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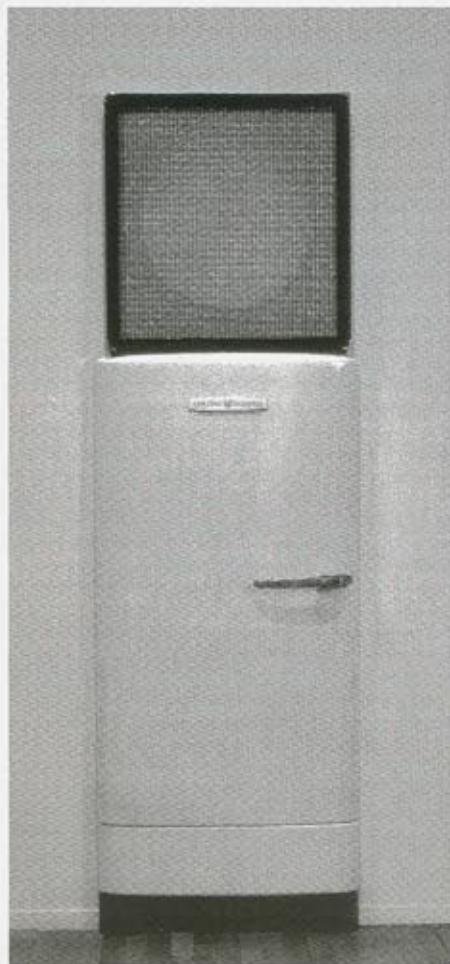
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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



something to do with jennifer bolande

PAULA MARINCOLA



Jennifer Bolande, *Conjunction Sculpture*, 1988, refrigerator door, speaker cabinet frame, and cloth, 75½ x 24 x 5½". Private collection.

Jennifer Bolande's highly individualized amalgam of sculpture and photography proceeds obliquely but precisely toward an accumulation of possible meanings. She is a connoisseur of unlikely but evocative details, of subliminally perceived, fragmentary images and events of a kind that would loiter on the periphery of vision had she not delivered them to the ring of attention. Much has been made of the idiosyncratic iconography of Bolande's objects, but though her works may be initially reticent, and thwart conclusive explanation, they are far from incommunicative, resonating amply in the connotative realm.

Bolande's production emerges from the Conceptualist tradition as filtered through the ironies of Pop and the media consciousness of early-'80s picture artists. Although two-dimensional photographic work gave way in 1983 to assemblage, with the creation of *Hotel* (a windowlike frame covered by a battered sheet of aluminum, to which a small drawing is affixed), her art has not otherwise progressed in strictly linear fashion: she recycles, resizes, and recontextualizes motifs and compositions as necessary, returning repeatedly to the primary themes of fear (a portentous urban dread, epitomized by the runaway-train image in *Marshall's Stack*, 1987); desire (stimulated and thwarted); and humor (ironic, intellectualized, quirky). Bolande speaks of being interested in things "once they have acquired an ambiguous history,"¹ and her works generate interpretive approaches from a variety of angles. They are screens onto which artist and viewer may project many stories, many condensed narratives.

A favorite strategy of Bolande's is to catalogue ideas and make connections between them within a structure that must accommodate as much information as possible until, like a house of cards, it is on the point of collapse. Approaching her work analogously, we might say that it has something to with:

A Lexicon of Materials, Forms, and Imagery

Bolande methodically works the opposite side of the street from many of the commodity-conscious artists of her generation: instead of chic, big, and slick, her sculptures are dense, modestly scaled, and slightly shabby. They are constructed from found photographs (ads, movie posters, giant outdoor murals), bought or cast-off objects (refrigerator doors, amplifiers, fake ceramic logs, an old drum), and scraps of funky materials (carpeting, bubble wrap, wooden shims). Any of these items may be conjoined in one work, along with a photograph or doodled drawing made by the artist herself. She shows an almost paradoxically maternal tenderness for what she considers "families" of images and objects: an arrangement of PA speakers, for example, or the group of trees she draws in *Sandwich Board*, 1984. There is also a penchant for theatrical apparatuses, particularly lights and curtains. In effect, Bolande's works are tableaux in which objects assume the roles of "characters" in the story being suggested.

Language is a constant performer in Bolande's art, both in the tropes of visual representation and in actual words, but its syntax is eccentric. Text functions as image—the block of names in *Stunt Artists*, 1985, for example; and images are analogues for text—the speakers piled up on each other like so many paragraphs, or also stacked like the empty frames of the film leader in *Flagship Episode*, 1985. Several pieces described in their titles as "stacks" are exactly that, in a material, literal version of a linguistic list. Moreover, Bolande has isolated and commandeered a repertory company of notational marks akin to the highly codified shorthand of commercial illustration, visual correlatives for verbal phrases such as the "twinkle" of light (like the star in a cartoon character's eye), or "land and sea slivers" (a ragged line indicating the zigzag of surf meeting shore).

A number of rhyming forms likewise make regular appearances. Bolande is fond of the cone shape, which upright she may use as a spotlight and turned sideways becomes the beam of light from a movie projector, or a symbol for the viewer's "cone of vision" trained on the art object. Similarly, the runaway train in *Marshall's Stack* is both an image of advancing danger and another version of the cone, a perspectival device emanating from back to front of the picture plane. Since the image is contained in a reproduction of an old movie ad, perspective here may be seen as an aspect of time as well as of space; it implies a progression from past to present as well as from depth to surface. It outlines a corridor of memory. Another recurring form is the circle: the round ball of the planet Mars in *Marshall's Stack*; the red plastic roundel (the O from a Texaco sign) in *A Salient Point*, 1987; the ghostly apertures in the center of the speaker faces. This O suggests itself as eye, mouth, lens, target, frame within a frame, and as a symbol for the originary voice of the artist, now available only through layers of mediating convention.

Bolande is acutely aware of the symbolic connotations of structures and materials. Flaglike configurations recur constantly in her oeuvre: *Chalkboard*, 1984, *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, 1985, and *Flagship Episode*, among others, are all species of pennants. More than just indirect homages to Jasper Johns, these flags signal an attempt to draw our attention to the territory of the marginal, the periphery of culture in which her work has planted itself and which it reclaims and makes visible. Look here. She also likes flat-footed visual puns. In *Carpet Piece*, 1983, a small window cut out of a trapezoid of woolly green rug reveals a photo of walls of the Wimbledon tennis courts, London, overgrown with green ivy; the leaning *Coda Stack*, 1988, literally "lists," and the gesture toward circularity made by the speakers' arcing tilt plays upon Bolande's interpretation of a coda as a prompt to completion through repetition.

While the assemblages retain the perishable, ephemeral air of *arte povera*, they can also possess a certain mock sumptuousness: *Movie Chair*, 1984, juxtaposes a plush red velvet seat with bronze

Jennifer Bolande, *Stack of Shims*, 1988, cedar shims, framed newspaper, and wire, 69 x 18 x 7". Private collection.



mountain forms (again conical) and gold-leaf lettering, then leavens them with inexpensive standing lamps. A humorous element of *faux* nostalgia may sometimes appear—the yellowing bundle of aging newspapers in *Stack of Shims*, 1988, becomes the artist's version of sepia toning. These esthetic "special effects" are deliberately low-tech. Flashier techniques are actually parodied, in fact, in *Stunt Artists II*, 1986. A dark rectangle (a photograph laminated and mounted on Masonite) leans on a Masonite foot containing a list of names; in their blue lettering and the way they seem to recede into the black rectangle, these names are Bolande's home-made counterpart to the spectacular opening-credit sequences of the movie *Star Wars*.

Dysfunctions and Linkages

Bolande often uses the phrase "stacks of binary relationships" to describe her assemblages. The pairings can seem simple: the textural opposition of mat to shiny, or wood to plastic; the color contrasts of black and white, or of not-quite-complementary colors like orange and green. Sometimes, too, a very straightforward kind of separation may be employed as a means of examining dualities: the recto and verso sides of *Sandwich Board*, for example, are used to sever figure from ground, black and white line from color field, structure from atmosphere, photography from drawing. But the binary relationships in Bolande's work can also be ideationally complex, as in the prototypical *Conjunction Sculpture*, 1988. This vaguely figural Magrittean presence—a speaker-cabinet frame sits headlike on a body suggested by an upright refrigerator door—incarnates an entire range of oppositions: masculine/feminine, intellectual/emotional, projection/reception, revelation/concealment, closure/continuation.

Coincident with Bolande's conscious deployment of dichotomies is an intense concentration on the meeting places between objects, the points where two differences border and thus define themselves. Bolande pays an almost surrealist attention to loci of simultaneous meeting and division as sites for potential transformation. In the photograph *Conjunction*, 1987, the intersection of speaker corner with refrigerator-door edge is set at eye level. In *The Glimpse Becomes a Stare*, 1988, an arced opening in an otherwise solid black ground reveals the abutment of two photographs: a blue-green landscape seen through a chair back adjoins an orange NASA photo of the Viking landing on Mars, in a paradigmatic conjunction of the everyday and the alien. This alignment of unlikely pairs provokes a whole range of associations that again find expression as dualities: the relationship of seen to unseen, known to unknown, nature to culture, self to Other. In occupying the same field, such concepts are made to suggest possible interchange or transposition as well as separate coexistence. A line is there to be crossed.

Activity in Bolande's objects often takes place above the head or at the feet. One "enters" *Stunt*

Jennifer Bolande, *Marshall's Stack*, 1987, speaker cabinets, color photos, and cloth, 69 x 22½ x 8½". Private collection.





Jennifer Bolande, *Movie Chair*, 1984, mixed media, installation view. Private collection.



Jennifer Bolande, *Resting Place*, 1987, mixed media, 57 x 38 x 18". Private collection.
Opposite: Jennifer Bolande, *Caruso Group*, 1985, mixed media, installation view. Private collection.

Artists II at its bottom, along the slide of names, and emerges from an imaginary journey through its central void via the enlarged, slightly lighter dot-screen pattern at the leaning rectangle's top. In pulling our focus out to the edges or perimeters of things, Bolande's glance purposefully avoids the center, or leaves it empty. In the elegiac *Resting Place*, 1987, the middle of an appropriated Kodak poster is actually obscured by a black-painted Plexiglas panel. Decentering the subject, the artist pulls apart the seams of cultural discourse, clearing a space so that the marginal, or normally invisible, may come into unhindered view. Room is made for difference. A lot can be lost by keeping our eyes only on the ball.

The refocusing of perspective implicit in *Resting Place* gains another dimension through the work's melancholy status as a true "*nature morte*." On the floor in front of the photograph sits a stack of ceramic logs; against the black ground, they suggest a strange sort of hearth before a chimney, or a machine-made burnt offering before an altar. The photograph had shown a happy couple out biking in the country, but the central black rectangle now obscures their figures completely, leaving only the slightly out-of-focus pastoral frame. A top corner is folded over in *trompe l'oeil* to reveal the process-yellow Kodak logo. Thus nature is cast here as an artificial presence, to be known through photographic reproduction, through simulation. The natural, even in an incarnation as remote as the planet Mars (which, in the photograph in *Marshall's Stack*, is prominently labeled "Planet Mars" across its surface), has been lost to and replaced by its conventionalized representation. Bolande's work everywhere acknowledges this loss.

Bolande's process is quintessentially additive as well as inductive, proceeding always from particular to particular until they evolve into a constellation. Assiduously stacking and joining disparate elements within structures created to amplify their interrelated meanings, the artist privileges listmaking as an essential form of artistic activity. If she functions as a librarian, sorting and collating information, she also works like a poet, constructing metaphors for the dislocated experience of late-20th-century culture through proximity, juxtaposition, and intersection. Her ongoing predilection for discovering linkages that suggest a context, however temporary, in which meaning may cohere is embodied in *and the*, 1987, a refugee scrap of movie marquee with the typographical legend of the title spelled out on it in idiosyncratically configured black letters. Here the idea of conjunction as a hypothetically infinite enterprise is objectified in a sculpture that is neither stack nor list. *and the* is a primary exemplar of Bolande's continuing proffering of the art object as a site for the realization of unexpected connections, a carefully orchestrated chance encounter.

Frozen Moments, Instants of Recognition
Bolande's art reveals an effort to retard the pro-

cess of examination and consumption, to forestall closure. The "slowed reception" on which one critic has commented in discussing her work is in part the result of an effort to draw out a process of examination and suggestion as long as possible. Just as scientific methodology subjects the most fleeting, imperceptible phenomena to the most exacting possible scrutiny, so for Bolande, as one of her titles indicates, the glimpse becomes a stare. This endeavor can take the form of a concentrated look at the very beginning of things. (Bolande has cited Jack Goldstein's *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, a 1976 film of the lion who appears at the start of the MGM movies, as a precedent here.) An early photographic series, for example, consists of film stills of the initial frames from a series of low-budget porn flicks—often a rudimentary room with an empty chair and curtained windows. The implicit voyeurism of the genre is simultaneously focused upon and thwarted; desire is arrested at its inception, gratification indefinitely delayed. In denying further entry into these narratives, Bolande calls a halt to this particular kind of sexual discourse, but leaves the viewer in a state of aroused expectation. Fantasy is invited but not possession. This refusal of ownership, a refusal to be pinned down, applies across the spectrum of Bolande's work in both esthetic and sociosexual terms.

Other works present a moment of finality, as in *Stunt Artists'* angled, stop-action focus on a film's closing credits (another list) rolling by like a requiem. The sense of exaggerated stillness pro-

duced by these immobilized instances of anticipation or aftermath suffuses Bolande's art with the sense that it is holding its breath on either edge of revelation: something is about to happen, or just has, but it is invisible, offscreen. Lodged within these frozen moments are further temporal displacements and inversions. In *Marshall's Stack*, for example, the train signals itself as an anachronism—a past harbinger of future technological progress checked within a present that is constant yet paradoxically aged, completed and over yet eternal in the space of the poster.

Bolande's objects and assemblages are freighted with references to speech and sound, but again congealed in a state of potentiality. The PA speakers are either deprived of their inner workings or muffled by an overlay of images or fabric. (It's difficult to resist reading them as stand-ins for the predicament of artists in this age.) A photograph in *Caruso Group*, 1985, permanently immobilizes a clown in mournful ferocity as he is about to bang a drum; the actual drum of *Central and Mountain*, 1985, sits dumbly on the floor, its mallet tucked uselessly in its top. Bolande has quoted the artist Alan McCollum's reference to an artwork as an object in a room "mutely signaling"; with her work, it remains finally for the viewer to get the message, to strike the note of meaning in the imagination.

Bolande may go to considerable technical lengths to recreate and transfix a simple gesture—*Chalkboard's* clouds of eraser dust are really permanent halos of paint—or to render evanescent moments

both corporeal and static. The dainty porcelain *Milk Crown*, 1988, transposes Harold Edgerton's famous stop-action photograph *Milk Drops*, 1957, into three dimensions, another instance of arrested excitation, and another deadpan pun. This kind of transformation also recalls Richard Artschwager: think of the solid black-Formica shadows in *Table with Pink Tablecloth*, 1964, and other works. Both artists make a specialty of converting the ephemeral and intangible into the permanent and solid, and vice versa, in a matter-of-fact reversal of natural laws and effects. Sun and shadow can be objectified in Formica; gravity can be frozen in porcelain.

More than just a witty means of metamorphosing a fugitive trace into a permanent object, *Milk Crown* comments on the artifice by which we come to know natural phenomena, and that replaces our direct experience of them. At the same time, attempting to hold fast an invisible (because exceedingly transient) event, it betokens Bolande's persistent effort to concentrate and prolong the duration of a momentary comprehension. Like some generous but exacting Pierrot, she juggles the spheres of meaning for us so that we may more closely attend to the flashing gleams on their surfaces as they hang suspended in the spotlight of vision. □

Paula Marincola is the Gallery Director at Beaver College, Glenside, Pennsylvania, where she organized an exhibition of Bolande's work in October 1988. She contributes regularly to *Artforum*.

1. Jennifer Bolande, artist's statement, *Journal of Contemporary Art* 1 no. 2, Fall/Winter 1988, p. 56. All other quotations of Bolande are from the author's conversations with her, in September and October 1988, or from an unpublished lecture at Beaver College in November 1988.

