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Through the Coat-Hanger Portal: Kate Shepherd's Debris

by Ellie Bronson
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Kate Shepherd: And Debris at Galerie Lelong
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528 West 26th St, between 10th and 11th avenues
New York City, 212-315-0470

In this new body of work Kate Shepherd adeptly fuses modernist architectural images with formal minimalism and a compelling eccentricity. *And Debris* presents twelve glossy oil and enamel paintings and seventeen adorably homespun wire sculptures. The paintings are created with Shepherd's characteristic coolness; she uses architecture and animation programs on her computer to map out her composition before painting. The finished pieces reflect this measured approach – they are elegant and alluring– at once angular and lyrical. Against high-gloss monochromatic enamel backgrounds the artist dangles and intertwines collapsed geometric shapes etched in wavering white lines of oil paint. Titles range from the descriptive and comparatively straightforward *Hung Tied String Figure on Grey* (2010) to the appealingly esoteric *Violet Grey African Rabbit Skin* (2010). Rabbit skins exist as empty vessels, divested of the living animal they once encased, and re-imagined by Shepherd as triangles and quadrilaterals suspended without infrastructure and hanging limp.

The wire sculptures consist entirely of unbent coat-hangers awkwardly reshaped into irregular amoebic forms and suspended from the gallery ceiling with 28 gauge steel wire so they dangle at eye level with the standing viewer. Eight are human-scale and vaguely creepy; their negative space threatening, like the shadows of sinister ghosts, or portals into a disordered alternate universe. When viewed as a group, especially from end to end, they oddly resemble 3-D versions of Ellsworth Kelly's plant drawings, twisting and swaying gently in eddies of air. In the side gallery there is another series of smaller wire sculptures rather less successful than their larger counterparts. At about half the size, they are a bit baffling, appearing more as puzzles or questions than the statements and demands of the large-scale works. The sculptures are at their best when viewed en masse – their amalgamated formlessness is visually enticing and borders on the physical, as the viewer walks around the works. I was strongly tempted to climb through some of the larger works – just to see what was on the other side.

Viewed singly, the medium of the sculptures becomes the message, as one is reminded of the unpleasant connotations of the coat hanger in the quotidian culture, from back-alley abortions to the hideous scene from the movie, *Mommie Dearest*: "No more wire hangers!"

The exhibition's title theme, debris, is underscored in grainy black and white photographs printed on newsprint, displayed folded in a case at the entrance and available as handouts. The photos are of the view from the artist's studio – a messy detritus-filled lot and a tangle of dissected wire hangers reinforcing the mundane simplicity of junk and underscoring its alchemical transformation into art objects.

The exhibition is quirky and captivating, inviting gallery goers to linger in contemplation whether deciphering the twisted geometries of the paintings, admiring their shiny surfaces and pleasing colors, or confronting the compelling ambiguity of the wire sculptures. Shepherd's older work was more blatantly architectural (she has a background in architecture) and her work's evolution into a more veiled and nuanced subtlety is a pleasure to see. A new unrest has crept in, adding layers of complexity and

challenging easy interpretation. One wonders if a glimpse through the coat-hanger portals or an untangling of the paintings' ordered chaos would yield a view into a parallel world – one slightly more sinister than our own.