

SLOW MATTERS

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Michelle Lopez makes speed slow. As we move among the objects around us, more often than not, time and place zip by in a series of transparent, unnoticed moments. Maybe it's the preoccupations of the mind, or maybe it's our conditioning by the repetitiveness of everyday life, that causes physical elements around us to dissolve into a ubiquitous background – an ambient field that simply cradles whatever we're thinking, whatever transactions we're conducting. But none of this is ever true when it comes to Michelle Lopez's work. All those objects and images that might be allowed to pass on unremarkably and unfettered in the continuous gloss of daily encounters assume a different weight there, a renewed, saturated physicality where even the air has a kind of static presence, and is somehow more palpable.

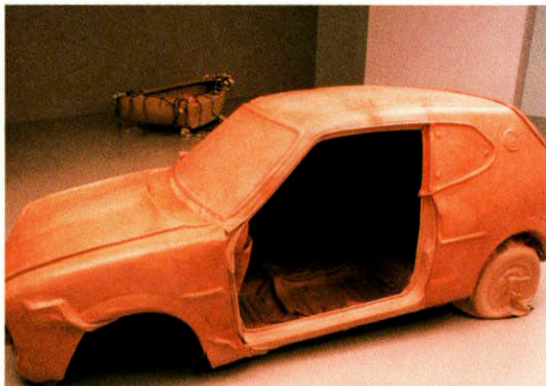
In part, that's due to Lopez's materials, literally. Her exhibitions might include numbers of animal hides hanging side by side on the gallery walls, with their sagging proportions having the strange ability to conjure the sensation of weight by appearance alone. Her previous smaller sculptures of recognizable forms like automobiles or tractors are wrapped in such hides, with their contours submerged in sluggish folds. (The heavy odor of these hides amasses easily, trapped and stagnant in closed rooms, and seems to assume an additional, unanticipated mass in your every breath.) Such materiality might seem readily associated with the work of others. Take, for example, the heavy piece of industrial felt that Robert Morris slit into heavy, drooping strips, which amplify the perception of mass – material presented as the simple fact of itself. But Lopez makes her mark by actually making marks: the animal hides she uses bear the cuts and scars, as well as smoothed and worn areas, of her figural tracings of form (often taken from cartoon and logo iconography) and the various workings into the surface by the tools of her leather trade. Her

material, in a fashion, can be displaced and destabilized by the very detailed processes that are embedded in it, and the elements of time and memory that they might supply.

Still another reference might leap to mind. Lopez's figural tracings of form extend to those three-dimensional objects onto which her hides collapse – a move reminiscent of Jasper Johns, that artist who would make bronze casts of his ale cans and light bulbs that were in turn encased in paint. But the connection here is not quite right. While Johns reintroduced his audience to the literal aspect of objects they could find in the refrigerator or closet, he kept to the codified utensils of fine art. Awash with paint, for example, these things could feel right at home in the art gallery – and so they could, and would, disappear into their living context. It's true that Lopez shares the painterly sensibility, oddly enough, molding as she does a malleable material around a sculptural surface. You could even say that she simply inverts the question: if looking for materiality in paint, why not make actual material painterly? But Lopez resists this kind of assimilation; as much as her sculptures disrupt the fabric of ordinary objects, they also rattle the cage of fine art with their folk art underpinnings of leather work. Consider Johns's friend Frank O'Hara and his banner statement "harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins!...They do have meaning. They're as strong as rocks." – meaning that everyday objects could be transformed into art, something understood by many artists long before the poet's declaration. Lopez's transformations, even when it comes to cars marked up with abstracted cartoon creatures, go a step further: in her work, the everyday object is transformed into a thing caught in a perpetual ebb and flow between art and the simple fact of its objecthood. If Lopez often

uses vehicles as a foundation for her sculpture, it is only to make them travel back into themselves. By slipping in so many different ways – between functional object and sculpture, between the figurative and the abstract, between the fine and the folk, between the pop and the entropic – she distills the sculptural experience. The gallery, the air in it, the materials, the objects swathed in those materials, all of them resist unnoticed assimilation, all of them compose a field of opaque, sensuous experience.

In The Untitled Thumb and Drape Project,



Lopez both enlarges and expands her repertoire. Gone are the model-sized objects, as she instead takes on, in *Boy* (1999), a small Honda she found in a Mojave Desert junkyard – covering the vehicle inside and out, and creating an environment for viewers to experience with multiple senses. Some things remain constant, as the hide maintains that incongruous folk-art value while hugging the comical, kitschy curves of the windshield, rear bumper, and Coupé logo. And again, on the car's interior ceiling, cartoon and logo imagery is cut into the leather hide, with Lopez's knife having traced and retraced the embellished curves of imaginary creatures and logo-like medical diagrams. It's in this realm that Lopez is so affecting, signaling as she does a kind of obsessive repetition that is only intensified by the dense, physical evidence of the time that activity occupies. The optical encounters, which could be common to any scan of television channels, are seemingly branded into the hide's "cornea," and then stay there in their morphic patternings. Even just to look at these images ends up evoking the dimension of time, as the eye could redirect the entwined script and resculpt their resultant forms for hours on end: to look at Lopez's imagery is to mimic her process in the mind's eye, to encounter the continuous reworkings and shifts in the directions and dynamics of line. The very action of vision is accumulated in compounded layers – like memories that are continuously revisited, reconstructed and changed by new events as they accrue, and new associations are made. It's Freud's magic pad, made for the senses. It's not unusual to hear a phrase like "the weight of memory," or "bearing the scars of memory," but it is unusual to find memory so manifested in physical form.

That psychological quality also permeates *Posy* (1999), a rowboat that Lopez with the collaboration of Sarah Bernbach transforms almost to the point of it seeming a figment of the imagination, covering it in marzipan sculpted to a wondrous forest of candied vegetation. A trace of Koons can be detected here, quoting as they do the overblown, kitsch vocabulary of wedding cakes and funeraries; but his cool, comical distance is slightly lacking. The brightness, flash-in-the-pan of that sort of kitsch is offset by the involved process necessary to produce it. And his nod to the iconography of mass culture seems married to *fleurs du mal*, as the ornate, ceremonial flourishes droop under the oversaturated weight of flesh-like petals, drowsy and intoxicated with their own physicality. As in the work of another sculptor, Keith Edmier – who might allow personal childhood memories to bloom up into large-scale, white form – *Posy* obtains psychological value: the transient materializes before you.

But nowhere is this paradoxical situation clearer than in

Lopez's photography – a medium she works with for the first time in this show. It might seem a strange decision: so much of her work consists of experiences created for multiple senses, why choose to work with just one? Yet Lopez's photographs from the *Cradle* series reach the same saturation point as her sculptures, apparently making the immaterial into material. The images are as sensuous as her sculptural objects. The enveloping fields in each of them seem as heavy as any hide; and the water, whose liquid properties would ordinarily be associated with motion, something ready to slip through the fingers, seems instead to be still matter with sculptural contours as it meets other objects. As Lopez's cut lines are embedded in the hides – seeming like part drawing and part sculpture – so the small figures she places in water are partially submerged, and seem to play between two and three-dimensional form. Images, those things that normally flit by, seem slowed down, even punctured out of time like memory fragments that stick with you no matter how many years have passed. As in the rowboat, the stillness is troublesome, in this case the result of a compressed attention directed at a single point; all the intensity of her sculptural craftsmanship is here focused in a single gaze. The images have a psychological density and ambiguity that suggests a larger story, which nevertheless remains untold. Again, the photographs resemble her objects; but instead of distilling the sculptural experience, they distill the physical sensation of an emotion with an image as its locus. The work offers a powerful display of the transposition of sculptural force into photographic image.

And all this forces anyone visiting her exhibitions to travel far, just by being there – because all the material tied to "there," and which so often remains invisible, rushes up to the surface. Lopez brushes against the grain of experience in such a way that the most transient (and the most abstract) things are compressed into pure sensation: time, emotions, process, medium. They all become objects to explore anew.

BOY 1999 steel, leather, contact cement, pigment 49 x 46 x 146 inches

cover image POSY 1999 [with Sarah Bernbach]
wood, marzipan, sugarpaste, aluminum, pigment 20 x 50 x 116 inches