Deborah Boardman

A POROUS SPACE

Gahlberg Gallery
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Like Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, Deborah Boardman’s generous art looks to the self-governing forces of nature creating synergies between human experience and natural phenomena. While her practice is deeply rooted in painting, it also belongs to a broader trajectory of process art that includes, in addition to working with systems of nature, artists books, video, performance and public collaboration. Drawing on the poetics and necessities of place, each project serves as a locus for diverse methods of working, a porous space for private exploration and communal exchange.

Boardman’s current work is based on the study of fault lines and underground waterways said to emit a magnetic charge when they intersect. While traveling in Europe and researching Romanesque cathedrals, the artist discovered that ancient churches were often constructed where these two natural phenomena meet, as evidence of the divine connection between earthly energies and the spiritual world. For Boardman, these geological forces become physical and symbolic points of investigation in works that expand the borders of site specificity.

Beginning with The Flux of Matter (2007), a project of paintings, sculptures and animation based on the culture and history of the Miami Indians in Peru, IN, the artist asked professional dowsers to identify waterways beneath the soil of the Kokomo Art Gallery, at the University of Indiana, where the exhibition was held. This search made visible the ongoing importance of Midwestern waters to the Miami Indians, whose heritage originates at the mouth of the St. Joseph River, and fostered a deeper sense of connection between land, subject, artist and audience.

For A Porous Space, the first iteration of which took place at Heskin Contemporary, New York, in 2009, Boardman again used diviners to research the waterways

“...As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. The site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty.” — Robert Smithson

Faults Crank, 2010, wood and printed cloth
and fault lines below the gallery’s ground, as she did
for this installm ent at the Gahlberg Gallery. The gallery
resides in DuPage County, named for the DuPage River,
the second largest county in Illinois. Portions of the
Central Midwest, including Illinois, fall with the seismic
zone of the New Madrid Fault Line and, ironically
or not, just experienced a sizeable earthquake on
Feb. 10 of this year. The water vein and fracture the
dowsers uncovered at this site are mapped within this
provocative installation of individual yet interrelated
works plotted throughout the gallery based on this
underground circuitry.

Boardman looks at fault lines as symptoms of “geological
weakness,” equating them with human frailty. This is
not to suggest that the death and destruction caused
by natural disasters, such as the recent earthquakes
in Haiti, Chile and Tibet, are the result of any direct
cause and effect. Rather, the artist reminds us of the
interdependence between our existence and the physical
world, between all of humanity (as the relief efforts in
the wake of such disasters have affirmed), while revealing
the positive energies of the earthly sources she
evacuates. Thus explored throughout the exhibition is the
connection between geological faults and personal flaws,
and the role of art as a conduit for shared experience.

In this version of A Porous Space, the artist asked varying
publics to share their personal faults, soliciting requests
over the Internet and from the school community of
College of DuPage. The responses, which range from
bodily imperfections to vices to feelings of guilt and
inadequacy, with procrastination seemingly to rank
highest, are at once disturbing, sometimes comical, and
yet, in the end, a bit assuring as one discovers oneself
within them. Edited phrases from these responses form
the basis for one of the exhibition’s central works: a
wooden crank from which emanates several large pulleys
bearing a textual stream of these faults (or “fault strips”) printed on canvas. The pulleys are placed along the same
axis as an underground fault line that runs diagonally
Demarked on the floor is a waterline that runs east to west across the width of the gallery. Where the fault line and waterline intersect stands a stage constructed from recycled wood that serves as a platform for a public performance. An ambient folksong created by Robert Metrick and Ryan Rice, the lyrics of which are taken from the list of personal faults, will be sung by a chorus at the exhibition’s opening.

Near the base of the stage is a video depicting the painting of a horizontal blue line performed by those who submitted personal faults. With no apparent beginning or end, each participant continues the line from the edge of canvas, much in the manner of an exquisite corpse, also suggesting a subconscious link to the subterranean phenomena that provide the template for the show. Revealed is the uniqueness of each artist’s hand and the pleasure of mark making, communal acts of creation distilled to its very essence.

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These public works are an extension of Boardman’s prolific studio practice, mainly centered on painting, another form of communication in which the artist frames the seemingly disparate and fragmentary into coherent planes of wonder and redemption. The artist draws on personal iconography, whether representational or abstract, rendered in large gestural brushstrokes upon either paper or canvas. Encompassing landscape, studio views that find kinship with Matisse and patterned compositions that hover between gestural abstraction and color field painting, Boardman finds endless potential in her ritualized material of paint. All these various modes of working are bound within the artist book that stands at the center of the exhibition; part diary, part document, it also contains painted facsimiles of the note cards marked with personal faults.

The Circle paintings included here merge Boardman’s interest in pattern and geometry with the kind of iconic imagery found in several projects based on emblematic conventions and personal iconography.
and notions of heredity: Intermittently dispersed along
the walls of the gallery, these paintings, with their
saturated wheels of color, offer moments for pause and
contemplation, an alternative form of circulation to the
linear fault lines and waterways below. From these
paintings radiates an energy in tune with the geological
forces from which Boardman draws. From this "gyrating
space," to borrow Smithson’s phrase, emerges the
possibility of *A Porous Space*.

— Susan Snodgrass is a Chicago-based critic and
a corresponding editor to *Art in America*.

1 Robert Smithson quoted in *Robert Smithson Spiral
Jetty*, eds. Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly (University of

Left Top: *Book of Faults*, 2010, painted book,
gouache on paper

Left Bottom: *I Let My Mother Control My Life*, 2010,
oil on canvas

Inside front cover and opposite page: *Book of Faults*
detail, 2010, painted book, gouache on paper

Gahlberg Gallery

**Deborah Boardman: A Porous Space**

Thursday, June 3, to Saturday, Aug. 7, 2010

The Gahlberg Gallery would like to thank the artist,
Deborah Boardman, and the writer, Susan Snodgrass, for
their creative vision on this project. Deborah Boardman
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Barbara Wiesen

Director and Curator

Gahlberg Gallery

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