

PINK AND RED AND NASCAR TOO

Serendipity and an eye for the playful and incongruous animate **Diana Cooper's** art, which links mind and matter, sports and science, music and literature, and everything else

BY BARBARA A. MACADAM

Diana Cooper works in a renovated studio enclave in what was formerly the cavernous Old American Can Factory, along the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn. The well-lit room is organized around a central workspace, with new pieces, works in progress, and older ones playing in counterpoint. Cooper's newest projects, she points out almost apologetically, include photographs—a recent development. Near the entrance is a collage focusing on car racing. "I am intrigued by NASCAR and vast spaces like the Daytona Speedway," she says. "The chairs, the tracks, the stadium, the parking lots, the pit



crew and their outrageous outfits—it's theater."

Then there's a huge wall installation with protruding red rods that call to mind lipstick tubes, penises, and plumbing pipes. Another piece is filled with tubes painted a seductive pink, suggesting intravenous solutions, blood flow, arteries, and every other kind of network. "I love late Guston," Cooper says, pointing to the dotted line embedded in the lipstick construction and, of course, the pink.

Barbara A. MacAdam is deputy editor of ARTnews.



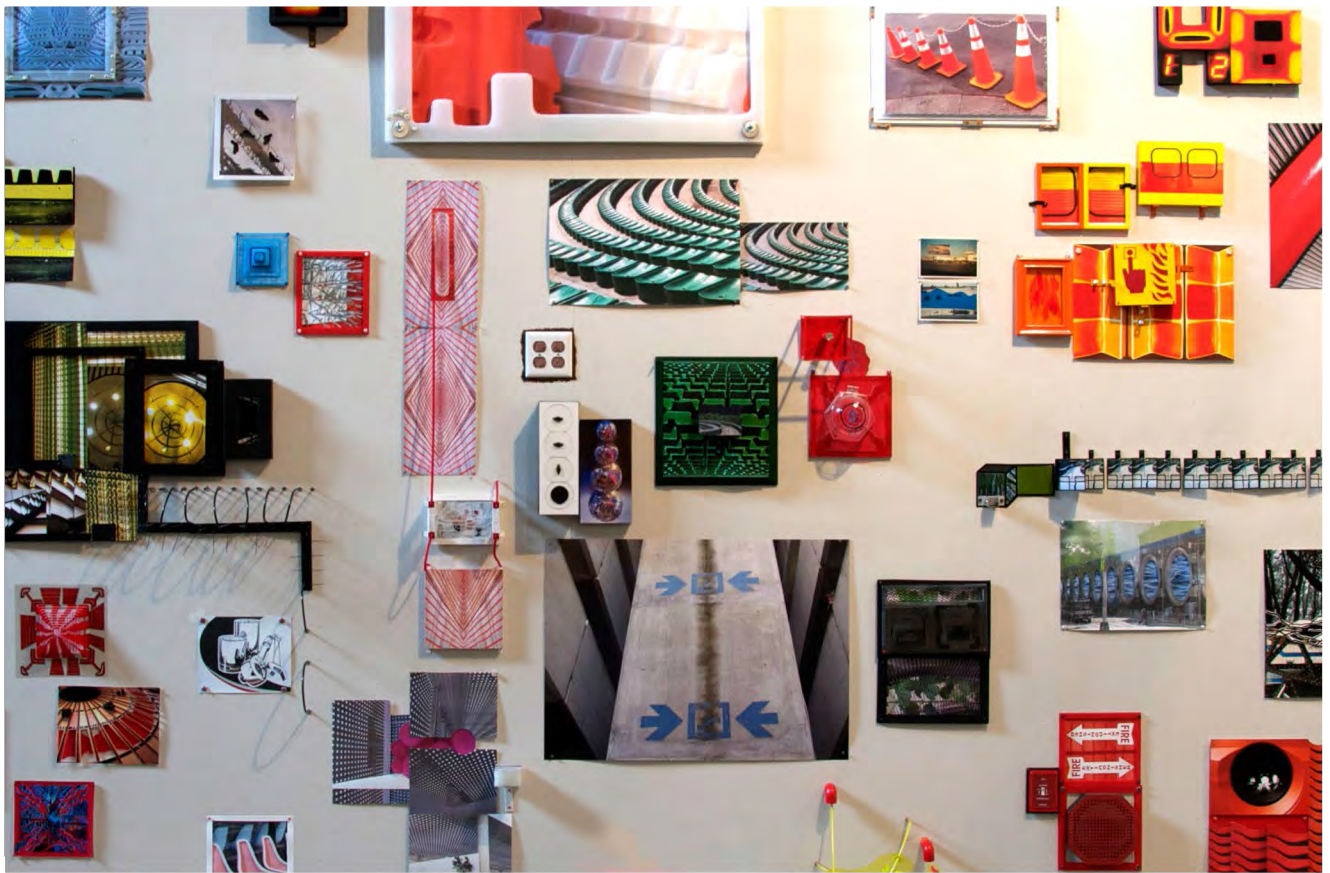
"I'm often attracted to things people might disregard," Cooper says. "Like pink—using it in a non-girly way. Pink is fleshy." And there's the red. The red pipes have little mirrors on their ends, drawing viewers in to reflect on themselves, blood, weapons, and war—and sex. The effect of it all is one of cheerful discomfort.

Working in a genre she describes as hybrid—drawing, painting, assemblage, and photography—the straight-talking 48-year-old artist uses old-fashioned and found materials to speak about new technology and ideas. Mazelike paper structures,

Cooper choreographing her ongoing installation *The Emerger*, begun in 2005.

cut and colored with Sharpie markers, plastic pipes and protuberances, fabric, screws, tape, and fasteners present themselves and link up in unexpected guises and combinations. In this way, Cooper connects mind and body, design and architecture, technology and biology, mapping everything from diseases and treatments to roads.

The elements of her constructions are often interchangeable.



Watch Your Step (detail), 2012, installed at the Boiler in Brooklyn, is like a diaristic index of Cooper's recent fascinations.

texts, the photos, and small paper constructions. They'll eventually show up, whole or in part, in larger works. "I start with something and end up with something else," she says.

Cooper has worked on a continuum throughout her career, introducing new ideas while retaining her unmistakable style. She can move from her dense, dark wall construction *The Black One* (1997) and huge bright sprawling installation *Swarm* (2003–12), which both appeared in her first solo museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland in 2007, to a permanent site-specific work, *Out of the Corner of My Eye* (2008–9), at the Jerome Parker Campus in Staten Island, New York, and an expansive, project-in-the-planning, which is part of an exhibition being curated by conceptual artist Oliver Herring.

Herring, who invited artists to respond to a raw warehouse space as a blank canvas, describes Cooper's approach. "During her first visit to the initial exhibition site," he says, "Diana photographed details of the interior space as well as the streets that surrounded it. She produced a set of computer sketches that juxtaposed, among other things, images of weeds growing on a public sidewalk close to the building, with an architectural detail of the interior, including a white electrical wall outlet. The weeds, rather than being removed, had been sloppily painted over with yellow paint by city employees. The white outlet had been sloppily painted over with blue wall paint by

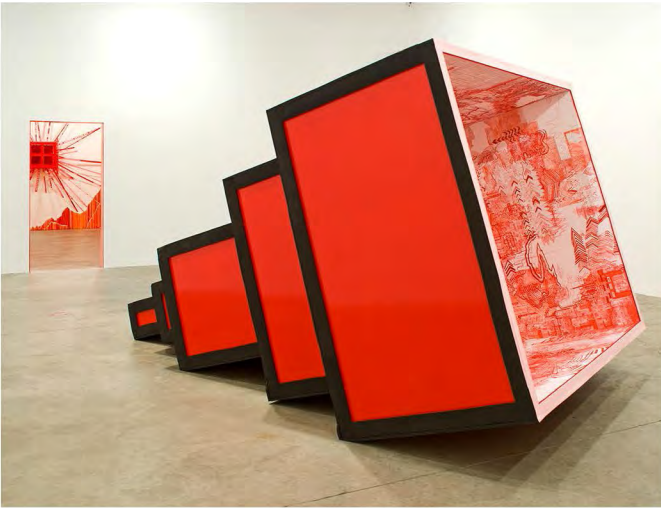
Ideas and passages flow from one piece to another. There's what Cooper calls her "feeder wall." It's where she gets ideas, she explains. Here she mounts fragments, the elements with yet-to-be determined con-

the custodian of the warehouse space. Both images were of jobs not so well done, and both were dramatically enlarged to fit entire walls, making you aware of all the things you don't easily notice."

Born in Greenwich, Connecticut, in 1964, to artists who taught in a number of private schools, Cooper grew up in various places along the East Coast. She attended Harvard University, graduating in 1986 with a major in history and English literature (mostly of the 19th and 20th century).

She wrote her thesis on Virginia Woolf, whom she admires for "writing the way one's mind works," and clearly the way Cooper's mind does. Woolf, in her story "The Mark on the Wall," focuses on a "small round mark, black upon the white wall," and lapses into a breathtaking range of free associations. "How readily," she writes, "our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it. . . . If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations."

Cooper demonstrates that process of association with her hands and camera. At Harvard, she also enrolled in life drawing and art history classes, and after graduating in 1986 she took courses at the New York Studio School, where she began making "intense drawings of figures," she recalls. "Then I started working abstractly on my own. I became aware there that the model was really an abstraction, a marker of space." Although she had initially planned to do graduate work in architecture or environmental law, Cooper found herself increasingly immersed in art and went on to earn an M.F.A. from Hunter College in



In fact, she says, while the process of installing *Swarm*, reminded her of her relationship to dance and her desire to be a choreographer, which she had to abandon in her early 20s due to knee and back injuries. “The act of reinstallation,” she observes, “is a kind of private performance that links my process and the experience of making visual art to the time-based and ephemeral nature of dance.”

Cooper says she surprised even herself by adding photographs to her compositions, since the photos deal with representation and her work has largely dwelt in the realm of abstraction. She realized that digital photography enabled her to branch out and to vary the dimensions of her pieces. “With the printer and computer, it’s all there,” she explains. So, in this way, “digital photography with its ease is not so different from drawing.”

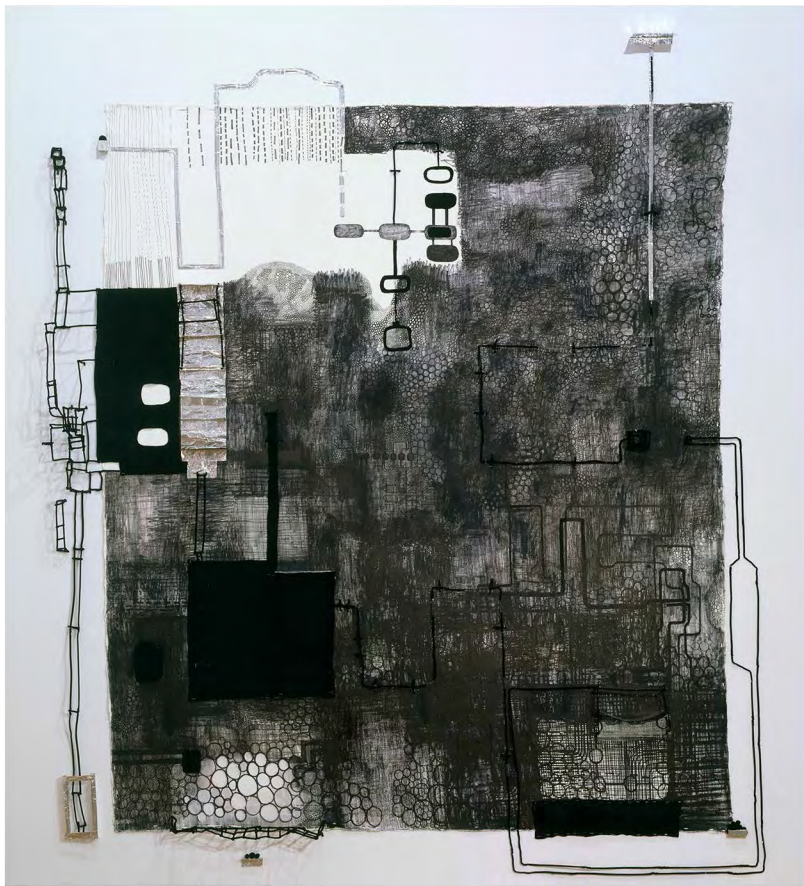
“The real game-changer,” she says, “was the shift from film to digital.” She got her first digital camera in 2003, just before leaving for a year’s stay at the American Academy in Rome.

“Having a digital camera for the first time coincided with two major changes in my life,” she recalls: “moving to a foreign country and going from being in a couple to being single,” as she had just ended a long relationship. While in Rome, she traveled a lot, mostly by herself.

1997. That year she had her first solo shows at Ah! space Gallery in New York and Yearsley Spring Gallery in Philadelphia. Since 1998, she has been represented by Postmasters Gallery in New York, where she will have a solo show running from January 5 to February 9. Her work sells for between \$3,000 for a small piece up to \$85,000 for a large installation like *Swarm*, on view through July 28 at Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, New York.

***All Our Wandering*, 2007, takes viewers from Piranesi to Pop and beyond (above). *Swarm*, 2003–12, currently swirls through the exhibition space at Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, NY (below).**





The Black One, 1997, an abstract architectural realm, was composed with Cooper's signature arsenal of felt-tip markers, pipe cleaners, and pom-poms.

she says. "The digital lens, paradoxically, became a way of escaping and engaging with the world at the same time." It kept her in the present. "I think I am constantly trying to stay in the moment, to avoid a programmatic approach, which for me feels too oppressive, too associated with the tasks of everyday life."

In 2011, Cooper spent some time in Florida, at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, where she was the master artist-in-residence. "I visited the Daytona Speedway numerous times," she says. "I went to the Daytona 300—a first! And then I went back twice more." Daytona and China, which she had visited in 2010, both drew her attention to man-made environments "where man and nature collide."

After her brother's death last year, Cooper was unable to work for a long time. "I was not in the studio in the same way," she recalls. "The camera was a way of connecting with the studio." And it has allowed her to "broaden the language—from 'this is my world' to 'this is how I see the world.'"

Cooper equates her venturing into the visual world and video with her move from oil and spray paint on canvas to Sharpie markers on canvas during her earlier years at Hunter—a shift that came about because she wanted to conflate drawing and painting. She found that the ease of digital photography made it not so different from drawing. "Sometimes it's hard to treat it as disposable, because I developed my relation to photography in the pre-digital age. I try to remind myself that digital photography isn't sacrosanct, because it is the malleability and immediacy of this new medium that draws me in." With digital, she adds, "there's a sense of infinity."

When she completes an installation—to the extent that she ever believes she has finished—Cooper makes a spiral-bound booklet, like a blueprint of the project. It's filled with step-by-step illustrations and descriptions of a work. For example, her manual for her piece *The Dispenser* (1999), with drawings and text by herself and fellow

artist Andrew Chan, is like a game plan, with materials such as hardware (staples, pushpins, map pins, pom-poms, pipe cleaners) detailed and sections of the installation circled and numbered. A page in the booklet is devoted to each segment, including photos of the pieces, as the pieces are packed away. The booklet enables other people to install and de-install the piece. In fact, Cooper says, "the blueprint has a strange relationship to permanence, in that the piece can forever be reconstructed."

Inspiration comes at her from so many sources: art, literature, science, news, music, and so on. "I read science fiction now,"



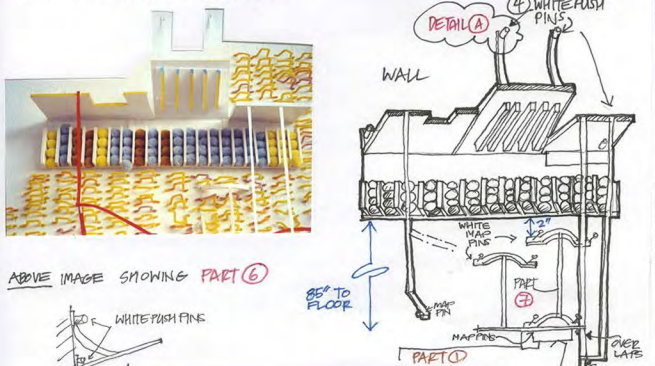
"The camera was like a companion," she says. "It was during this period that my subject matter became more defined, and photography became more central to my creative process. A lot of my photography happens when I am in transit, and the technology that makes that possible is often the focus of my attention."

A still bigger change came about when her brother was diagnosed with cancer. "I cared for my brother in 2010 and '11, while he was being treated in Boston. I was traveling between New York City and Boston, and I felt a great deal of alienation,"

THE DISPENSER 99

DIANA COOPER
INSTRUCTIONS FOR PART ⑥+⑦

PART ⑥ "L" SHAPED IN PROFILE WITH POM POMS, FOAM CORE & PAPER CONSTRUCTION ATTACH TO WALL WITH 4 WHITE PUSH PINS APPROX 4" TO THE RIGHT OF PART ⑤

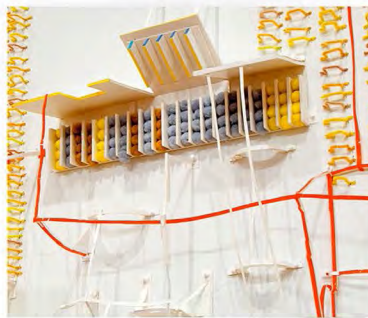


ABOVE IMAGE SHOWING PART ⑥

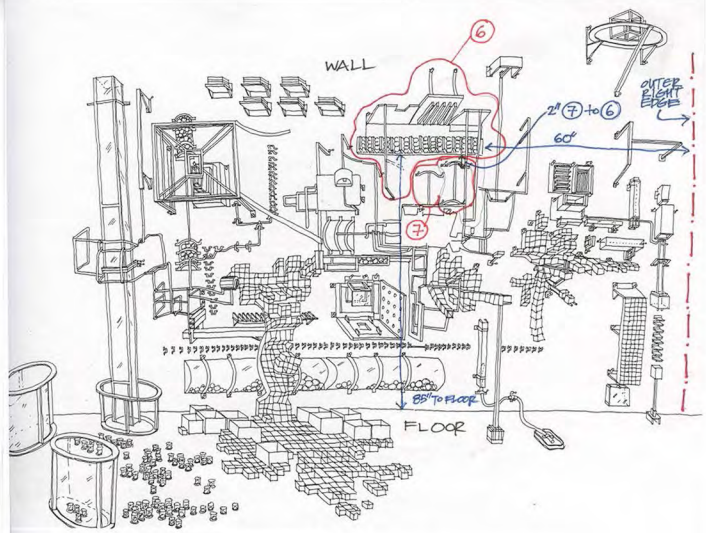


PETAL (A)

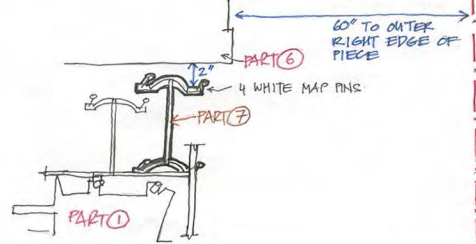
RIGHT IMAGE SHOWING PART ⑦



NOTE: PLEASE REFER TO COLOR IMAGE AND DIAGRAMS FOR EXACT LOCATION



FOR PART ⑦ TWO "C" SECTIONS ATTACHED TOGETHER BY A WHITE PAPER STRIP ATTACH ABOVE PART ① BUT TOUCHING TO WALL WITH FOUR WHITE MAP PINS.



Cooper draws up detailed "blueprints" for her installations, as here, for *The Dispenser*, 1999, so "the piece can forever be reconstructed!"

At the same time, she is attracted to very concrete-seeming places, like parking lots and airports. "There's a kind of imagery that transitional spaces like airports produce," she says. "It's the narrative of nowhere." And "there are videos and animations coming out of these things," she explains as she turns on her computer. One video opens to a runway. "I like the tarmac when getting into a plane and the view from the windows at takeoff; it's like drawings for giants."

But it's her interest in the sciences and technology as an outside observer that seems to propel her work and mind—"the role of esthetics in information." She's apparently not alone. When, in 2011, she was doing some research at Columbia University, where her husband, Mark Lilla, is a professor of humanities, she visited the biomedical imagery center and was shocked and amused to discover that the scientists hold beauty competitions for cells.

This spring, she is teaching a course at Columbia, called "Temporary Landscapes," the aim of which is "to explore the relation between the creative process in art and the makeshift nature of seemingly orderly things, their precariousness, and fragility."

she says, and her favorite part of the *New York Times* is the science section. "I'm fascinated by science and math, but I've never had any aptitude for it. I'm attracted to the microscopic—the microcosm—the echoing of form and structure."

Since her brother's death, Cooper has also come to realize that she has a "strong emotional relationship to music." She responds to all kinds, from Sonic Youth to Joni Mitchell ("She was part of the fabric of my whole life"), to Nina Simone and to more classical music—Debussy and Schubert—and to Steve Reich ("until the repetitions made me crazy"). Lately, she's been working in silence. "Orchestral music," she finds, "can make anything you're doing seem too important."

"I sometimes wish that visual art could be as emotional as music," she adds. "I often feel like I am trying to inject music and movement into the static forms of visual art. This is an absurd proposition but infinitely challenging!"

Lately, Cooper has been making three-dimensional photo-based works with fewer parts, such as the illusionistic wall-piece *Undercover* (2010), shown in "Seeing/Knowing" at Kenyon College last spring. One installation, *Watch Your Step* (2012), exhibited at Pierogi Gallery's satellite space, the Boiler in Brooklyn, was like a graphic index of her recent concerns—including a still from her tarmac animation—all allowing her to present her work in a diaristic fashion.

As Herring describes it, "I learned to love how Diana sees scrappy detail and opportunity in everything and everywhere. If you ever have a chance to take a stroll with her through an urban landscape, do it. You won't look at that blighted lot or that rusty street curb quite the same afterwards."

And, Cooper might say, quoting Virginia Woolf, "I want the concentration and the romance, and the worlds all glued together, fused, glowing."