

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Kino, Carol, "An Artist Breathes New Life Into Renaissance Ways With Wood," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2008: E1, E5

The New York Times



On a recent spring morning, the artist Alison Elizabeth Taylor paced nervously around the second floor of an architectural woodworking firm in East Harlem, watching closely as three sinewy men prepared one of her delicate wood inlay compositions for the veneering press.

"I feel like I've got some open wound until these are glued down," she said as they fitted the piece onto a slab of Baltic birch plywood that they had just slathered with urea resin. "I feel very vulnerable."

Unusually for a 35-year-old contemporary artist, Ms. Taylor's favored medium is wood marquetry, a craft that, like oil painting, flourished during the Renaissance. She had come to the woodworking firm William Somerville to finish "Room," a massive installation that is the highlight of her second solo show at James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea.

Most of the smaller pieces in Ms. Taylor's show — she calls them "paintings" — present the kind of enigmatic narrative one might expect from, say, Eric Fischl. In "Era of Argus" a man feeds a peacock outside a Unabomber-like shack beneath a sky of flat-cut maple and mottle-figured aspen. In "Slab City" a pair of white-oak hands can be seen poking out of a lake as two men on the bank hurriedly strip off their clothes.

Yet "Room," which Ms. Taylor describes as "an architectural portrait," is singularly devoid of people. From the outside the 8-by-10-foot installation resembles a white open-topped box; inside, the viewer encounters a trompe l'oeil furnished domestic space whose windows look out onto a trompe l'oeil landscape that suggests the desert near Las Vegas, where Ms. Taylor grew up.

The panel that the men were hoisting into the press that morning was a small slice of this project: it depicted a Victorian gun safe, a maroon nail-head armchair and an open window framing a vista of desert

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

hills. Over the last year Ms. Taylor had assembled this piece and its fellows in her Brooklyn studio, using close to 200 types of exotic wood and a lot of elbow grease.

Normally she presses her paintings there too, using a homemade vacuum press. But the installation was too big for her studio to handle, so her gallery had arranged the trip to William Somerville.

“I actually feel more confident about these guys doing my pieces than I feel about me doing them,” Ms. Taylor said. But once they had levered the piece back onto a table, she took over, running her fingertips over the smoking-hot surface to check for bumps as they stood back and watched respectfully.

“Now I’ve just got to sand for seven days straight,” she said ruefully. In the dusty workroom her artificially red ponytail glowed like padauk, one of the exotic veneers she uses in her work.

Ms. Taylor began inching toward her current métier in 2001, shortly after graduating from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., when she found some wood-grain contact paper in a 99-cent store and suddenly got the urge to use it to make a portrait of her best friend as she had looked in first grade. At art school her interest in figurative painting had been something that “always got me in trouble,” she said. “Most of my teachers were abstract painters and conceptualists.”

She also liked drawing indie comics, and the contact paper soon became another one of her many storytelling mediums.

In 2004, after moving to New York to attend graduate school at Columbia University, Ms. Taylor visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art and happened upon the Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, Italy, one of the most important surviving examples of Renaissance marquetry. Commissioned in the late 15th century by the Duke of Urbino, it is fitted with trompe l’oeil furniture and cupboards whose open doors reveal objects that tell the patron’s life story: items like armor, books, and musical and mathematical instruments. As soon as she saw it, Ms. Taylor said, “I thought, ‘I’ve got to work with real wood.’ ”

So at graduate school, along with studying conceptualism and critical theory, she researched marquetry in hobby books and on the Internet. “I think I was being kind of ornery,” she said. One of her earliest works presents two girls cuddling in a hot tub, with one wearing a zebrawood bikini. In another, made after she had taken an art history class about 19th-century Orientalism, a woman stands in a tract house filled with chinoiserie.

Although these pieces seem a bit clunky by comparison with Ms. Taylor’s current work, they drew the attention of a visiting critic, the artist Andrea Zittel, who appreciated that Ms. Taylor was using a craft with hobbyist associations to make scenes that suggested both comics and genre paintings, without descending to kitsch.

“She was always trying to figure out where she fit in between high and low culture,” said Ms. Zittel, who is now a friend. “She’s created this really interesting hybrid.”

Elyse Goldberg, the director of James Cohan, discovered Ms. Taylor at her 2005 master of fine arts show. She was similarly struck by the young artist’s ability to blend “incompatible information,” using a craft originally developed to decorate European palaces to depict contemporary American scenes. “I think of her as a conceptual artist who is using story,” she said, “but story in a way that you’d find in a Gus Van Zandt film.”

Ms. Taylor starts by making a drawing in a sketchbook, constantly reworking as she scales up in size. Then she cuts out her veneer pieces and fits them together like a puzzle, keeping them in place with sticky film from a sign warehouse.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Even a small panel can use up to 50 types of wood. “I try to make every piece a different variety,” she said. “I really try not to repeat myself.” After assembling a scene, she frequently reworks it with new species to modify the look or mood. “The struggle,” she said, “is to use the grain in a way that can create form and contrast and value, just the way you would use paint.”

Over time she has figured out a few guidelines. The gumwood’s fine grain is “great for reflections,” she said, while walnut burl works better “for ambiguous space.” To create an overcast sky she likes maple; for moody skies she prefers the striped violet grain of kingwood.

The idea for “Room” arose in early 2007 on a road trip through the desert in Nevada and California. En route she was struck by the tiny houses she saw that had been abandoned as tract developments mushroomed nearby. “I got really interested in the way that all this is a tradition — that if you’re a little misanthropic, you could go west and escape.” But now, “all the things that you’re trying to get away from — congestion, suburbs, shopping malls,” she said, have forced the early utopia seekers out.

So, mindful of the Studiolo, she decided to tell the story of one such person, using only his possessions. The piece shows all the disparate memorabilia of a man’s life: his tools, his microwave, an old Army helmet, even photographs, and, seen through a doorway, the corner of a solitary camp bed.

Yet in contrast to the Duke of Urbino’s artisans, she noted, she doesn’t aim exactly to exalt her subject; she tried to make sure that what he represents is not ignored.

Like most of the stories she tells, this is one is “mundane and ugly,” she said. “But people are drawn to the beauty of the wood, and when they’re looking at the wood, they have to look at the image.”