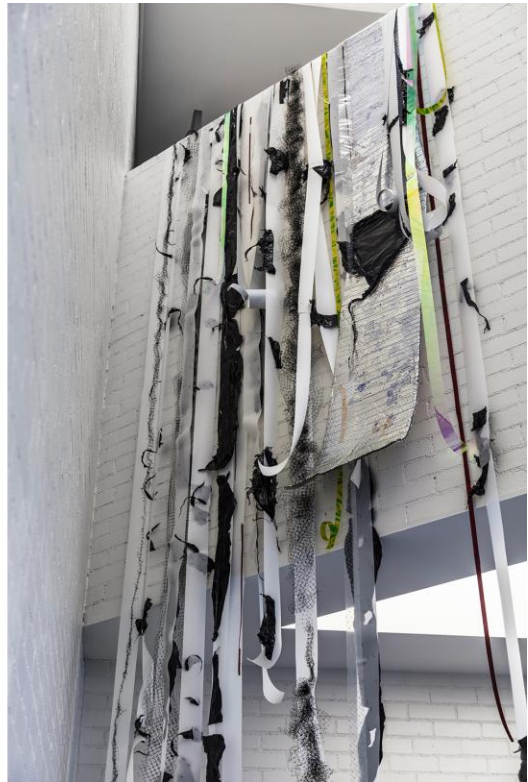




# Gelah Penn: *High Tide*

Catalog produced in conjunction with the exhibition:  
Gelah Penn: *High Tide*  
On View at the Martin Art Gallery  
October 18 – January 15, 2017  
Artist talk: December 6, 5 – 6:00pm in the Recital Hall  
Baker CFA, Muhlenberg College, Allentown PA  
Installation photos courtesy of Greta Brubaker  
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MAG Director: Paul M. Nicholson



**Gelah Penn's *High Tide*** is a site-responsive project in Muhlenberg's Philip Johnson-designed Baker Center for the Arts. Using plastic garbage bags, foam rubber, Mylar, mosquito netting and other synthetic materials, Penn transforms the Galleria's skybridge in a dramatic overhead installation.

*High Tide* examines the tension between individual parts and the unified whole, as cut, frayed, stretched and bound materials transform a functional architectural space into a dynamic sculptural intervention. From close range, lenticular plastic, coupled with foiled thermal insulation, feels like DIY futurism; at a distance, the work reads like a constructed drawing. Torn plastics stapled together become a series of arresting flourishes and highlights. Linear elements intersect, cross, and attach themselves to expanses of fabric. This considered manipulation of disposable matter transcends materiality and enables us to see drawing as sculpture, and sculpture as drawing. From afar, we view the totality of the work-*High Tide*, as it appears to obliterate the very structure it rests upon.

Paul M. Nicholson  
Director, Martin Art Gallery



Dust and Footsteps Shining  
By Tom McGlynn

Gelah Penn's humble materials, embedded in expansive pictorial structures, set in motion the poetic tension in her works. If one were to focus solely on either the reductive, everyday plastic bags, staples, paper and fishing line that have made up much of her oeuvre or, conversely, on their formal arrangement, that would be fairly missing the artist's point. It's important that these be taken together to fully grasp the classic nature of Penn's aesthetic, which is classic in the sense that it depends upon a constant dialectic between materials and their ultimate form, much as the interplay between light and shadow in, say, a Vermeer, has to do with the then-revolutionary technique of 17<sup>th</sup> century oil painting and its transparent translation of opaque realism. While the analogy might not be readily apparent when confronting the ragged glory of Penn's expressions, upon sustained encounter, what comes into view is more related to the history of painting than one might first assume.

Penn works in what used to be called a grand manner. One can discern in the torquing planes and staccato details of her work a rhythmic formal counterpoint similar to a monumental Rubens allegory or a Gericault history painting. Devoid of representational imagery as Penn's work is, one still becomes immersed in the discursive phenomena of its compositional flux. Further, by employing staples, pins and various types of micro-hardware to keep her compositions in lyric (and practical) check, the artist unambiguously enacts the resilience of non-art materials as materials-in-themselves: a kind of spirited

phenomenology of inanimate form. What initially seems non-aesthetic in Penn's work ultimately transcends traditional categories of aesthetic beauty to claim its own haecceity. In so doing, she also usefully lays bare the inherent fallacy of resting too easily upon historical forms or representational monuments. An excerpt from a poem entitled "Arte Povera" by Eamon Grennan handily makes this same point:

Like a poem by Stevens (his latest manner)  
the gravestone of Vermeer--a grey paving-slab  
inlaid with his name only, which the daily  
dirge of dust and footsteps keeps shining.

Grennan succinctly alludes here to Wallace Stevens to telegraph that poet's famous comparisons of representational forms to their phenomenal consequence ("The blackbird whistling... Or just after," or a simple jar contextualized as a "port of air"<sup>1</sup>), while "picturing" a Vermeer unlike any other. Perhaps the truer picture of art lies between an obdurate, mortal slab and a hard place to qualify. Art, in other words, continually escapes its traditional forms to re-form into something other than expected, which, of course, is another way of saying we might transcend our own final forms (or deaths) with a creatively regenerative will. Whether that step beyond takes on a real aspect or remains an idealized chimera has troubled the politics of philosophy, or the philosophy of politics, for centuries.

<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" pub. 1954 and "Anecdote of the Jar" pub.1919.

But strong artists and poets are notorious non-signators to any such polemical tracts. Gelah Penn is such a strong artist because of her refusal to deploy traditional materials, but more importantly because of her elegant re-imagining of the otherwise mortally urgent (yet ultimately pointless) conversation between the bare limits of low materiality and the limitlessness of lofty idealism. To be clear, the "pointlessness" of Penn's work has nothing to do with typical value judgments of useful meaning. Robert Smithson's ostensibly silly one-liner of a sculpture "Pointless Vanishing Point"<sup>2</sup> is a good example of the vicinity in which to wander when thinking of Penn's *raison d'être*. If one were to put all of one's projected chips on an idealized, virtual vanishing point, then one is apt to lose the bigger "picture." For Smithson, this inversion of the symbolic form of perspective led to a dialectical reconsideration of the historically picturesque landscape interrogated by "the real" in field projects. For Penn, it signifies an escape velocity from categories of aesthetic beauty accrued to traditional art materials. By using extremely impoverished means, she sidesteps, via a structural irony, the short shelf life of grand unified theories of aesthetics. She thereby keeps vital the possibility that the cyclical nature of formal expectation is what can remain truly timeless and monumental.

One might reasonably take the work to task for its unrelenting, in-your-face anti-aesthetic. Why would the artist even go there in a somewhat self-abnegating abandonment of beautiful materiality? Yet these difficult questions might be at the core of what the artist's deepest intentions are meant to convey. It's probably not insignificant, for instance, that Penn's parents were refugee survivors of the Nazi Holocaust

<sup>2</sup> Robert Smithson, *Pointless Vanishing Point*, 1967.

in Europe. In a recent studio interview, the artist related her family's story (her ontological inheritance) not as a central content of her work, but as an inescapable genealogical trauma. No matter how we try to transcend our history, our future re-casting of past tragedy invariably depends upon the discovery that such genetic imprinting is integral to our being. In scouring their subconscious for palpable forms, artists will often come up with unwieldy fragments of unresolved experience. Penn's anti-aesthetic (primarily with regard to her materials, if not their graceful deployment), in its punctures, sutures, folds and tears, embodies in one sense the discontinuity of traumatic memory, yet in another, the acceptance of historical fragmentation.

But there is really no need to connect memory in a representational way or to attach any overt symbolism to Penn's work. Better to consider her discrete pieces and ensemble installations as a form of *gesamtkunstwerk*, a never-ending morphology of form which the artist commits to on a lifelong basis. It's a risky, yet invigorating aesthetic journey, and one that can potentially inspire those who appreciate the work to accept life and art on their own intractable, yet unpredictable, terms.

*Tom McGlynn is an artist, writer and independent curator based in the New York City area. He has been a contributing writer to The Brooklyn Rail since 2012 and currently teaches at Parsons/The New School in NYC.*

Gelah Penn's recent solo and group exhibitions include the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery/SUNY Old Westbury (Old Westbury, NY); National Academy Museum, Lori Bookstein Fine Art, Foley Gallery, Equity Gallery (New York, NY); San Francisco Art Institute (San Francisco, CA); Weatherspoon Art Museum (Greensboro, NC); Bibliotheque Municipale Louis Nucera (Nice, France); and Carl Berg Projects (Los Angeles, CA). Her work is in the collections of the Weatherspoon Art Museum (Greensboro, NC), Columbus Museum (Columbus, GA), Brooklyn Museum Library (Brooklyn, NY) and Gund Library/Cleveland Institute of Art (Cleveland, OH). Reviews have been published in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *artcritical.com*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and a feature in *Sculpture* magazine. Penn has received a Tree of Life Individual Artist Grant and fellowships from the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. Her work will be included in "Materiality: The Matter of Matter" at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (Rockland, ME) in November 2017.

