

Shadow of the Thing

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“I was in my house, but it wasn’t my house.” For anyone who’s ever tried to explain their dream—or had to suffer the recounting of someone else’s—this is a familiar contradiction. “It was, but it wasn’t” seems to be the best way we’ve found to describe the simultaneously strange and ordinary worlds our subconscious builds. Separated from “real” life, the sleeping mind generates its own images, where the rules of space and time relax. We can slip easily from a nondescript office to our second-grade classroom, except that the door leads outside to a field we’ve never seen. Shifts in scene and character occur seamlessly, and we accept them unfazed; in dreams, unburdened by rational thought, the illogical tends to make perfect sense.

This incongruity is at the heart of Sam Moyer’s work. Stone becomes weightless, windows function more like walls, and canvas parades as marble slab. The laws of physics don’t seem to apply. Ranging from early dyed paintings to recent handmade paper works, the objects in *Woman with Holes* reveal the artist’s engagement with abstraction as a kind of dream logic—snippets from life partially resurfacing, recognizable forms encountered in a strange context. The works offer a sliver of something recognizable, and we’re left to complete the picture.

At the Hill Art Foundation, Moyer has put her work into conversation with objects from the Hill collection that similarly exist on the outer edges of reason. The artists she has selected use illusionism, replication, or unexpected materials to present commonplace forms in the guise of abstraction and uncanny realism. Sometimes absurd, but always grounded in the familiar, their works are haunted by everyday life: a sink drain stuck in the wall, an inexplicably oversized rubber eraser, a window that offers no view. As in dreams, real things find their shadows here.

The show is organized as a series of vignettes, discrete groupings that seem to have been cobbled together by an unconscious mind. In one alcove sits a sculpture by Isamu

Noguchi, a wavy little figure carved from pink and white marble. Titled *Woman With Holes II* (1969), the sculpture's smooth surface is interrupted by a peppering of small divots. She might be cheekily dimpled or punctured, slowly deflating. The figure sits mute, as the light outside the picture window builds and fades over the course of the day, filtered by Moyer's *Screen for Mure-cho* (2025). Made from handmade paper pulp, the latticework construction casts a gridded shadow pattern around the room, rippling over walls, floor, and Rubenesque stone as the sun moves. Engaged in their silent dialogue of motion and stillness, curves and hard edges, Moyer's screen and Noguchi's woman offer a strange, potentially private interior scene we've stumbled onto. Our sudden presence in their midst—a new character in the dream—sparks a shift in tone until we exit again.

In the presentation of her work, Moyer hopes to create a space of mysterious encounter, a scenario in which the viewer “can't quite define what it is, and there is just enough information missing to let them develop their own interpretations.”¹ This is not dissimilar to how the filmmaker David Lynch, a master of fabricating unsettling dreamscapes from the most mundane spaces (roadside diners, suburban living rooms), described his intent to stray from logical progression and tidy answers: “I keep hoping people will like abstractions, space to dream, consider things that don't necessarily add up.”²

World builders like Lynch, and cinema's ability to evoke a mood more broadly, have fundamentally shaped Moyer's artistic sensibility. She grew up on studio sets in Hollywood, where her father was a lighting designer. The “dream factory” introduced her to an industry expert in manufacturing illusions—props, scenery, light, weather, all fabricated into false worlds that exist unto themselves. Robert Edmond Jones, a twentieth-century American theater designer noted for his pared-down, surreal sets, described how creating scenery is a kind of alchemy: “Everything that is actual must

¹ Author telephone call with the artist, February 12, 2025. Unless otherwise indicated, further quotes by the artist come from this conversation.

² David Lynch in William Grimes, “The Adventure Is Back for David Lynch,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1995,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/05/31/movies/the-adventure-is-back-for-david-lynch.html>.

undergo a strange metamorphosis, a kind of sea-change, before it can become truth in the theatre.”³ Jones was writing on theatrical stage design, but his statement holds true for cinema, and speaks to the transfigured and illusory quality of a movie set that hooked Moyer.

She subjects her own materials to a transformative magic, drawing on the potential of familiar elements to elicit an emotional response. Her painting *Fern Friend Grief Growth* (2024) presents a mossy green field across which a tangle of ferns and boulders unfolds. In the composition, both plant and stone are constructed from pieces of remnant marble, a material Moyer favors for its distinct tactility that anchors it in everyday life—kitchen countertops, bathroom tile, lobby floors. “I want the work to have a generosity, to leave enough space for the viewer to bring their personal experience,” she notes. At ten feet tall and twice as wide, *Fern Friend Grief Growth* is exactly that: a painted backdrop, a silver screen, a surface onto which viewers can project as they progress across the length of the work.

The scene presents a graceful balancing act: stacked boulders whose weight is supported impossibly by the fragile backs of arching ferns. Practically speaking, the marble pieces are nested within a framework of MDF, canvas, and plaster, but the illusion is of stones suspended in air. No longer tethered by gravity, rock slab can become a curling frond, a cloud, a levitating form that upends our mental grasp on the physical world. The magic is in the suspension of materials, as well a suspension of disbelief in the viewer. “If you know how much it weighs, the work returns to stone,” Moyer explains. “It returns to an understandable, elemental material that you can imagine being able to lift, or not.”⁴ The illusion flickers back to reality, to our own experience of gravity and mass.

Liz Glynn’s *Untitled (Tumbleweed XIII)* (2017) sits nearby, like a little bramble that has escaped from Moyer’s painting. Cast in stainless steel, its thorny branches glint where

³ Robert Edmond Jones, *The Dramatic Imagination* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1967), 25.

⁴ Sam Moyer in “In Conversation: Ross Simonini and Sam Moyer,” in *Sam Moyer* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2023), 197.

they catch light, more like a snarl of razor wire than a desert plant. Glynn works frequently with casting, a process she's drawn to because "casting, inherently, has a reference, some index out in the real world."⁵ The world of cinema has made the tumbleweed a symbol of desolation, rolling aimlessly across the dusty streets of ghost towns, but in Glynn's piece, the windborne weed is fixed in space and time, a petrified memorial to its roving state.

Robert Gober's material wizardry likewise allows us to approach familiar objects from a place of curiosity rather than certainty. "Part of the task," he explains, "is to find the appropriate material, if there is one, that makes the work resonate in a way that another material might not help it to."⁶ The observation has often been made that Gober's works—his windows, drains, and neatly made beds—could easily be found objects, imported from the outside world into the gallery, yet he chooses to painstakingly re-create these items by hand. His white basin sinks, for instance (one of which is installed in a nook on the second floor) are made of wood, wire, and plaster, all coated in several layers of paint that Gober sands until it glows—until, in his words, it looks "like something other than paint."⁷

Gober once described the sinks as "portraits," each one based on a sink he had known in life, called up in memory from old homes and workspaces.⁸ His replica, however, lacks

⁵ Liz Glynn in "An Interview with Liz Glynn," *Even*, n.d., <https://evenmagazine.com/liz-glynn/>.

⁶ Robert Gober in "Robert Gober with Jarrett Earnest," *Brooklyn Rail*, December 2014 / January 2015, <https://brooklynrail.org/2014/12/art/robert-gober-with-jarrett-earnest/>.

⁷ Gober in *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979–2007*, ed. Theodora Vischer (Basel: Steidl/Schaulager, 2007), 66.

⁸ Gober in *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979–2007*, 66. Interestingly, the sinks, which Gober made during the 1980s and early 1990s, have an indirect relationship to a recurring dream: "I don't remember which came first, the sinks or the dream. But I remember having a dream in which I found a room in my home that I had never known existed. It was full of daylight streaming in through open windows and there were white porcelain sinks hung on all of the walls with their taps open full and water running. The sinks I ended up making differed from

the fixtures and plumbing that would make it actually function. Unable to produce or hold water, this basin is made even stranger by the subtle indications that it isn't one of hundreds cast from the same mold. Its lines are ever so slightly off-kilter, its surface uneven upon closer inspection, a chameleon hoping to pass unnoticed. Its handmade quality produces, in the words of art historian Elisabeth Sussman, "a recognizable thing, related deeply to everyday life, yet uncannily possessing something unknown."⁹ It is specific and universal, anonymous but charged with the residue of someone's murky memory.

Across the hallway from Gober's sink, light filters into the gallery through Moyer's *Brick Window* (2017), bathing the room in a russet glow. The panes of this stained-glass piece were designed to fit the front window of the New York gallery 56 Henry, where it mimicked the brickwork of the building's exterior. The window appears opaque from the street, but when viewed indoors, backlighting brings out the variation in each hand-painted brick, revealing brushstrokes and clots of color. Moyer's interest in stained glass stems from her childhood memories of sitting in church, where the radiant images kept her "heart beating and eyes open" through the service. This early experience, a combination of boredom and wonder, stoked a fascination with the way light moves through material. In *Brick Window*, Moyer has taken a medium steeped in religious storytelling and used it to create imagery that is not so much transcendent as practical—the geometry of the everyday.

Brick Window is luminous yet impenetrable, conditions evocative of Mark Rothko's abstract paintings and the perennial question of whether they present portals or walls. Though his glowing panes of color are most often described as voids, Rothko once explained that he hoped his paintings might make "viewers feel that they are trapped in a the dream. There was no water and no daylight. The promise that the dream implied was confounded, counterbalanced by the real-life nightmare of day-to-day life in New York." *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979–2007*, 60.

⁹ Elisabeth Sussman, "Robert Gober: Installation and Sculpture," in *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979–2007*, 19.

room where all the doors and windows are bricked up.”¹⁰ *Brick Window*, like all stained glass, distracts from its concealing nature through a promise of transparency and light. Mimicking sturdier construction materials, the piece is a shimmering mirage of a wall, thin enough for light to pass through, but an enclosure all the same.

Art critic Dave Hickey, writing on Gober’s work, remarked how “it approaches the elusiveness and mystery of everyday experience, and very few works of art venture far into this haunted realm.”¹¹ It’s a place that can easily become haunted because it’s so readily taken for granted, dismissed as unremarkable fact. Jasper Johns, however, began to doubt the reliability of the real at a certain point in his life. A painting from the artist’s *Catenary* series (1997–2003) hanging adjacent to Moyer’s stained-glass wall boasts all the trappings of a window—shutters, a drawn curtain, lift cords—but none operating in quite the way you’d expect. The curtain’s draped fabric morphs into an abstraction composed of encaustic marks and dangling string. His work’s ability to make us second-guess our initial impressions mirrors Johns’ own skepticism of mundane objects as bearers of objective fact. Where he once believed that art should be approached “the same way you look at a radiator,” something the “mind already knows,” by the 1960s he was no longer “willing to take the radiator as a concrete object with definition and spatial characteristics. If you please, as a real object. . . . Art has so often involved. . . the possibility of ambiguities. I originally thought the radiator was not ambiguous, that it was a basis on which we might agree. I am not sure any longer that I believe or am secure in that type of thinking. I would now question the reference as much as the work.”¹²

¹⁰ Mark Rothko in Jeffrey Weiss, “Dis-Orientation: Rothko’s Inverted Canvas,” in *Seeing Rothko*, ed. Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2005), 146–47.

¹¹ Dave Hickey, “In the Dancehall of the Dead,” in *Feint of Heart: Art Writings, 1982–2002*, ed. Jarrett Earnest (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2024), 147.

¹² Jasper Johns quoted in “His Heart Belongs to Dada,” *TIME*, May 4, 1959, 58; Jasper Johns quoted in Emmanuel Alloa, “Jasper’s Dilemma,” in *Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror*, ed. Carlos Basualdo and Scott Rothkopf (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2021), 197.

This may be a function of all of the works presented in *Woman with Holes*—to call into question things we think we know. A Gopher sink is a fact but also a lie. Glynn's tumbleweed is an imitation and the thing itself. Moyer's floating stones are illusions, but still, there they are, teetering in their permanent balancing act. They are, but they aren't. Here, as in dreams, what sticks is the contradiction, the thing we struggle to articulate but remember the feeling of poignantly, even as the specifics slip further and further into the recesses of memory. Truth, illusion, reality, imitation, fact, fiction—the urgency to make such distinctions fades, and we can begin to appreciate the shadowy spaces in between.

Notes