

FACING OUT

Stephanie Snyder

Facing Out (2008) is one of Elspeth Pratt's most recent sculptures and it occupies a unique position in her oeuvre. In distinction to Pratt's past work, *Facing Out's* complex structure consists of a holistic and unified form—no appendages, protrusions, or radical material juxtapositions. *Facing Out's* peculiar, faceted shape is comprised of a syncopated planarity that simultaneously conceals and reveals the work's interior and exterior dimensions. The work allows us to see into, around, and through shapes, angles and surfaces that would otherwise establish themselves in resistance to transparency and human contact. Instead, the work possesses an interior logic of extension and revelation. Partly because of its semblance to ancient Egyptian pyramids—the ultimate form of architectural opacity and interiority—*Facing Out* also resembles a scale model or the artefact of a planning process.

Its surfaces smooth and flat, *Facing Out* is composed solely of coloured mat board, its form is commensurate with the structural nature of its constituent materials. Pratt was inspired to make the work, in part, by Japanese architect Toyo Ito's 2002 Summer Pavilion for the Serpentine Gallery in London. Ito's temporary structure was composed of a rectangular network of thick volumetric planes punctuated by glass. Not unlike Ito's pavilion, *Facing Out's* eccentric geometric narrative is generated by a radically simple set of properties: volume, interiority, exteriority, angularity and, of course, planarity. But within the work, these attributes cohere an impression of containment and autonomy that, to reiterate Matthew Stadler's description, exudes "... a surfeit of internal necessity."¹ This internal necessity is produced as much by the piece as by the interaction of the work and its environment. *Facing Out* expresses a

sociality of *encounter*, embracing the architecture of the gallery as an organizing principle, but also as a partner; it cannot stand up without it.

Facing Out needs support to exist, and its interdependence is a critique of monumental, isolationist ideologies. Pratt's sculptures almost always articulate their interdependence at the margins and intersections of space, expressing an ethos of *graft* that resists rational hierarchies. Pratt's preoccupation with the *touching*, *joining* and *grafting* of commonplace materials, evidences her commitment to experimentation, interconnectedness and humility. These humanistic/aesthetic predilections are evidenced by Pratt's preoccupation with the architectural practices of poor and marginalized communities, in which material ingenuity becomes a semiotic register of forms of social interaction. In the words of Robin Laurence, "[Pratt] is attracted to experiments in structuring space and establishing alternative means toward social cohesion and community interaction."² This is true both symbolically and literally—the impermanence of Pratt's work privileges dexterity and resourcefulness over immutability and power. Laurence continues: "Pratt challenges old but still lingering notions of the heroic and the monumental and, in so doing, incorporates a subtextual feminist critique of both art and architecture into her work. In the past, she has spoken about the elements of doubt and vulnerability in her sculpture, in opposition against the expected masculine assertions of conviction and strength. Not that Pratt is interested, necessarily, in articulating gendered space or examining the domestic realm."³

An interesting companion to Pratt's philosophy can be found in the Turkish practice of Gecekondu (pronounced ga-ja-kon-doo), which means "house built in one night." Gecekondu developed on the outskirts of Ankara in response to Turkish land-use laws stating that an unpermitted

dwelling could only be considered permanent, “If by sunrise, the walls and roof enclosed a shelter that could keep bedding dry, and if water for tea was boiling.”⁴ This first night becomes just one stage in a constant process of construction. In Gecekondu, the surrounding environment is both folded into and exposed within an evolving network of rooms that are grafted together using found and recycled materials, such as used food cans, tire rubber and cardboard. Structural vulnerability is accounted for by a moveable network of leaning supports in the form of poles and fences. Every surface remains the site of another possible addition. Often built against disused retaining walls, hillsides, or other existing structures, in Gecekondu: “Anything built as part of the Gecekondu leaves itself open as a base for attachment and displays itself as an opportunity to take on more.”⁵

The prismatic surfaces of *Facing Out* with a similarly open, additive impulse, diverting the floor line of the gallery and compartmentalizing it into an extended set of planar nodules. As it ruptures the space, *Facing Out* creates an imaginary deformation of solidity—as a symbolic property—offering the viewer the possibility of material insight and kinship that is the true reward of transparency.

¹ A line from Matthew Stadler’s essay in this publication.

² Robin Laurence, “Elspeth Pratt,” *Border Crossings* 27:2 (2008), 92-94.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mary-Ann Ray, “Gecekondu,” *Architecture of the Everyday*, eds. Stephen Harris and Deborah Berke (New Haven: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 153.

⁵ Ibid., 158.

Elspeth Pratt: Nonetheless

Elspeth Pratt

Building Back

2007

Cardboard, nylon crate

77.17 in. x 12.99 in. x 22.05 in. (196 cm x 33 cm x 56

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Close the Door Behind You

2006

Wood, coroplast, cardboard

38.19 in. x 7.09 in. x 28.35 in. (97 cm x 18 cm x 72 cm)

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Collateral Event

2007

Cardboard, vinyl

17.32 in. x 3.15 in. x 12.99 in. (44 cm x 8 cm x 33 cm)

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Encroachment

2006

MDF, balsa wood, glassine

25.98 in. x 6.3 in. x 45.28 in. (66 cm x 16 cm x 115 cm)

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Facing Out

2008

Mat board

35 in. x 73 in. x 12 in. (88.9 cm x 185.42 cm x 30.48

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt: Nonetheless

Elspeth Pratt

Implantation

2007

Mat board

17.72 in. x 7.87 in. x 31.5 in. (45 cm x 20 cm x 80 cm)

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Lift

2008

Foamcore, vinyl

16.14 in. x 3.15 in. x 12.99 in. (41 cm x 8 cm x 33 cm)

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Moveable Feast

2008

Wood, paint, can

25 in. x 24.02 in. x 48.03 in. (63.5 cm x 61 cm x 122

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Sketch

2008

Vinyl, paper

12 in. x 9 in. (30.48 cm x 22.86 cm)

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt

Take Me Out to the Crowd

2005

Polystyrene, wood, Styrofoam, laminate, D-bond

27.56 in. x 31.5 in. x 63.78 in. (70 cm x 80 cm x 162

Sculpture



Elspeth Pratt: Nonetheless

Elspeth Pratt

Unrelated

2007

Wood, cardboard

24.8 in. x 11.81 in. x 86.61 in. (63 cm x 30 cm x 220

Sculpture

