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The Great Amalgamator

David Salle

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Rachel Harrison Life Hack

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We're all stylists now.

Stylists are the people who accessorize a fashion shoot. They source the shoes, jewelry, scarves, etc. that enliven the image and help viewers project themselves into the scene. If there is to be a prop—a bicycle, a vintage car, or maybe a pony—that too is the stylist's job. Stylists mix up visual cues in order to announce the newness of the designer's or editor's vision. They are interpreters, and the good ones enlarge our notion of what goes with what, of which artifacts can open up, deepen, or complicate our relationship to the primary subject. Like artists, they practice a kind of everyday, multicultural tightrope walk; they engage in a blithe, deliberately ahistorical appropriation. At heart, they have a limitless empathy for inanimate objects; they approach them as supporting actors in a drama. Good stylists have a style themselves, a distinctive, even inimitable way of balancing irony with sincerity, shock with naturalness, and of punctuating a visual narrative; they tell stories, and they leave fingerprints.



Rachel Harrison/Harvard Art Museums/Greene Naftali, New York

Rachel Harrison: I'm with Stupid, 2007

It's funny how durable the figurative is in art—it's a reassuring presence, hovering protectively over the wilder exploits. The artist Rachel Harrison makes sculptures that are

grounded in figurative forms but that are not representational in any traditional sense. Many of her pieces start with a columnar vertical core of approximately human proportions and are constructed out of fractured planes; it's a language that reaches back to Picasso's Cubist sculpture *Glass of Absinthe* (1914). Sometimes the built core is a horizontal lump of rough-textured, faceted polystyrene that resembles a meteorite on legs, to which she affixes any number of visual counterpoints: wigs, sneakers, flashlights, safety vests, modems, digital photos, and other hoarder's junk. Her works are accumulations of several different kinds of materials, some formed, others found; they don't portray anything more than their own meandering thoughts. They have wit and an awkward charm. You take the work in quickly, like an exclamation point. Occasionally it stings, but only for a minute.

Harrison's starting point is a feeling of disconnectedness, estrangement, and simmering revolt fed by a finely cultivated disgust. The disgust is tempered by humor; it's gleeful and semi-inclusive. Her work feels familiar, part of a long tradition, and also of the moment—what absurdity looks like has to be reinvented for each generation. To flourish in our current visual culture is to establish just the right kinds of connections—between things found and made—that are neither too literal nor so vague as to be like water through a sieve.

Harrison is currently the subject of a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "Rachel Harrison Life Hack" has been organized by the veteran curator Elisabeth Sussman together with David Joselit, a leading critic of the "Post-Pictures" generation, and it has been a great success, especially with younger viewers. It's easy to see why: the show is playful, upbeat, and *improving*—like a good table at a Bemelmans Bar for teetotalers. Seeing Harrison's particular brand of juxtaposition is like being on the set of a game show—the brash, overemphatic colors and flimsy scenery, the overlay of pseudo-information with silliness. As on any set, there is what the camera sees, and there is what the live audience sees. Harrison is adept at exploring that discrepancy. She works with a shopping mall's worth of unlikely, hard-to-love stuff, which she doses out in measured proportions to create a jolt of recognition, solidarity, or outrage. Sometimes the results provoke boredom or irritation. Harrison's linkages, the intervals between two or more unlike things, can be finely tuned, and occasionally reach a place that feels joyfully undefended—almost a visual perfect pitch.

The surprising, knife-edged juxtaposition of images—thing modified by proximity to unlike thing—has been the bedrock of modernist poetics for generations and is now the lingua franca of contemporary life; it shows up pretty much everywhere you look, in art as well as in music, advertising, even architecture, and it's the base on which Harrison's ad hoc constructions rest. The question, now as always, is how to make the combinations feel necessary rather than arbitrary, how to make them matter. If art is like a tuning fork, we want the one that vibrates all the way down.

Harrison's constructions contain so many distinct elements, each one of which is a formal extravaganza of cutting, painting, joinery, etc., that it takes almost as long to describe them as it must take to make them. *I'm with Stupid* (2007) includes the following materials: wood, polystyrene, cement, acrylic, child mannequin, papier-mâché skull, green wig, festive hat, SpongeBob SquarePants sneakers, Pokémon T-shirt, wheels, canned fruits and vegetables, fake carrot, fake feathers, fake grass, Batman mask, cat mask, necktie, scarf, and plastic beads. As Slim Pickens's character says in *Dr. Strangelove*, "A feller could have a pretty good weekend in Vegas with all that stuff."

What the ingredients of this particular stew don't tell you is the relational logic of its construction, or rather the strange balance between the necessitated and off-handedness. Like a number of other works in the show, *I'm with Stupid* is built on a wheeled platform, a kind of dolly-cum-pedestal on which Harrison stacks platforms in tiers to arrive at the finale on top. *I'm with Stupid* ascends like this. First tier: plywood platform on wheels. Second tier: cans of food that hold up the third tier, a three-sided plywood box, open on one end and perforated with large holes on the other. Fourth tier: a three-sided plywood tabletop that sits on top of tier three, with two sides of uneven width that descend from the top edge, one side being cut into eccentric shapes. Several sides of tiers three and four are painted with salmon-pink and azure-blue marks and lines, while other sides are painted with words in dark paint: fragments of the phrase "I'm with," and the word "Up."

On the fifth tier a child mannequin dressed in a T-shirt, tiny shorts, and sneakers sits awkwardly with raised knees, wearing a white cat mask that partially covers a Batman mask (in other works, Harrison deploys masks front to back, Janus-like), and with a flat iron bar piercing its head. This creepy child/cat appears to be holding in its right hand, as a kind of offering, another amalgamation made from a papier-mâché skull and topped off with striped fabric, a green wig, and a red felt hat draped with tassels, shells, and beads, while holding upright in its left hand a fake carrot.

While by no means the best thing in the show, *I'm with Stupid* demonstrates Harrison's effect: rough carpentry; a jigsaw used like a doodler's pencil; decorative play with color and surface; an element of human, figurative presence; and something creepy, tart, inappropriate, or vaguely sexualized all at the same time. The piece has the feeling of something made in a dorm room; it reminded me of the Halloween parties at CalArts in the 1970s. This particular work, like a scavenger hunt in reverse, is overburdened by its own too-muchness; it feels clotted, the syntax a little garbled.

A work that exemplifies Harrison's garage band/rummage sale-meets-John Cage aesthetic is *Huffy Howler* (2004), which features a bicycle of that brand with a yellow frame and nubby off-road tires. The bike's frame is jacked up by a stack of rectangular brick-like forms that have been slathered with polystyrene and painted a sickly mauve. This pyramid is positioned so that the bike's rear wheel is suspended in the air—a reverse wheelie. From

the bike's handlebars hang seven black handbags, each filled with gravel, small rocks, a brick, or stones. Projecting diagonally upward from the frame, angled above the rear tire, a long metal pole supports some dangling white furs—a sheepskin and two foxtails. Attached with clips to the hanging furscape is an inkjet print of a publicity still of Mel Gibson in his feathered-hair *Braveheart* look.

The angle of the bike pitched aggressively forward and the cantilevered pole spiking rearward in the opposite direction are like two outstretched arms, or the wings of an angel in flight. The piece is audacious and casually confrontational. It's not every day that you see something with the combined aesthetic DNA of Sir Anthony Caro and Parliament Funkadelic, but even with all the chutzpah, *Howler's* affect is strangely flat. The energy of the piece is more like that of a cartoon. The wall label informs us that it is a play on equestrian statues, that it deflates the masculine grandiosity of the form and brings it down to earth. And while that's a nice idea, I'm not sure the reverberation produced by *Howler* is in line with its grander ambition.

One of the things I most admire about Harrison is her impulse to take the audience backstage, so to speak, to turn the scenery around and expose its functional, improvised, or even slapdash structure. This seems to grow partly out of her “speak-truth-to-power” ethos, the desire to unmask the wizard behind the curtain. Harrison has a fascination with supports, stands, plinths, and bases—all the physical means of presentation. She's also absorbed by one of sculpture's first principles—balance, what she has to do to get something to stand upright. These structures in her work are a fundamental piece of stage business, and Harrison foregrounds the support mechanisms on which sculpture has traditionally relied. Her work is essentially antimonumental; constructing and deconstructing are shown to be part of the same continuum, sides of the same coin.

Two sculptures that illustrate the charms as well as the limits of Harrison's method are *Sphinx* (2002) and *Cindy* (2004). Both feature a section of drywall positioned to completely or partially obscure from view the main action. In *Cindy*, the sheet of drywall appears to be simply leaned against the more substantial part of the composition, and the unsupported panel looks provisional and conditional; it's starting to warp slightly and could easily be knocked down. In *Sphinx*, the drywall is screwed into a backing of 2 x 4s and is held upright by a side brace, away from the artisanal component, as if it were a theatrical backdrop.



Rachel Harrison/Greene Naftali, New York

Sphinx, which I think is the more successful of the two, sports a vaguely pyramidal lump of pink-painted polystyrene emerging from a simply built wooden sculpture stand whose legs are supported by an array of wooden braces angled this way and that—an arpeggio of homemade carpentry that manages to be self-confident, humorous, and a little needy all at the same time. The handmade part of the work is positioned behind the sheetrock panel, so that when seen head-on, the sculpted element, the gestural, hand-formed pink mound, is hidden from view. A framed photograph of Sister Wendy, the nun who explained art on television in the early 2000s, contemplating a sculpture is hung on the outward-facing side of the sheetrock wall. It appears to be a screenshot and is of low quality; her well-meaning visage is flattened out. Just what the connection is between the photograph and the other elements I couldn't say, but it gives off a low vibrational hum of the conspiratorial and seems to be in earnest good fun, like Sister Wendy herself.

Cindy, on the other hand, is a more astringent work. A semi-wonky construction of multiple tiers and columned platforms, set at various angles and reinforced here and there with additional box-like forms, has been slathered with polystyrene and painted a metallic-looking cadmium green—the color of cartoons or cheap toys. A platinum blond wig, store tag still attached, sits at roughly eye level on the top tier and turns the funky green tower into a personage—feminine, vulnerable, slightly emptied out. Rapunzel in her tower? The sheetrock panel casually leaning against and concealing the construction becomes an emblem of frustration.

“Resolved” is not a word much used anymore in art talk; nonetheless, the way the component parts relate to one another here feels a bit raw—both in the sense of undercooked and also rubbed raw. Who has not wished to simply drag some element from “real life”—a plant on a stand, or a link of painted wood, or a page torn from a magazine—and place it in front of a painting, incorporating it into the composition? It's a common enough impulse. The decision to simply lean the sheetrock panel against the other form makes sense as an idea, or a dare—why does everything in art have to be secured? In execution, however, it feels, well, unresolved, the formal equivalent of wishful thinking. The work's three components—green structure, blank sheetrock, and soft, gently draping wig—present an opportunity for a kind of poetic chord, but the work doesn't come into focus as a whole. Like a number of other works in the show, this one is meant to communicate something about the fragile and conditional nature of meaning in art. It's also about self-canceling, and the avoidance of closure and completion in the traditional sense. The question is whether *Cindy* embodies those ideas or just points in the direction of an imaginary sculpture somewhere that does.

Harrison may be our current champion magpie, which is not a criticism. She unabashedly takes from everyone and everywhere, and does it blithely, with neither embarrassment nor

apology. At times she reminds me of a determined shopper, elbows out, making her way down the aisles of Filene's Basement. (Andy Warhol would have loved going bargain hunting with her.) Harrison's work fits into a very long continuum marked by Rodin on one end and Bruce Nauman on the other, with diverse figures such as Marisol, Allan Kaprow, Eva Hesse, Bruce Conner, Joseph Beuys, and that avatar of abject maximalism, Mike Kelley, in between. We can sense as well the influence of Vito Acconci, Haim Steinbach, Richard Prince, Cady Noland, Franz West, and, not least, Liberace.

Few artists cycle through so many different influences and affinities, try on so many different hats, and still come out with a recognizable style. Harrison might be considered the great amalgamator, the apotheosis of cultural appropriation. The artists with whom she has the most in common on a structural level are Jessica Stockholder and the English artist Rebecca Warren. The undervalued Stockholder makes sculptures out of the kinds of things found in a hardware store—a bucket and broom, a hank of colored twine, some scraps of plywood. Warren is the most classically sculptural of all of Harrison's precursors and peers, and her hand-formed, bulbous, and swollen figurative sculptures would seem to be the template for Harrison's. Warren is a determined, tactile form-giver—she finds the form in the act of making. You feel the clay or plaster yielding to her touch. Like Harrison, she often covers her sculptures with thinned, dripping paint, but the relationship of color and gesture to form is more rewarding in her work. It is more sensual, less cerebral than Harrison's.

The closest stylistic relative to Harrison, and an artist who provides a telling comparison, is the somewhat older German sculptor Isa Genzken, of the "I'm crazier than you" school of cultural mashup. Genzken also appropriates in her work all manner of cultural signage and everyday, non-art materials (broken glass, clothing, house paint still in the can, web-sourced photos, packing tape, etc.). In 2018 Genzken made an installation at the David Zwirner Gallery, *Sky Energy*, which featured a circular grouping of mannequins dressed in disturbingly mismatched and misappropriated garb: bare-legged male figures draped with police gear, a female figure wearing a patterned hoodie and sunglasses and bound with packing tape, figures draped in plastic webbing, crash-site barriers, more restraining tape, fuchsia wigs, orange merkins, rain slickers, a brass mylar tube in place of a head, and much more. Altogether, it was a hilarious, perverse, and fucked-up piece of set design. The work's psychic temperature was almost alarming; a piercing aggression and despair came off it in waves. This kind of intensity, using only what is at hand, working only from nerve and swagger, is rare, even in Genzken's own work, so it is in a way an unfair comparison to make. But walking through Harrison's show brought back the memory of this bruising example of styling-as-art.

If we were to posit a spectrum whose poles are "makers" and "finders," at one end sits the form-giver Warren, whose figurative clay and bronze sculptures offer more-or-less familiar pleasures (Rodin stands at a respectable distance behind her). At the other end we would

place the performed squalor of Genzken, who gave up on form early on in favor of inspired, savant-like image tantrums. Harrison's deftness resides in being able to play in both sandboxes, that of the maker, the form-giver, and also that of the finder/hoarder. One fetishizes craft and the tools of making, the other fetishizes fetishes.

Viewed through another lens, Harrison looks to be an heir to Robert Rauschenberg: the abrupt transitions, the illusion of spontaneity and freedom, the embrace of the everyday. Despite the apparent similarities, they are very different types of artists. Unlike Rauschenberg, no one could accuse Harrison of elegance. In a Rauschenberg painting, especially the "combines" from the late 1950s to mid-1960s, we feel that his materials—stuffed fowl and goats, tires, ties, X-rays, and umbrellas—are all subsumed into an abstract language that is an extension of what can be done with a paintbrush. In other words, Rauschenberg's found objects are transformed; they are subsumed into a whole. His work does not stay long on the level of the purely cultural signifier; it is more like a map of excavated personal meaning. Exactly where it leads is an open question, but a map it is. It would be instructive to see Harrison's work in the same room with Rauschenberg's *Monogram*, for instance, to see just how similar or unlike they really are: the same vocabulary with different syntax and punctuation, or a different vocabulary altogether?

Harrison does not appear to be much into transformation in general, and why should we expect her to be? Of course, what constitutes "transformation" is itself mercurial; the brain is an organ of transformation. One of the shifts in sensibility from the 1950s to today is the belief that choosing, or presentation, as an act in itself, is transformation enough. In practice, it's more complicated. In Harrison's work, things are still themselves, only enlisted in a program to which they are not party; and some of them, like the child mannequins, feel embarrassed to be there. Those mute, inanimate objects and fragments of objects weren't asked if they wanted to be part of this particular image drama, and were they to be asked, might have expressed a certain reluctance. Perhaps ironically, it is this lack of transformation that activates our sympathy—for the elements of inclusion, but not always for the works themselves. Sometimes, coming upon one of Harrison's discontinuities, such as a vacuum cleaner wedged into an expanse of polystyrene (*All in the Family*, 2012) or a satellite dish protruding out of what looks like a giant lump of coal (*Siren Serenade*, 2010), is like seeing a well-known actor showing up in a commercial. "What are *you* doing here?"

One of my favorite works in the Whitney show is *Warren Beatty* (2007), which is also among the simplest, or rather one with the fewest ingredients. A narrow vertical form, vaguely figurative, human-scaled, has been completely enshrouded in purplish, mottled gray felt. The result resembles a tall hooded figure, inclining forward, draped head to toe in felt. The work has a *Burghers of Calais* aspect to it, as if Rodin had teamed up with Christo.

Harrison is drawn to the act of moving things around; she likes rolling carts, furniture dollies, hand trucks, and lawn mowers—anything with wheels. And she likes all the sculpture verbs: forming, slapping, shaping, twisting, punching the clay, or foam, or tin foil. She reminds me of someone who plays with her silverware—she’s a balancer first of all. She jerry-rigs a structure, then ladles on the imagery, the political or cultural signage and other references, sometimes in the form of devices like earphones, videos, and the like—the “meaning collage” part. She finds drama in the instructional. The slow burn, the entrances and exits, the massing of the chorus on stage: Harrison’s instincts are innately theatrical. That’s one of her strengths.



Rachel Harrison/Greene Naftali, New York

Rachel Harrison: Warren Beatty, 2007

Harrison’s work, with its antic forward energy, offers no conviction that a dive into its image mists would yield any particular depth—the connectivity assumed to lie beneath the hijinks stays illusive. In other words, the work pushes hard against our cultural moment, and then, just before the big reveal, goes on to something else. It’s hard to be a satirist and moralist at the same time. Still, the fundamental questions remain: What kinds of underlying structures must there be and in what way must they be linked in order for meaning to be adduced from the visual artifact? And how shared must they be?

Everything has an aesthetic; even things chosen for their artlessness become part of a sensibility. Information and its various modes of conveyance—video monitors, headphones, digitally enlarged photos and images harvested from the Internet or TV screens—all have a certain look. One of Harrison’s themes seems to be the paradoxical way that media ends up distancing us from the very things it purports to bring close. Photographic images, usually second- or third-generation inkjet reproductions, are all over the exhibition. I hadn’t quite realized, seeing Harrison’s gallery shows over the years, the extent to which photography is a kind of secret sauce—the element that produces the sensation of slipping on a banana peel. What’s really going on is the shifting of one’s gaze, in this case from the pedestal to the floor, or to the world outside, and back again.

How does juxtaposition create meaning in visual art? What governs the fitting together of unlike images and objects? Out of the everyday and the mundane, the discarded and unloved, the manufactured and utilitarian, a poetry of equivalencies and reciprocities emerges. That is where the work’s personality resides. There is an element of rescue involved. Her work says, “Everything is just stuff, some things are uglier than others, but

it's all just a cultural construct anyway, so why get so excited about it?" In that case, why do some things work better than others?

It might be helpful to use a musical analogy: think of the specific intervals that make up a musical chord. The notes—there can be two, three, four, or more—when played together make a complex sound with a distinct emotional valence. But there is not only simultaneity, there is also succession, and it is the motion from one chord to another that gives meaning to each one; the same chord might be heard as consonant or dissonant depending on its surroundings. The harmonic relationship of a chord, itself built out of intervals, to its surroundings, like the intervals between images or objects, is everything.

Music also shares with sculpture the properties of simultaneity and succession. We take in a work of art at a glance, but sculpture is also seen in the round; different views reveal different aspects, and like the sequential nature of melody, one note following another, meaning unfolds through time. What kind of music is Harrison making? Satie or Saariaho? Oompa or Brahms?

Another way to think about meaning in art is syntactically. Is there a syntax at work, or simply a long list of interesting nouns?

Harrison also draws with confidence and verve, and several rooms of the show are devoted to her works on paper. As in her sculptures, Harrison is an impressive appropriator and mimic, but the achievement if anything is more striking in drawing, as one can either make a certain kind of line or not. It's all drawing—you can't put an actual lawn mower or wig in a drawing; you have to render it. It's uncommon, in the last fifty or so years, for a sculptor to draw with such sophisticated pictorialism. The drawings capture the irony and rebellion of her sculptures, but with purely graphic means.

She works primarily with soft colored pencils to make a flowing, lyrical, descriptive line. The same problem with her use of color in the sculptures—its essential arbitrariness—is also present in the drawings but is less bothersome; she's not applying color, as in the sculptures, but drawing in color, which may seem an insignificant distinction, but is one nonetheless. She makes use of a dominant trope of twentieth-century art—the overlapping and intersection of outlined forms to create a sense of simultaneity; images from different eras and aesthetic persuasions overlap, mingle, and collide.

A number of the drawings depict the late singer Amy Winehouse, and the repeated persona—alternately ferocious and beatific with big hair, big eyes and mouth—makes for a riveting anchor. The presiding spirits here are Picasso and the late Martin Kippenberger, who are present as stylistic model and subject. Like a nightclub comedian doing impressions, Harrison “does” both artists in a way that is fraternal and critical at once. The danger is that she is inviting comparison to these exemplars of graphic invention, with unpredictable results.

You do not get the feeling that Harrison is drawing from a deep well. Rather, her ideas, whether formalist, imagistic, or activist/theoretical in nature, are for the most part readily available—in the air. In the bingo parlor of contemporary art, putting an unlike thing next to another unlike thing is second nature; it's just what people do. The title of an early-1970s mock-serious video by John Baldessari comes to mind: *The Way We Do Art Now*.

Harrison is not an especially psychological artist; she's the type who is in sync with her audience, not ahead of it. Overall, her work seems to be chiefly concerned with reflecting the art world back to itself, as distinct from a set of forms that originate, however inchoately, within the artist herself. The work feels external, deliberate; it's provocative, but in a way that starts to feel like a hall of mirrors.

We're all stylists now.

What distinguishes a brilliant stylist from a mere arranger of accessories? How do you know when someone is good at it, when her combinations have meaning, are right? Just as in painting, or poetry, or any other constructed form of attention, it's how something is done, the inflection of it, that lets us know. Styling is what you do to achieve the look, and it's also the look itself. In a way, Harrison's art is of the type that looks like what any of us would do, only better. What does "better" mean, in this context? A new disequilibrium displaces the old one. Right place, right time. That is a gift, a talent, in itself. Is Harrison more fluent in this contemporary language than most, or is she simply standing in the right place? And for how long will she stand there? Impossible to say, but she may have to recruit other faculties, plunge into other mythologies, for her work to expand past the immediate moment.