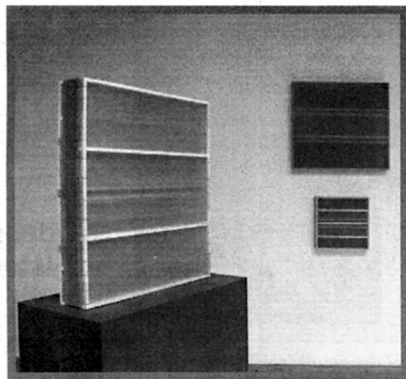


Theodora Varnay Jones at Don Soker Gallery

Theodora Varnay Jones's exhibition of recent work at Don Soker Gallery extends her interest in what she calls "meaning as interaction." The interaction she speaks of, however, is not merely the interactions and reactions of viewers with her created objects or with presupposed mimetic representations of referenced objects outside the work. Although



Theodora Varnay Jones, *Transparency #19*, 2004, pigments, color pencil, acrylic polymer, wood structure, wood stand, 22" x 20" x 4", at Don Soker Gallery, San Francisco.

she admits that the layered three-dimensional images inherent in her translucent painted box structures produce "physical experiences and psychological observations" in the viewer, she also insists that "the structures themselves are the phenomena."

She draws a fine philosophical and psychological distinction between the effects of a work of art on the viewer and its objectified existence in the world of external objects "outside" the observer, over which the observer apparently has no control. This is not, of course, a new argument or condition for works of art—whether meaning exists in the mind and eye of the viewer or whether the works have objective meaning separate from the viewer. This subject has always been paramount to minimalist works of art.

Eight of the eleven works in this show are titled *Transparency*. These rectangular or square shallow boxes have horizontal and vertical "struts," support structures that maintain the walls and shape of the boxes. Some of these struts are curved and bowed. The entire box is covered with translucent, stretched acrylic polymer, shrink wrapped, to produce very intriguing and engaging reflective and transparent surfaces. Jones had to learn to construct these boxes to withstand the deforming and warping forces of the shrinking plastic. The interior background of the boxes contains lines and markings, "drawings" that have no reference to an "external" reality or representational images. The colors of these sur-

faces are deceptively subtle: light green, aqua or faded blue. The interior and external surfaces interact with each other, shifting and changing with variable light and viewing angle. The struts and edges of the boxes are also sometimes painted to highlight or contrast with the interior and surface colors. The translucent surfaces sometimes reflect and sometimes absorb the light, alternately opening and blocking views of the "interior" of the boxes. As a result, complex and subtle effects cause the light to shift from interior to exterior, and sometimes only remaining external and superficial. In *Transparency #25*, where the supporting struts are higher than the surrounding peripheral frame of the box, the stretched acrylic polymer forms curved, wave-like surfaces between the struts that create the effect of looking at breakers on a lake or ocean. Jones, of course, would call this association, "accidental," one that exists only in the mind of the viewer, not in the work itself.

Jones herself, however, adds a new, contradictory factor to the minimalist condition between object and observer by asserting that the obscured drawings and "markings" that she makes on the underlying surfaces are "buried, on the bottom, like childhood memories." These she calls "undercurrents," giving rise to the title of the exhibition. The drawings and markings are for her the "determining foundation," and the layers that she builds upon these do in fact "alter their perception, as events in time or distance in space do, but their physical presence, although not fully visible, takes the obscurity away and restores the reality of these works." The problem remains: What obscurity is removed and whose reality is restored? The very idea that the foundation drawings have a relationship to "childhood memories" injects a psychological human reference into her structures that, in principle, she should deny if she wishes the structures to remain pure phenomena. Of course, this is not possible because the works are not in fact separate from human perception, for they are not "natural objects" like leaves on trees but manufactured human objects, like works of art or machines. Found objects partake of this dichotomy, even when we are both looking at and through the surface of things.

All this philosophy of meaning only adds interest to Jones's already interesting works. Like all minimalist works, they acquire significance just as the famous doubloon in Melville's *Moby Dick*, where the more one concentrates on the meaning of an object, the more meaning dilates until a thing can finally mean everything and therefore nothing. The "real" intrigue for the viewer of such art is to stop the dilation at a point where a particular derived meaning persists and before the work becomes "meaningless." If this is the point at

which one sees or feels an affinity within the works with the waves of a lake or the ocean, then this is satisfactory. Yet there is more than this here. The play of light upon and within these structures is a physical activity that can persist without meaning, like an intriguing game either natural or human-made. After all this discussion about the philosophy of meaning, I almost hesitate to say that these works are in fact quite beautiful objects to observe.

—Frank Cebulski

Theodora Varnay Jones: Undercurrents closed in December at Don Soker Gallery, San Francisco.

Frank Cebulski is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.