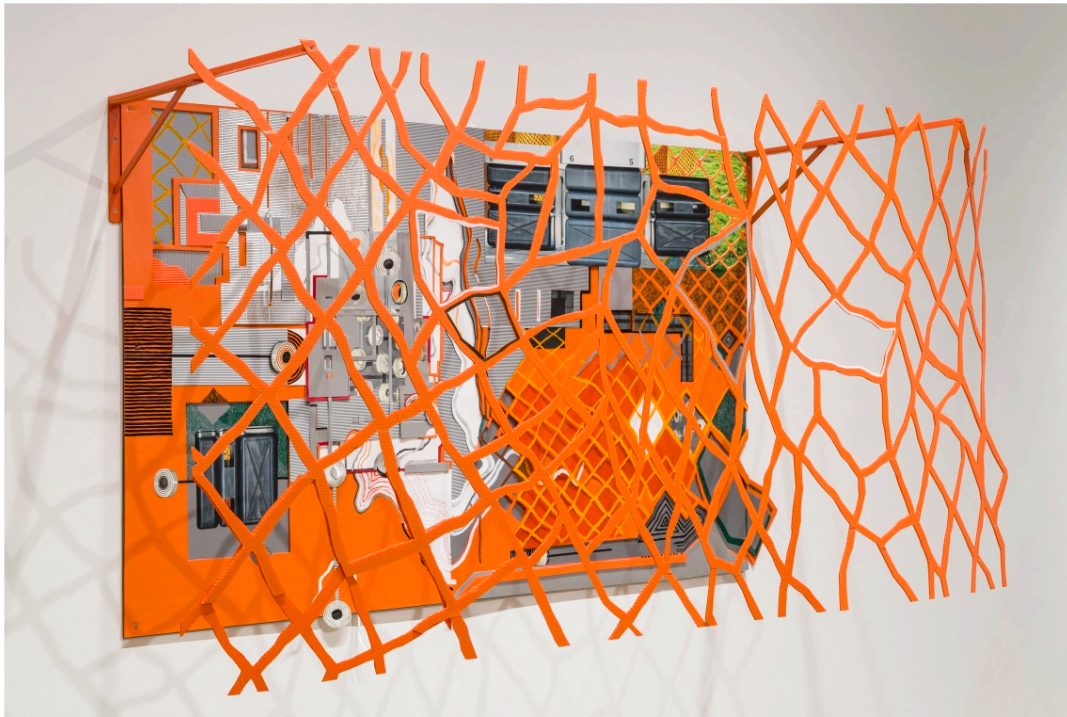




POVarts

Seeing the World Anew: POVarts in the Studio with Diana Cooper



Through her artwork, the artist Diana Cooper explores systems, incongruencies, and things that are almost unseen, closely seen.

POVarts was fortunate to meet with New York artist Diana Cooper on the heels of her fantastic recent solo show, *Sightings*, at Postmasters Gallery. Sitting in Cooper's studio, in The Old American Can Factory in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn, POVarts got to ask the artist questions about her recent work, studio practice, and upcoming projects.



Sightings, Diana Cooper's solo show at Postmasters Gallery. (Photo credit: Paul Takeuchi)

POVarts: What are the core concepts, materials and techniques of your recent show *Sightings* at Postmasters Gallery?

DC: My work is informed by intense acts of observation both in my day to day life and in my studio. For me the walls of my studio are porous and there is a back and forth between what is inside and what is outside. What I make in the studio can direct my sight outside, just as what I see outside can direct what I make. I like that the word site is a homonym and for me the three different words: site, sight and cite are all connected to my creative process. In this show there are a variety of sites: psychological, visual, public, and private. In a way a site can be anything.

To navigate the world I must memorize things out there because I lack a sense of direction. As a result, I've developed an elaborate way of making sense of my environment and how I move through it. This heightened visual way of navigating the world can, when transferred to the studio, lead to a very personal, idiosyncratic logic in my work. For me there are always new systems to discover and develop, there's no default setting to rely on. I marvel at the creative imagination that creates order in our world, from urban structures and construction sites to electronics. From a very early age stereo systems, television sets, phones and phone cords were sites for drawing. I'm intrigued by how design and function coexist to form our conceptions of what the future should look like. Speaking of technological innovations, I use my phone's camera as a sketchbook to frame and record what I observe around me. So much of my work is concerned with framing things that surround us but shifting the frame away from the main event.

POVarts: Yes, I see this working in your artwork, *Family Safe*, that features all types of representations and presentations of security cameras in the form of photographs, sculptures, collages, actual cameras, hidden and revealed in the installation – structural, and compositional musings and possibilities of how something relatively unseen can be seen anew and for the first time, many times. It reminds me to some degrees of the Situationists who were keen on really experiencing life in a way that was fresh and present by taking detours or in their words: *détournements* where the participant/artist would take a different route than usual to find new awareness in their experience and to resist the inuring that happens from the blinding habits that set us into default patterns making us numb to our own lived experiences.

DC: That is interesting that you mention the Situationists. I return to their writings often. And with each passing day, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* becomes ever more prophetic. At Columbia, I teach a course on Collage/Mixed Media and I often discuss the Situationists in the context of the *dérive* and psychogeography and how they can help open up new ways of seeing and emotionally connecting to the urban landscape. In the past I have felt less of connection with *détournements* because I am not interested in overt political messaging in my art. That said, perhaps *Family Safe* comes closest to a *détournement* and Debord's 'spectacle'.



Family Safe by Diana Cooper (Photo credit: Paul Takeuchi)

POVarts: It's interesting to see that these works feel more discreet than some of your earlier installation/constructions.

DC: Yes, at my opening, the artist David Humphrey compared my earlier works to run-on sentences! And he noted their absence in the current work. These new works are more self-contained, they relate to each other but don't flow into each other. They are indeed closed compositions. The new works refer to tarmacs, elevator interiors, medical equipment, barcodes – formal systems that have a distinct beginning and end. I also think I was starting to question the role of excess. I wanted to see what it was like to resist the urge to expand or sprawl.



Slide Rule by Diana Cooper (Photo credit: Paul Takeuchi)

POVarts: Where did this change from an open sprawling compositional approach to a more determined and succinct composition strategy come from?

DC: I am interested in the relationship between constraint and restraint. I think they are both operating in this show. I am intentionally constraining the vocabulary of a given work. Each work reflects a discrete concept. There is some meandering in the work but there is also a clear beginning and end of each work in physical space. In *Slide Rule* I was thinking about restraint and how the piece juts out in multiple directions without taking over the gallery. I was imagining that it was somehow being held back. For me there is power in this, it forces me to find tension elsewhere, not between chaos and order but within the internal logic of the piece itself. Another thing I wanted to do was make each piece different and autonomous. Distinct islands that together create a place.

POVarts: It's a very satisfying way of encountering your maximalist, energetic and dynamic work.

POVarts: When and how did you know you were going to be an artist?

DC: I grew up with 3 brothers so I often played with boys' toys: blocks, legos, and cars. Both my parents were artists and teachers. Art was a big part of my life from the moment I could hold a marker. But it wasn't until I was in my twenties that I called myself an artist. I went to a liberal arts college where I majored in History and Literature and did art and dance on the side. In hindsight, I think one of my main reasons for not wanting to be an artist was because I didn't want to do what my parents did. Of course in earlier times, it would have been the expected thing to do, that is if I had been male. As a child and adolescent, it was dance and choreography that fed my imagination and all my free time when I wasn't doing homework. Some key memories include endless summers playing in Nantucket with pine needles and twigs to create various low lying structures on the copper floor of the forest. My parents taught in private schools so we would have these long stretches of unscheduled time in the summer to play and explore. In addition to the general positive reinforcements, my father would take me to NYC galleries in the 70s and early 80's. I keenly remember going to see the Beuys exhibit at the Guggenheim and trying to make sense of the piano wrapped in felt; the Volkswagen bus and the fat. It was a visceral experience. I don't ever have a memory of newly discovering contemporary art. I feel fortunate to have had parents who were insatiably curious.

POVarts: Describe a typical/ideal day at the studio?

DC: It's really straightforward. I walk in, hang my keys on a nail by the front door, put on work clothes, and deliberately avoid looking at what is on the walls until I have all the lights on and can face them head on. I guess I'm trying to achieve an impersonal form of observation as if I am looking at an object that has nothing to do with me. Then I start to work: music on, internet off.

POVart: That's very interesting, as your work really rewards the very observant viewer. There is just so much to see and to experience. You were one of the first artist's whose work I saw in New York, whose work had this tremendous ability to unfold and reveal itself generously overtime.

DC: Thank you for that. That is very much what I hope to elicit in my work. In *Sightings* I do have a few discrete pieces hidden in plain view that I refer to as rewards for the very observant!

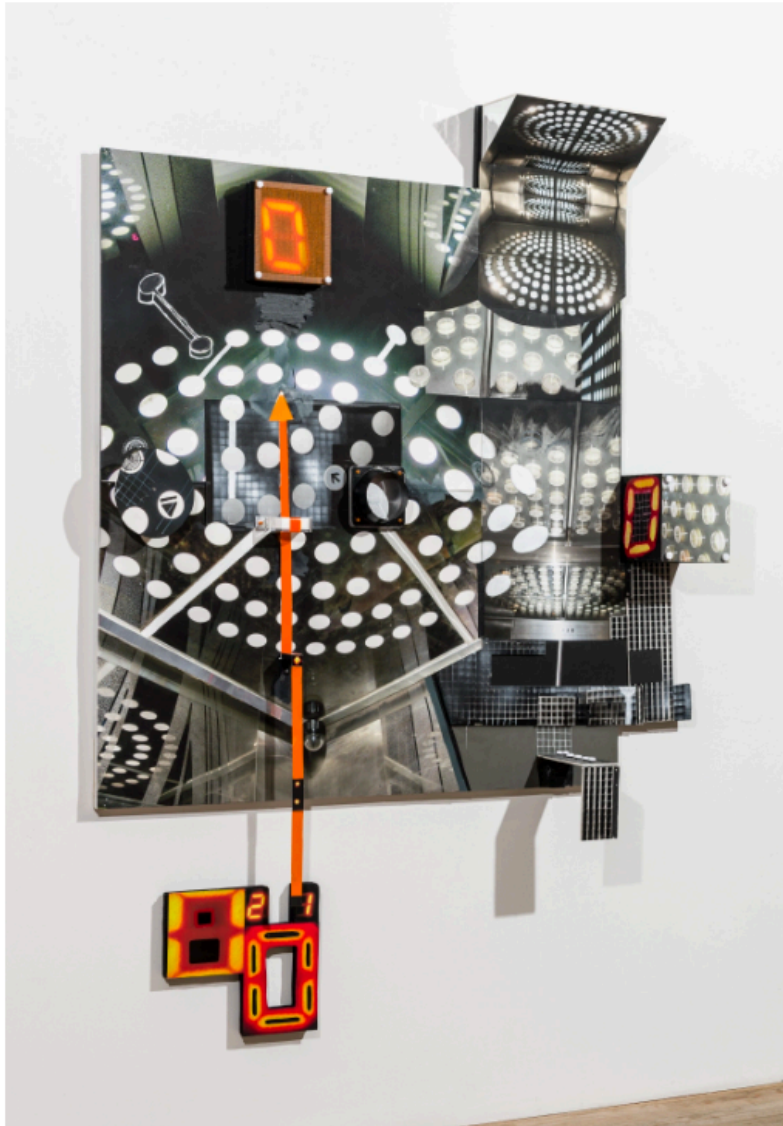
POVarts: What do you do to work through a creative block?

DC: I've experienced different kinds of creative blocks over the years. For instance, when I lost the majority of my life's work during Hurricane Sandy, I didn't consciously understand the extent to which it was responsible for a creative block that spanned years. It was only after I had a conversation with an artist many years later who had had a similar experience that I was able to acknowledge the impact it had on of my ability to make new work. The artist I spoke with was more in touch with her emotions, and in sharing her experience, she helped me. It didn't make the block go away but it did enable me to be gentler towards myself and the difficulties I was encountering in the studio. For the regular kinds of creative blocks I have a variety of techniques that I use: I focus on a different artwork, turn on or change the music or radio station I am listening to or try to start something new. In the late 90's I made a piece called *Mood Channel*, the title directly referred to music and how I used it set the tone for what I was doing. If none of this works, I force myself to leave the studio! I take a walk, see shows, look for something else to focus on. I guess I try different things to shake it up, I particularly like having someone over to the studio if a block persists.

POVarts: What kind of response do you hope to elicit with your artwork from the viewer?

DC: I hope that I am understood through these works because it really is my preferred form of communicating. My hope is that viewers, after seeing my work, can experience the world differently; that they pay attention to what is often ignored, the background to our lives. I want them to find the freedom to get lost. I hope that they see the wonder, the disorientation and complexity that I experience when making the work and that in some way they can visually and emotionally participate in it with me.

Recently the response to my work is that it's beautiful and/or fun. It is interesting to me because when I was coming of age in the NYC art scene, the word beautiful was suspect. During my show I had a conversation with a long time friend about the difference between the word 'play' and the word 'fun,' and why I preferred the word play. While there is nothing wrong with these words, I do hope that people will take the time to go deeper into the complexity of the work. I don't have children, and it really feels to some degree that my artworks are like my art offspring that I create and send out into the world. It's very personal.



Astral Lift by Diana Cooper (Photo Credit: Paul Takeuchi)

POVarts: If you could be in a group show with any artists alive or dead, name the first 3 that come to mind (and why).

DC:

Lee Bontecou – her work doesn't look like anything else.

Leonardo DaVinci – a mind that straddles art, science, and naturalism – it has no boundaries.

Elizabeth Murray – I'm sorry to have never had the chance to meet her. I respond strongly to the exuberance exploding out of her paintings, and the way she challenges conventions of the rectangle, while still staying in strong dialogue with painting.

POVarts: What's coming up next for you?

My MTA Public Commission *Double Take*, 90 ft long mural will be unveiled in 2021. I am very excited about this project and its materials. It is made of glass mosaic, ceramic, granite and steel. Materials I have never worked with before. Unlike most MTA permanent projects, it will be above ground. It will be the first thing you see when you exit the F Train on Roosevelt Island.

I have an upcoming solo exhibition in 2021 at the McDonough Museum of Art at Youngstown University in Youngstown, Ohio.

Also, an updated website coming soon with a video walkthrough of my recent commissioned *Highwire*, as well as a 2016 video of abstract meditation on an escalator. I am finishing up three new videos that I plan to show in my next solo show at Postmasters. Date to be determined!

To keep up-to-date with Diana Cooper's work you can follow on Instagram @dianacooperstudio and check out her website: <http://www.dianacooper.net/> and learn more about her recent show here: <http://www.postmastersart.com/archive/cooper19/cooper19.html>

(Top featured image: *Scrim* by Diana Cooper Photo Credits)



Photo of the artist in studio (photo: POVarts)

Diana Cooper (born 1964) is Brooklyn-based artist. Recently had her seventh solo show at Postmasters Gallery (9/10-10/12/19). Other recent solo shows include *Highwire* at the Moss Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech, and *Gleanings* (1997-2018) at the New York Studio School in NYC. *Double Take*, a new permanent outdoor installation commissioned by the MTA is to be installed on Roosevelt Island in 2020. Cooper is a recipient of the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant and Anonymous Was A Woman. She currently teaches at Columbia University.

Written by Katerina Lanfranco