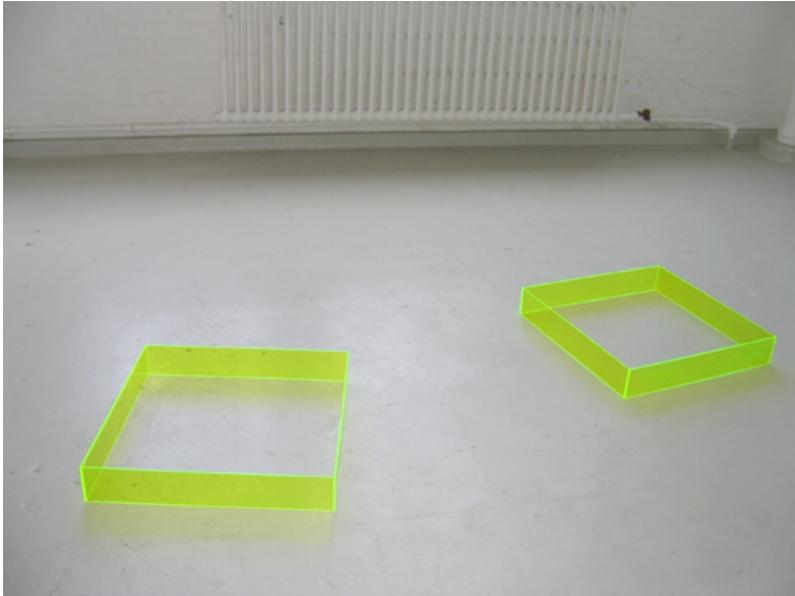


# Visual Discrepancies online publication



## **How Little is Enough – Lynne Harlow**

May 25, 2009

**Brent:** What are you currently working on?

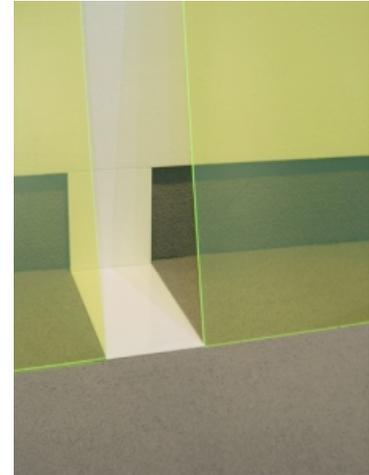
**Lynne:** I'm working the way I most like to, doing several different things at once. I have just completed a site-specific piece for a group show, I'm playing around with painted balsa wood strips that I'm gluing into shapes and, most significantly, I'm preparing for a collaborative project coming up this summer in Houston, TX. A terrific artist in Houston, Ariane Roesch, has organized the project and she has paired me with Brett Davidson, a writer currently living in Zurich. I've never collaborated with a writer before and it's very good new territory for me. The current pieces continue to explore the question that's central to how, and why, I work: how little is enough?

**Brent:** Your work almost disappeared there for a while. What I mean by 'disappeared' is that, and as you say central to your inquiry 'the thing' was almost not there. I'm thinking of a collaborative piece you sent to Tokyo, where aluminum powder sprinkled on black rolled up felt was patted to the wall: Gold thread-like chain I think went to Sydney? How are they enough?

**Lynne:** Although all of my work is at the reductive end of the spectrum, my own sense of what is enough varies. Sometimes I'm really curious about using so little physical material that the piece and the resulting experience are barely there. They're right on the border of dissolving. But they hang on. I'm really attracted to working at that border. The challenge for me is to stay as sensitive and disciplined as I can, recognizing how little aluminum powder or gold-plated chain seems necessary to make its presence adequately felt, to make something that barely exists but

does in fact offer a very specific visual experience for someone who encounters it. My hope is that once the nearly imperceptible piece is discovered, its presence fills the room.

Both the aluminum powder and the fine-gauge gold chain are ideal materials for that kind of exploration because they have beautifully active reflective surfaces. Light becomes an essential part of the work and really behaves as one of its materials. These materials and the others I tend to use, like fabric, Plexiglas, and copper, all have such dynamic physicality that I do as little as possible to alter the actual materials and instead arrange them in ways that make full use of their attributes. In a sense I ask them to do the work.



**Brent:** And for we to discover.

The materials that you use, though, become something like a reflection, instrument, and extension of probably what is running along inside you: The choice and context, how things are placed, often with very slight intervention, for example with *Norse Wall*, register very much, for me, that you are picking up things for their ‘shared’ qualities, and emotional processes... you bring up how something behaves: ‘dynamic physicality’ ‘use of attributes’. To me you are not talking about things, but expressions. And those expressions appear very much tied to who you are, and what light you wish to give off. It’s obvious that you are attracted to certain looks and materials: And your wish to share this experience, in aspects and subtleties. I’ll count in even an exoticness noticed via the simple and plain. But how you become attracted to a material... it would be interesting to learn some more? How and why are you attracted to say a sheet of Florescent Plexi, why the choice of color? And back to *Norse Wall* and the attention you gave to a particular situation, the skirting edge, the slight intervention, did it happen because it was available to happen, or was it planned, or did it, at the time and location, appear necessary?

**Lynne:** I think for most of us it’s fair to say that our daily living is the combined experience of physical navigation and visual analysis, but much of it occurs with minimal awareness. We’re reading advertisements on the sides of buses while trying not to crash into people near us on the sidewalk and simultaneously avoiding obstacles like trees and fire hydrants. It’s pretty basic, but it became really interesting to me as I was finishing graduate school and since that time I’ve been looking at both how we do this and how a piece of art can slow down and bring some consciousness to the process. While we can turn to phenomenology for an intellectual investigation of these ideas, I find it as informative and more relevant to carefully observe how we live. This is a long way of saying that all my work and the materials I choose revolve around how we navigate our surroundings and whether or not we’re aware of what’s there.

Going more specifically to your observations about my materials, you’re right to say they’re expressions. I’ve never categorized them this way before, but I think beyond the varied associations they all have, the materials share an expression of spirituality. And by spirituality I mean the state of one’s soul. Not religion. (I think of a critic who once described Agnes Martin’s practice as “spirituality as a secular discipline.”) The movement I encourage, the slow discovery I suggest in my work might leave a person’s soul feeling just a little bit lighter. Or at the very

least help a person to locate oneself, body and soul. Whether it's Plexiglas, chiffon or gold-plated chain, I'm attracted to materials that allow me to use them in spare, deliberate arrangements that don't feel spare and deliberate, but rather full and generous. That's where color is especially important to me. Things like fluorescent green Plexi and saturated pink fabric give and give and give, but also appear weightless. Doesn't that seem like an ideal way to be?

**Brent:** This weightlessness, lightness, without weight, hardly touching, has me thinking in terms of moving through the world. Touching lightly so not to disturb the balance, yet to add resonance. These ideas are generally found in, say, a monastery, or develop, as you become a master of tea ceremony. It's about this lightness and giving. To become a master takes all the patience and practice one can muster (not different from a western idea), though with the goal not to dominate over some thing or win (an audience over.) It's more a mastering of this simple act called generosity. This is what I get from your work. I need to put in this 'effortless' work to meet what you have 'given'. By effortless, I probably mean having to put on hold this desire to look for answers, or clues to authenticity. Instead you are suggesting let be what is there, and if you can do that it will wash over and through you. It's a kind of deprivation. And for some, I would imagine, this would be quite painful. I was bicycling the other day, and I starting looking around and seeing why things are the way they are. The things around us are built to protect us. I saw dwellings; roads where cars go, pedestrian areas, road signs and railroad signals. They make life easy. And they are there, built over time and research to help us and things run smoothly. They're there to protect a society. You are offering something that I consider not dissimilar, it's about fluidly, and you have given all that needs to be given in order for an audience to participate free of harm. However the element of 'control' which is part of the 'protect' doesn't seem to be present. I have images, well conceptual ones, of a world without railways signals. And then I have this image of 'when the train comes.'

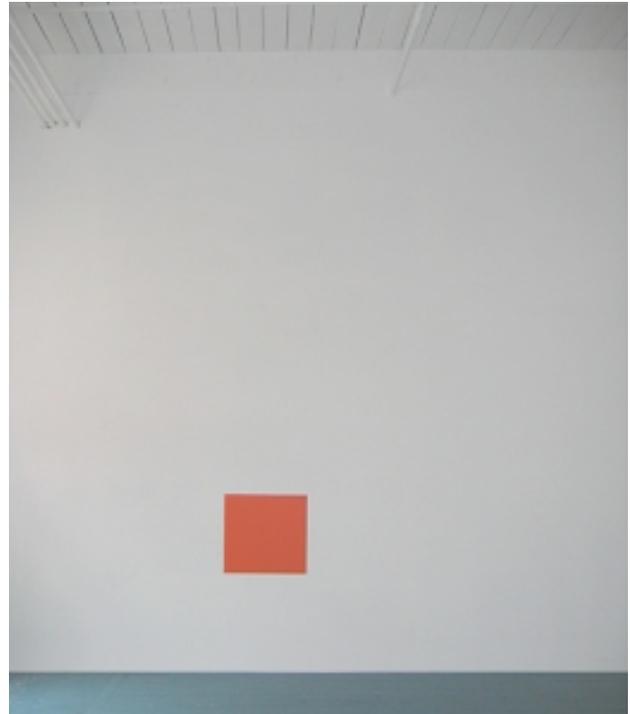
**Lynne:** Your train example makes me think about good design and urban planning. When it's really, really good, there's a sense of freedom. A sense that things like safety limitations and municipal restrictions are easing rather than controlling our lives.

I'm not interested in controlling anyone who encounters my work and I take care to keep my pieces absent of that element. Instead I think about the installations (and even some of the drawings) as arrangements that encourage particular movements and responses in the space without dictating the exact nature of those actions. In this sense I think of myself setting up an incomplete choreography, a situation that gives only limited information regarding how and where one's body should move. These pieces then rely on the participant to absorb and synthesize the given information and complete the piece with his or her own thoughts and actions.

Ideally people will approach the work without looking for answers and allowing the piece to "wash over" them, as you described. Easier said than done. But I hope that even those who begin looking at the work with expectations of a clear answer, a quick punch line, will be slowed down by the physical participation the work encourages.

**Brent:** *Dedicated to All You Are*, 2008 comprises six drawings and a final installation. The drawings each hold a [coppery orange painted square](#) and a number of small crystals attached to the paper. The square, from the three I can see, is in the same position each time. The crystals

move around in relation to the square in relation to the borders of the paper. The overall feel is that the square both floats and anchors. The area around this works so that no side feels like a border. The spaces around the square feel very open though thought out, and suggest an ongoing openness. The bottom area does offer the sense of grounding. And when this is observed, you start to sense these other openings but as clear spaces. It's hard for me to see but I'm sensing the small crystals further inflect upon that initial decision of where the orange is positioned. Again the feel is this openness. And the anchoring is a 'just' holding, like a balloon filled with helium, though unlike a balloon which moves side-to-side looking for release. The release comes with the square moving towards you, and then settling back, not in a push pull way – Nothing really to do with that. Or if aware of this possibility the square doesn't perform that way.



You then move these drawings into an installation based on the performance of the drawing, or did the installation come first? It'd be nice to get some history of this.

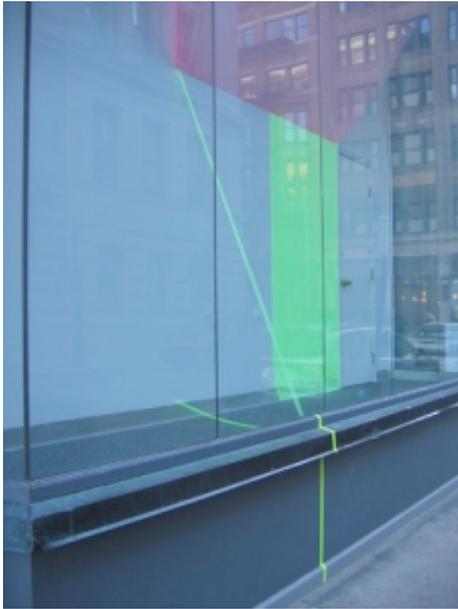
**Lynne:** The Dedicated series from last year deals in an extremely restrained way with locating. Anchor, float, hold, move, ground – these are all sensations we feel when we're making sense of where we are and how we fit with what's around us.

The [crystals in these pieces](#) are faceted and are about 1/8" high so placing them on paper or a wall creates a very shallow sculptural surface. Really shallow, and that's what was interesting to me. The drawings and installation developed together as a way for me to understand how the crystals would function on a small scale and a larger one. These crystals reflect light and cast small shadows so despite their small size they are very present. They're also a significant counter to the flat painted square. As you note, the square is a constant (its size and placement) while the locations of the crystals change in each piece.

In the Dedicated installation drawing, as in most of my work, I wanted to avoid having a clear edge to the piece. The openness of the wall is part of the installation and it doesn't make sense to conclude that the drawing ends where the outermost crystals are located. I think there's a much stronger sense of physical engagement with a piece of art when you can't tell quite where it stops because you're left a little unsure about your own proximity to it. The more spatial the work, the more exaggerated this feeling. In the paper pieces, I used the openness of the paper to suggest that spatial experience.

**Brent:** In *Tropic*, several works on paper, the edges hold color in the form of skewed bars that either [address the edge\[s\]](#) or pass through the sides of the paper. However the structure remains

very open: The color especially helping this. You could say these drawings play very close to the wall of the paper structure so the float is further pushed asymmetrically, existing and exiting off the paper field. The color tends also to feel more like a fold, a folding ribbon of color space?



**Lynne:** The *Tropic* drawings feel spatial because they refer directly to a temporary installation I made last year that dealt with color in a large contained space. The [Tropic installation](#) was made in a fairly large but shallow storefront window, the space being about 15' tall and just 3' deep. I limited myself to two colors, yellow and pink, and used mostly sheer fabric with a strip of Plexiglas and a strip of tape. The colors were pretty saturated so even with the sheer materials they remained vivid. To prevent the installation from feeling too contained and inaccessible behind all its glass I ran one piece of yellow tape down the outside of the building as a continuation of a line within. Playing with color and space quite literally.

Most of my installations are temporary and while some can be remade in other locations they tend not to exist beyond their initial creation. In the last couple of years I've become focused on making small-scale works that relate to and evolve from the temporary installations. These small pieces are sometimes drawings, sometimes prints. They fit somewhere between the actual installations and the photographs that serve as documentation.

Once the *Tropic* installation was complete I began the group of seven drawings dealing with the play of colored planes and their relationships in space. The drawings don't depict the installation but they do reflect the structure of the installation as well as a sense of movement. They're [hard edge, geometric pictures](#) in conversation with their delicate, organic source that no longer exists. They're distillations.

**Brent:** Outside the window, *Tropic*, the installation, the small interventions on the storefront really do balance what is going on inside. Also, from where I can see you pay attention to the space just above the window and below, the area that reaches down to the sidewalk.

**Lynne:** Those decisions, I think, made the piece something that people could really engage with. It brought the piece right onto the sidewalk so it wasn't encased in glass and withheld from a passer looking at it. The yellow taped line down the outside of the building has given me a lot to think about and work from in future pieces.

**Brent:** You seem to be making use of [chiffon](#) again. I hadn't seen it for a while. Though it's different. Before I understood it as alignments, as you move around you become involved with different links – architectural, spatial, and also to either another veil of color or a painted area on 'say' a wall. As with *Tropic* this interest has continued, though the 'fabric is further reduced, while the outside environment is further included.

**Lynne:** I hadn't been conscious of the shift in my use of the chiffon so it's really informative for me to hear your observation. As you point out, it has certainly acted as an element for aligning; locating in many pieces and in *Tropic* it had a less dictating role. This time it became primarily material color. As we talked about earlier, these open-ended materials like chiffon allow for so many different uses and approaches.

**Brent:** We started this conversation with you mentioning 'playing around' with painted balsa pieces.

**Lynne:** The [painted balsa shapes](#) are turning out to be a way for me to look very specifically at the relationship between color and structure. The colored lines become drawing and support and sculpture all at once. I'm realizing that this work might not actually result in any finished pieces. I think it's more of a tutorial for me, a chance to take an element in my work and really think about it. I have a 3' balsa square leaning against the wall of my studio right now and I can't stop looking at it. It's so great that this comically simple construction has so much to offer. I like doing this kind of thing in the studio from time to time. It feels like I'm tuning myself for what's next.

