitions from the other side: Rece shows at MoMA and the Ace Gallery in New York presented architects' renderings and models as art objects. T connections are everywhere; take the similarities between World Trade Center memorial architect Dan Liebeskind's drawings of shattered planes in space and artist Julie Mehretu's drawings and paintings, seen in *O of Site*, for example.

Based on the work presented in this recent spate of exhibitions, it seems that the line separating contempora artists from architects is wavering, and that a nexus of interests is connecting the two groups: specifically, the shared manipulation of new technologies to create whole environments, whether real or imagined, and their common attraction to the exploration of psychoanalytic categories like the uncanny.

In Connecticut, as elsewhere, there is an emerging interest in architecture and in the built environment on the part of contemporary artists that is expressed through the manipulation of building materials and the imagery of postwar homes and commercial developments. Rather than offering alternate sci-fi spaces, this varied work grapples directly with the highly charged issue of how we live in the environment we have built. Rather than emphasizing sensations of displacement, these artists are rooted in the specificities of place.

Unionville sculptor Matthew Weber transforms the basic building materials of vernacular American architecture–logs, shingles and shims–into organically minimalist wood sculpture. His *Shingled Log Construction* (2002) was exhibited at Artspace in New Haven in the spring as part of the exhibition *Superstructures*. Four long sections of carved pine logs were stacked to a height of roughly six feet, so viewers could see that the surface of each piece of pine had been carved into a facade of shallow shingles. The effect, as is the case with much of Weber's work, was paradoxical: The expanse of shingled surface seemed absurdly like a Victorian facade, as if the image of a shingled exterior had been projected onto the pine sections. But Weber's intentionally clumsy carving left traces of his hand and his labor, emphasizing the sculpture's physicality.

Weber has since moved from carving existing logs and saplings to using cedar shingles and shims, which he buys at a lumber mill near his studio, to construct site-specific sculpture. Each of these materials plays a different role in construction: Shingles are an esthetic "surface skin" of Victorian homes, he says, while shims are thicker, wooden wedges that are used to restabilize the structure of a building. In sculptures such as *Hollow Cedar Shim Construction* (2002), shown at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in September, these basic building blocks of American domestic architecture are painstakingly stacked side by side to form loose rings that are built one atop the next.

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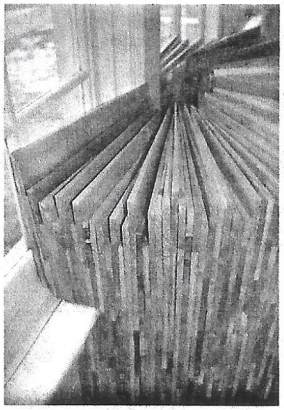
Like the minimalist sculpture of an earlier generation, *Hollow Cedar Shim Construction* forces a physical confrontation with the viewer, who must take care to avoid bumping into it. But the effect of Weber's sculpture is both warmer and more beautiful than, say, a series of Donald Judd plywood boxes stretched across the Dia Art Center floor. Weber intends for his work to communicate some of these materials' original existences in nature, which is why he stacks them into concentric forms. He says that doing so highlights the "tree's inherent tubular physicality" while retaining the "squared dimensions of its material products." In some ways, these sculptures are "universal memorials," he says, to the things that are erased by modern industry. They don't mimic the processes of industrial production, as does some minimalist sculpture, they subtly critique them.

Encountered in person, Weber's work isn't nostalgic in a one-dimensional way. In addition to capturing the "dialogue" between nature and construction, the laboriously placed shims and shingles are both objects and performance pieces. They retain some of the residue of Home Depot, but they also approximate marble in their variations of color and texture; their fragility underlines their temporary existence at one site for a set period of time. Alchemy seems to be caught in motion as tree becomes lumber becomes shim becomes sculpture.



Matthew Weber, *Stacked Cedar Shingles* (detail), loose stacked cedar shims, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

Weber describes this work as having grown out of his New England surroundings, specifically Connecticut, where he is from. He is attuned to the vernacular wood-frame architecture of the region; he says that he became interested in these materials as he watched his neighbor restore the shingled facade of their late-Victorian home. He observed that shingled siding "functions as a symbol of rural New England, just as the brownstones of Brooklyn, and the cast iron facades of Soho" represent those places. Unlike minimalist sculpture or the contemporary tech-driven art being exhibited elsewhere, Weber's growing body of work is rooted to place in a thoughtful, meaningful way that undoes some of the homogenization of our contemporary industrial landscape.

A recent exhibition titled *A View From Here*, also held at Artspace, presented a collaborative sculpture project led by the Brooklyn-based artist Lee Boroson. Like Weber's sculpture, the exhibit's miniature models of New Haven balconies and porches were directly inspired by the built environment of Connecticut, though they focused on urban rather than rural environments. Boroson worked with thirteen high school students from New Haven's public schools to produce over fifty miniature balsam wood sculptures of one of the city's most visible architectural forms. Each was mounted directly to the wall at eye level, where viewers were encouraged to inspect details such as matchstick-thin balusters and carefully constructed cornices.

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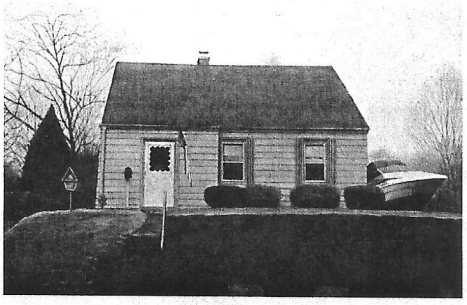
For Boroson, New Haven is a way station on his weekly commute between Brooklyn and Providence, where he teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design. Unlike Weber, he is a traveler amid these buildings, not a resident. The genesis of the exhibition came from his status as a stranger in the city: New Haven's porches and balconies are the only semiprivate space that is publicly accessible. He says that they seem to be both "greeting stations" and "pedestals looking out at me."

Here, then, are two very different ways of conceptualizing these spaces: The former tells us how porches are used by their owners while the latter assigns Boroson a role in the equation of the city's relationships. The city's porches, that is, become eyes that bring an outsider's subjectivity into being, implying that architecture casts an eye on us as much as we cast our eyes on it.

The exhibition installation emphasized this point. In the middle of the gallery, Boroson installed sheer fabric "rays" from ceiling to floor that obstructed the viewer's movement rather than sight. The rays alluded to vision and to the light that is necessary for us to see; but even more importantly, they forced a physical confrontation with the unexpected, which approximates the experience of finding one's way through unknown territory. And even though the porches and balconies were inspired by reality, many of them became "fantasy balconies" or "imaginary balconies," Boroson says, as the students translated what they saw in Boroson's photographs into sculpture. What emerged was a composite view of the city, part interpretive documentary and part fiction.



Peter Waite, *House #2*, acrylic on aluminum, 30 x 43", 2002. Photo: John Groo. Courtesy of the Edward Thorp Gallery.

Connecticut-based painter Peter Waite's recent series of Connecticut houses, some of which were exhibited at Real Art Ways in Hartford, similarly explore the liminal space between objective and subjective relationships to place. *House #5* (2002) depicts a flat, frontal view of a typical postwar suburban ranch house flanked by generic clipped shrubs and adorned with a single, small American flag. The house's blue shutters and slight pediment are gestures to colonial architecture, but empty gestures; they call to mind Levittown brochures rather than eighteenth-century estates. The spiritual vacuity of the scene is emphasized by Waite's use of acrylic on aluminum, which

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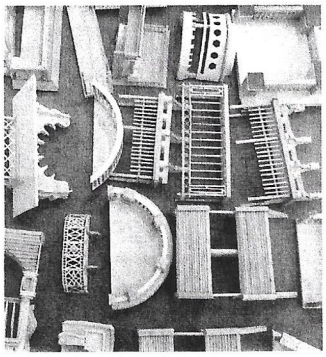

Lee Boroson, *View From Here* (detail), monofilament, wood, cardboard, foamcore, hardware, dimensions variable, 2003. Photo courtesy of the artist.

strips the painting of depth. Even the weather lacks depth or drama: A flat gray sky hangs over the empty streets and browned patches of lawn. The other paintings from the series depict similar scenes, with slightly different backdrops.

Given this description, one could read this series as a social critique of postwar suburban development and homogenization. Such a critique was the subject of Connecticut artist Andrew Prayzner's bleak paintings of fast-food restaurants and strip malls exhibited alongside Weber's sculpture at the Aldrich in September; and of New Haven artist Martin Kruck's recent Artspace exhibition of photographs from his Geomancia project: large glossy prints that show construction sites marked with signs advertising "Cathedraltown," and other marketed utopias. The photographs, covered with thick Plexiglas, appear straight out of the showroom of any developer's office. By mimicking the methods of the advertising industry, Kruck shows us how empty its promises are.

Yet Waite's paintings are different from these critiques because some element of Waite is in them. He notes that when these paintings were exhibited in New York City, some viewers read them as critical commentary on suburbia. But like Weber's shingles, Waite's houses are part of the artist's everyday life; he lives in a ranch house in Glastonbury and passes by these homes by bike or by car. He says he tries to retain "the eyes of a traveler even in my own backyard," and he thinks of his subjects—corporate boardrooms, Disneyland, and his hometown in Massachusetts—as sites that meld "personal and social memory."

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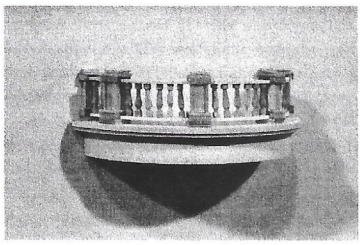
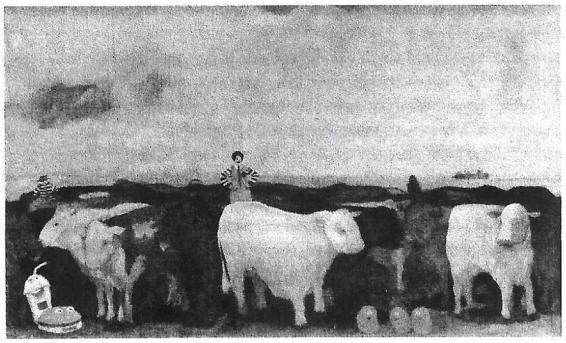
Is there something about Connecticut that has inspired this body of different yet similar work? It is both specific and universal; it responds to architecture, cities, and sites in Connecticut, and it conveys more universal feelings about the continuous edge cities and tract housing have created from coast to coast. Weber's work recalls minimalism, while Prayzner's and Kruck's critiques share ideological and formal ground with Dan Graham's 1966 photo-essay on suburban tract housing, *Homes for America*, and work by his contemporaries, such as Ed Ruscha.

It is easy to see the universal message but there is an element in this body of work as a whole that is original to Connecticut, a state that is part of both New England and the tri-state area, thus sharing paradoxical similarities with both regions. The richness of this contrast permeates these works of art, endowing them with a welcome sense of place amid the increasing homogenization of our built environment and the attendant globalization of the art world.

Installing Lee Boroson's *View From Here*, monofilament, wood, cardboard, foamcore, hardware, dimensions variable, 2003. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Lee Boroson, *View From Here* (installation detail), monofilament, wood, cardboard, foamcore, hardware, dimensions variable, 2003. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Andrew Prayzner, *Find Ronald*, oil on canvas, 48 x 72", 2003.

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