Art in America
April 2008

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Spatially omnivorous, Diana Cooper's profuse mixed-medium installations begin with the drawn line.

Line Analysis

An artist of the accumulative, Diana Cooper uses craft materials to create simple geometric shapes whose wild proliferation, however playful, lends her work an Orwellian cast.

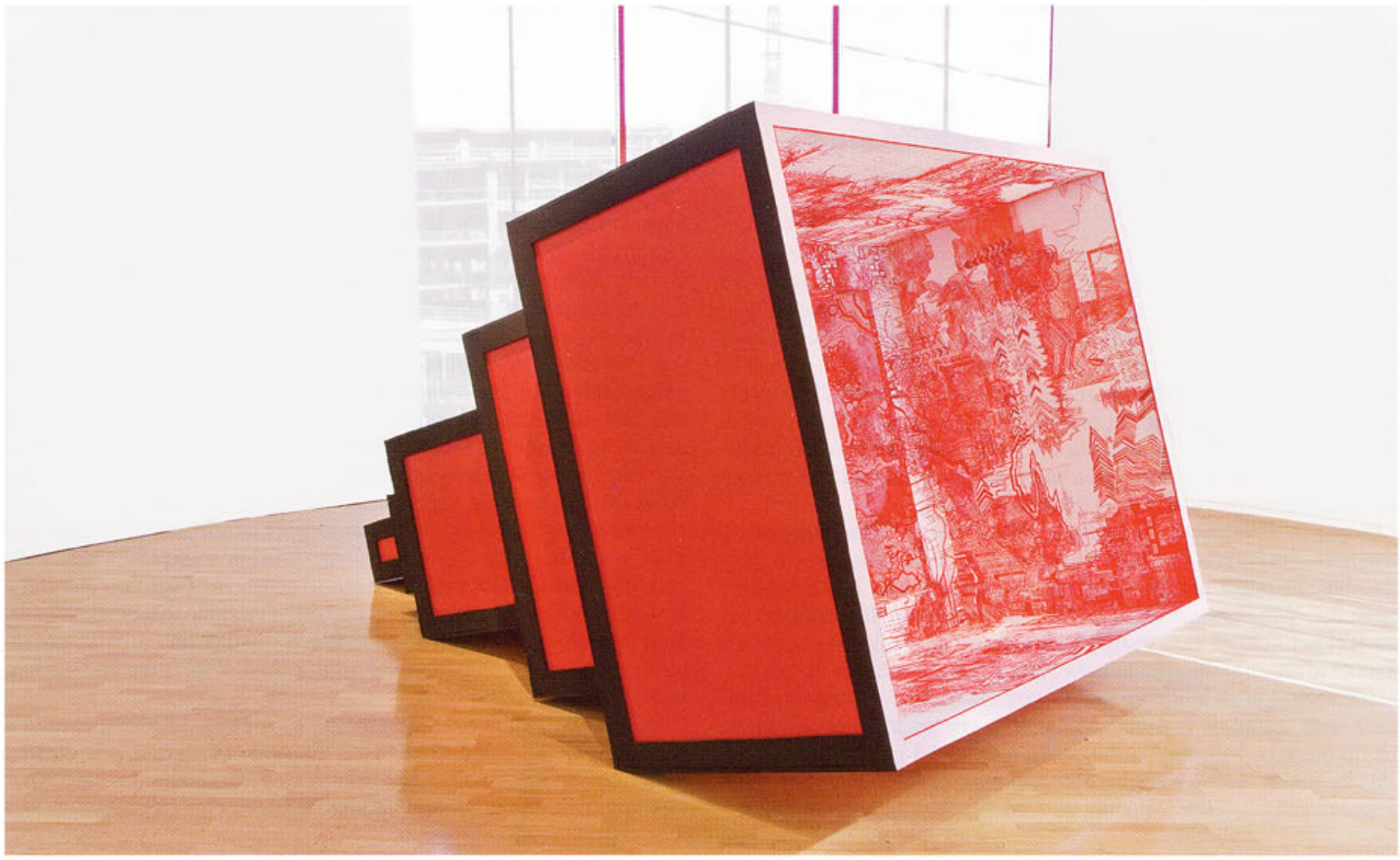
BY LILLY WEI

Daphne, *2006, paper, ink, acrylic and photographs, 73 by 31 by 1 inches. Photos this article Tim Safranek Photographics, courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland.*

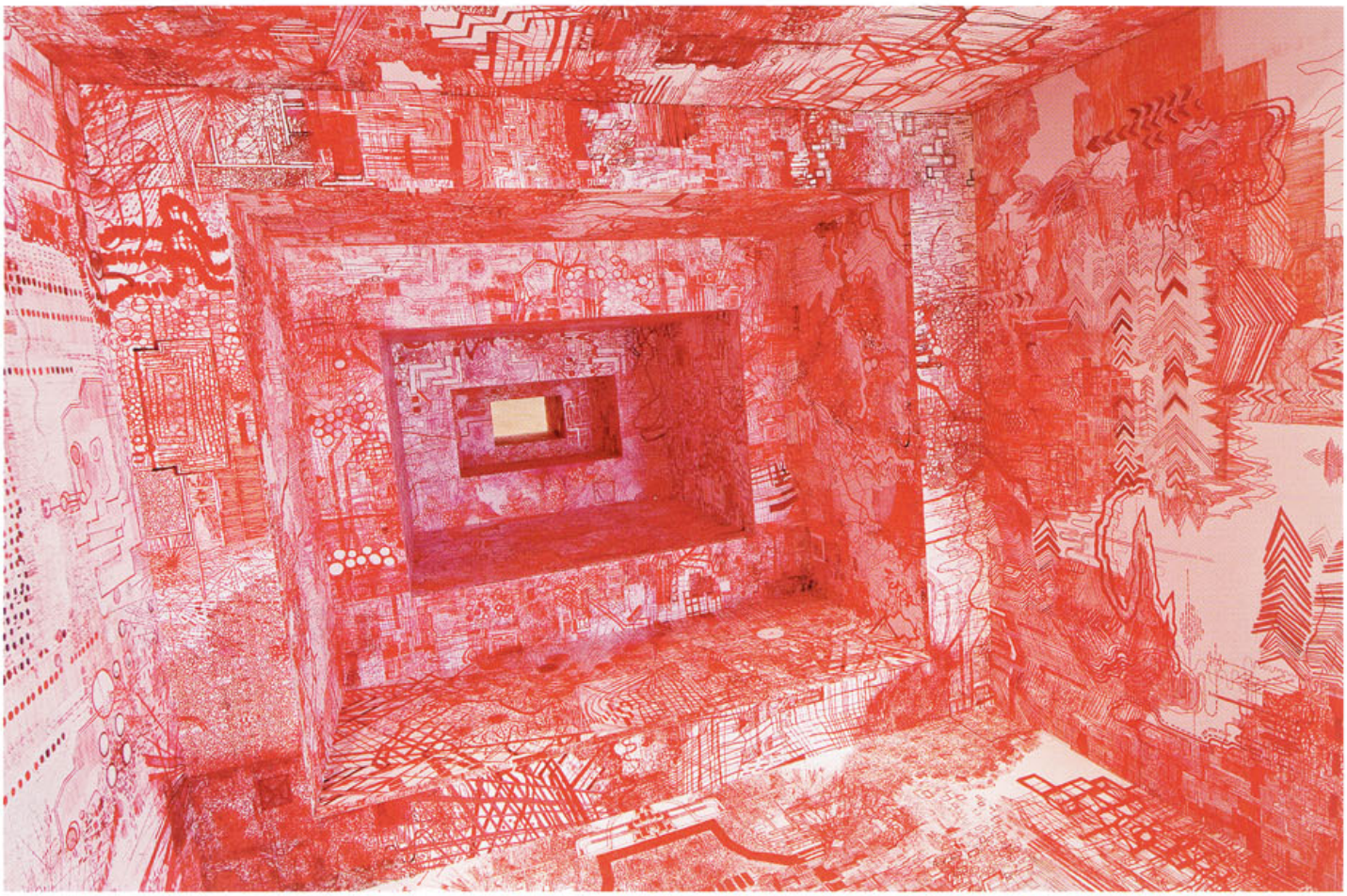
Daphne (2006) is an arresting, abstract collage and mixed-medium drawing that was situated near the entrance of the exhibition "Beyond the Line: The Art of Diana Cooper," recently seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland. Conjuring the beauteous nymph's transformation into a laurel tree so as to escape Apollo's amorous embrace—symbolized by the shimmering, striated disk emerging from the background—the work's precariously balanced system of taut, filigreed cutouts and dense, finely drawn nets of black lines, as well as staccato marks against greens both tender and corrosive, sounded the theme of metamorphosis and technology run amok that was the heart of this exhilarating exhibition.

An overview of approximately 10 years of Cooper's work, "Beyond the Line" was her first one-person museum exhibition, and it included a trove of large and small drawings or wall reliefs, a sculpture and five installations that combined the manic and the methodical. Although beautifully mounted, the complex, multipart, labor-intensive installations would have been even more effective had each been given a room of its own, as was *Orange Alert UK* (2003-07), a mutating work (it changes noticeably each time it's assembled) inspired by the color-coded post-9/11 terrorism alert system, and the newly commissioned, site-specific sculpture *All Our Wandering* (2007). Only her second freestanding sculpture, the latter is a sequence of interlocked, graduated, rectangular sections faced in bold red vinyl and trimmed with black foam rubber. The effect is comparable to that of a "fallen ziggurat" stretched across the floor, as MOCA curator Margo Crutchfield noted in the show's catalogue. Atypically, the work is made of wood, and its austere, rectangular structure represents a new direction for the artist, even as it confirms Cooper's longstanding interest in Donald Judd, Tony Smith and the history of modernist and postmodernist abstraction. The interior of the piece suggests a tilted, segmented funnel shaped by the nested, open-ended boxes, and it is covered in red graffiti-like drawings. This is new ground for Cooper, with its delirious, overlapping networks of digitally executed composite images, themselves created out of earlier drawings and paintings, that were then reworked by hand—a kind of retrospective in itself.

This quirky, fiercely determined maker of "hybridized con-



Above, **All Our Wandering**, *2007, wood, vinyl, custom pigment print, ink, acrylic, colored pencil, ballpoint pen, foam rubber, Sharpie, Velcro and felt, 76¼ by 79½ by 14½ inches. Detail below.*



Cooper wants both to create chaos and to control it in a drawn-out act of sensuality only partly sublimated—an act that is also one of cognition.

structions," as the artist refers to them, combines drawing, painting and sculpture into distinctively architectonic installations. Cooper's approach to material, form and content originated with her incessant habit of doodling and an obsessive urge to multiply and repeat forms. She wants both to create chaos and to control it, in what amounts to a drawn-out act of sensuality, only partly sublimated, that is also one of cognition. Essentially three-dimensional drawings, these works suggest systems and circuits of all kinds—from the biological to the mechanical to the social, political and economic—that have been abstracted and schematized, but are based on real sources and real configurations of data.

Cooper (b. 1964) began as a painter with a "huge affinity," she says, to Mondrian—especially the later works, such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie*—but she might also be compared to artists such as Tom Friedman, Sarah Sze, Tara Donovan, Elliot Hundley or even Jason Rhoades. And yet she is closer in some ways to Judy Pfaff and Jessica Stockholder. Unlike a number of artists of the accumulative, Cooper's basic units are simple geometric shapes, often in one or two primary colors, that are made by hand using craft materials that may be found in any grade-school art class: felt-tip markers, ballpoint pens, pencils, acrylic and paper. To these she adds foamcore, Velcro, pushpins and map pins, pipe cleaners, felt, tape, pompoms and more. Consequently, coupled with drawing, most of her constructions—taped, tacked, Velcro-ed, stapled or pinned together—have a contingent, precarious look, as if confirming that everything in life is held together by rubber bands.

The earliest work in the show, *The Black One* (1997), representative of a group of large monochromatic canvases she made between 1996 and 1999, is covered entirely in black Sharpie doodles. The unstretched canvas is stapled directly on the wall, its surface already embellished with the pipe cleaners, aluminum tape, pompoms and construction netting that would become some of Cooper's signature accessories.

At the end of this period, Cooper abandoned canvas to work directly on the wall, as in *The Dispenser* (1999), a wonderful early hybrid construction consisting of hundreds of shiny or fuzzy handmade objects: a long vertical panel of bright yellow acetate; yellow pipe cleaners bent into brackets or jerrybuilt scaffolds; little cubes of white paper spilling down the wall onto the floor, placed just so; delicate bands and tendrils of white paper fashioned into fragile support structures; red, orange and white pompoms cached in clear storage units or transparent blue vials; clear blue acetate wastebaskets scattered about. *The Dispenser* gives off a somewhat suspect air of cheer and suggests a machine that produces pills, however fitfully. The underlying question is whether this quixotic mechanism can be counted on to yield anything. And, if so, is the end product toxic, salutary or merely inert?

Missed Once (2000-01), dominated by a range of blues, recalls a ramped-up circuit board. Created out of sheets of foamcore, it is situated away from the wall and is meant to be viewed from both sides—a further step toward three-dimensional installations. Long pipe-cleaner extensions

Orange Alert UK, ***2003-07, acetate, acrylic, felt, ethylene vinyl acetate, paper, foamcore, corrugated plastic and map pins, dimensions variable.***

Swarm, *2003-07, corrugated plastic, paper, ink, acrylic, felt, foamcore, photos, Velcro and map pins, dimensions variable. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York.*

like electric wires still link it to the wall, however, as if Cooper weren't ready yet to make a break.

Another work suggesting some kind of military or industrial control board, *Hidden Tracks Sabotage the Random* (2001-02), reverted to the wall for support but also utilized the floor, extending 12 feet outward into the gallery space to form an obstruction that the viewer was invited to negotiate. The piece, made of plastics and vinyl, was dominated by a stack of surprisingly beautiful clear red acetate boxes bundled together by transparent tape. Cooper says of this work that she was "drawing in plastic with my scissors and my knife."

Swarm (2003-07), a skittish, at times apparitional black-and-white installation that seems to be in motion, remains Cooper's most ambitious work to date. She began it in 2003, while in residence at the American Academy in Rome, taking her inspiration from the birds she could see wheeling through the sky outside her studio. The predominant motif, repeated thousands of times, is an arrow-shaped wedge—like a child's notation for a bird, or a character on a computer keyboard—that swoops in multiple through the expansive, geometric infrastructure, resembling bees, fighter squadrons or space vehicles. These latter associations arise from the wall patterns, which suggest sites under aerial surveillance, and from the small photos of the Kennedy Space Center control center inserted throughout. White corrugated plastic barriers are arranged in groups on the floor—a further reference to a post 9/11 world, to the war in Iraq and to the anxiety that is now commonplace.

Emerger (2005-07), another variable wall relief, again combined the geometric and the organic. Its gray, felt-covered grids were hung with intricate, pink and red cutouts that suggest cross-sections of organ tissue. Not as giddy as some of the other works, its humorously macabre insinuations recall illustrations abstracted from a medical textbook and other, perhaps more sinister, sources. Cooper also treated the wall in a new way here by cutting small passages through it at various points. Lined by plump pink and red pillows, they suggested the interior of the body, referring at once to inside and outside, that which can be revealed and that which can't. Cooper, with her absurdist playfulness and Orwellian intimations, appropriates for herself—and her hybridized, metamorphous creations—a unique place in contemporary abstraction. □

"Beyond the Line: The Art of Diana Cooper" appeared at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland [Sept. 28-Dec. 30, 2007]. The artist recently had a show at Postmasters Gallery, New York [Feb. 23-Mar. 29, 2008].

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