

MIAMI RAIL

Miami Rail
Virginia Overton
By Christy Gast



Installation view of Virginia Overton's *Flat Rock* at MOCA, North Miami. Photo courtesy of Daniel Portnoy

Flat Rock at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, is Virginia Overton's first solo exhibition in an American museum. The new freestanding sculptures that Overton created for the show are tenuous yet forceful assemblages of materials the artist encountered around Miami and on site at the museum. The exhibition begins with a large-scale fountain that Overton created for the museum's pond. In the gallery, she addressed the existing architecture by arranging long planks of lumber to create two parallel lean-to walls; this rudimentary architectural device carves out a long passageway that viewers must navigate before entering a diagonally warped exhibition space.

Christy Gast, interviewing Overton for The Miami Rail, is an artist whose work across media reflects her interest in issues of economics and the environment, and the role of content in giving meaning to the experience and form of the work. She met with Overton and MOCA Interim Director and Chief Curator Alex Gartenfeld to discuss the artist's evolving process, site-specificity and the problematic of the "vernacular."

CHRISTY GAST (RAIL): I would like to begin with the first piece that visitors, or passersby for that matter, will encounter, the fountain (Untitled, 2014). You have reworked the existing spout and pond in the museum's plaza, using infrastructural or construction materials that look like they were excavated from the building's inner workings, in a way that is both functional and sculptural—or anti-functional, and even decorative.

VIRGINIA OVERTON: My work involves an examination of the nature of the commission, and the space—finding the easiest way to get from here to there. I responded immediately to the fountain outside. The two concrete pads in the pond had not been used in years, which Alex and I thought was a shame. In my research I found that the pads originally had trees in them, and formed a grid with the palm trees on the museum's lawn. The steel hopper at the end, resting on one of the pads, is one of the first things that I saw in Miami when I came to do site visits.

RAIL: I noticed the hopper says “Dade,” and has some other numbers or information written on it. Clearly you sourced it here in Miami-Dade County, but what does that inscription indicate?

OVERTON: The number indicates its weight: 501 pounds. There are hundreds of these steel hoppers at metal-recycling businesses along the Miami River corridor. They use these hoppers to separate metals, moving them around with forklifts. They were originally used for shipping airplane engines. The guy who sold it to us said it was 30 or so years old and they really don't like to get rid of them. They use them and use them and use them until they are totally mangled. So it took some finagling to get them to relinquish one of these objects.

The hopper was the jumping-off point for the fountain. Then the next step was finding materials that would do the job—transfer water from here to there. Using aluminum for the troughs made sense because it's somewhat lightweight, fairly inexpensive and easy to bend. It came in flat sheets; I just had it cut in half and then bent on a cold roller.

ALEX GARTENFELD: This issue of functionality is operative. Christy, you mentioned the tension between supposedly functional construction material and the decorativeness of sculpture. Virginia never necessarily absolves any materials of their functionality. All of her structures conscientiously deconstruct the notion of the decorative. In terms of the fountain, functionality manifests dually. The work perpetuates the transfer of water, extending the original purpose of the pond's spout in an elaborately obvious way. Second is, I hate to call it a social aspect, but an architectural aspect of how the work animates and transforms the space.

That effort recurs in the display apparatus that creates the main gallery—Virginia's lean-to's. Formally, the diagonal room is both a strong and tentative type of room, and frames the presentation of these discrete objects.



Virginia Overton's *Untitled (lean-to-South)*(left) and *Untitled* (Moca's rollgate fashioned into a lightbox). Photo courtesy of Daniel Portnoy

RAIL: Like the fountain, the works in the main gallery address circulation and movement. For one, the lean-to sculpture creates a darkened hallway that forces visitors forward into the gallery and past the museum's architecture. Internally, the works seems to point to one another. That happens with the fountain as well—each line seems to point as it moves the water forward.

OVERTON: Creating the lean-to is my way of structuring the way I add material to the space, using elements of the architecture that exist and letting them lead the way. At MOCA these guidelines were the Unistrut, a lowered ceiling device that the lighting rigs into. And I bring in the materials that I am familiar with in order to create a new environment while exaggerating the inherent qualities of the space. The materials serve a particular purpose now, in this installation. Later, they'll perhaps come apart and turn into another thing. The materials themselves have a life cycle.

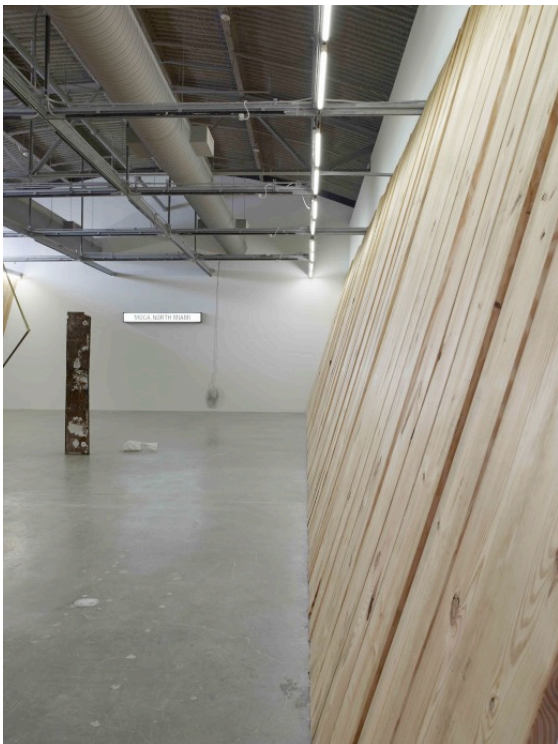
RAIL: Which relates to why I wanted to start at the fountain—because as you said, these objects came via the river and they were going to leave via the river and the circularity of that process is mirrored in the work. Your concentration on infrastructure is very local to the site of the museum and its specific architecture. For instance, you have created a light box, a big white scrim stretched over a portal of an existing metal roll gate, which is typically closed during an exhibition. The piece completely transforms the way the light works in the space. It filters the intense Miami sun down to a cool ethereal glow.

OVERTON: The windows in the exhibition spaces were covered up for a long time. Part of the process of the show was to pay attention to architectural details and uncover a lot of things that had been hidden. When I realized that there was a roll gate in the space I was working in, I wanted to engage it somehow. I've made other lightboxes in the backs of pickup trucks by stretching tarps around stretchers mounted to the rim of the truck bed and lighting them from within. Using this opening to make a lightbox without electricity was a nice way to extenuate the natural light that comes through the windows.

GARTENFELD: One of the challenges for Virginia in putting together this show was figuring out how to unify different parts of the space, which are very irregular in terms of the architectural floor plan. MOCA's building is a Gwathmey Siegel building from the mid-90s—it's very postmodern, with its curves, niches, asymmetry and use of vernacular materials. Virginia forces an examination of circulation in the space that extends to visitors' movement between the internal courtyard and the gallery—the bifurcation of inside and outside, which is literally addressed in this piece. It's the first time that Virginia has created such an inset lightbox.

We joke that this work is an anti-Turrell, because it is possessed of intense and even quite varied experiences of light but at the same time it's self-reflexive, anti-spectacular, oriented in sensual experience. Obviously Virginia's approach contrasts with generations of far more macho, far more produced light experiences. This is more natural and more open-ended.

RAIL: The lightbox is interesting because it operates visually, as a white space and a void, but it has a voice, allowing sounds from the museum's courtyard to filter in.



Installation view of MOCA's main gallery

OVERTON: Engaging more than one sense is of interest to me—for instance using wood that has a strong scent or water elements that have sound. Entering the show you immediately walk through a corridor that seems empty, but the light, sound, and changing shape of the space—all of these things make you more aware of where you are, of being in the space and in the moment.

RAIL: The work in your show at MOCA is site-specific in that it depends on the space for its structure and is largely made with materials that you collected here in Miami. When we met last week you mentioned you'd been spending a lot of time in the recycling centers on 79th Street and other thrift stores and flea markets.

OVERTON: I really like to immerse myself in the situation so I've visited a number of times. I've gone on these scouting trips with various people from the museum, including Alex, to all kinds of shops and recycling places, but also just getting familiar with the city and spending time in the museum itself in different states—seeing other shows and seeing it in transition from the last show that was before me to my show and then when it was totally ready. Creating a mental inventory of all these things—materials, space and ideas—gets my mind wrapped around the process. I studied the floor plan for months in advance, carrying it around, arranging the space in my own head.

GARTENFELD: One very specific feature of Virginia's work is that she doesn't have a signature style but rather a signature mode of production. A benchmark of her practice has been her concentration on the time and the site of production. Focusing on the exhibition period is important, and a really interesting way for her to investigate issues of an artist's work. But Virginia intervenes in the assumption that all the work is made on-site and thus spontaneous, or somehow authentic. It turns out she very conscientiously revisited various tropes from her work—the lightbox, the fan, the lean-to or the suspended triangle—which she installed in the museum as a playful tentative mini-survey, as opposed to some kind of authoritative retrospective.

OVERTON: I would talk about the installation period as a chance for me to experiment using materials—using familiar materials but in a new way, or employing new materials in ways that I'm familiar using them. It helps me push my practice and try things and really use an installation as a chance to explore the way that I make work. That said, I am conscious that working during installation is not the only way to work, and needs to remain in flux. I make plenty of work in the studio.



Virginia Overton, *Untitled (Good Year)*, 2014. Tractor tire, wood, car battery, inverter, white-noise machine. 57 x 57 x 57 inches. Photo courtesy of Daniel Portnoy.

RAIL: A lot of your work involves precariously stacked, leaned or suspended materials creating structures that depend in part on the architecture of the exhibition space for their structure. They seem unstable, one false move and all the pieces could fall to the floor with a powerful racket, yet they are often monumental in scale. Some refer to this tension as “poetic.” I wonder what that means.

GARTENFELD: The work is also very physical and even menacing—about to snap.

OVERTON: Yeah, the fan, for instance, can swing wildly at times and we dealt with how to keep it from being too menacing.

GARTENFELD: Christy, as you mentioned, Virginia’s sculpture takes a particular deconstructive approach to monumentality. That is to say it can be very large but also very fragile, and more importantly, that it seems to speak the language of meaning and authority, but delivers something quite different. What I would offer is that poetic is perhaps a misnomer inasmuch as the work isn’t really about language. There’s a syntax, I think, to this exhibition layout, because it engages Virginia’s history of reusing materials and tropes from her own work. But there isn’t a defined system internal to the work that helps to make meaning or form.

RAIL: I have noticed that a lot of reviews of your work jump from Donald Judd to Eva Hesse, whereas I would make a connection to Bill Bollinger. I wonder how you insert yourself into this type of lineage.

OVERTON: I don't. I like to float around. Obviously I'm thinking about all of these things. But for the same reason the work is untitled. It makes more sense to leave things open-ended.

GARTENFELD: Obviously the issue of gender relates to the history of modernist form. And Virginia's work typically undermines the tendency to muscularity typically associated with minimalist sculpture. She creates the same confusion in a discussion of "vernacular."

RAIL: Virginia, you grew up on a farm, as did I, which brings to mind Anna Chave's essay "Minimalism and Biography." I recognize some of the gestures in your work as a reflection of an economy of means that you find in an agrarian environment. Materials are reused over and over again, not in a particularly aesthetic way, but in a way that is functionally creative. Could you talk about the farm and how it influences the way you used materials?

OVERTON: When you're on the farm you use what is on-hand to take care of problems that come up. If a fence is broken you use what you have. If you don't have fencing you use rope or barbed wire that's cut off, or whatever. Often I moved different parts from various sculptures to other ones, made things that didn't end up in the show. Although it's not exactly like fixing a fence...



Virginia Overton, *Untitled (MOCA, Nort Miami)*, 2014. Painted aluminum, acrylic, electric wiring, 12 x 96 x 6 inches. Photo courtesy of Daniel Portnoy.

RAIL: Because it doesn't have to keep the cow in.

OVERTON: Maybe it has to keep the cow interested.

GARTENFELD: Virginia is very conscious of the presumption about what it means to use vernacular material. That type of terminology is problematic. She really plays with the biographical references that you might use in order to decipher this work. To use the title of this show, *Flat Rock*, as an example. It was prompted by having to pick a title for the show. Virginia's initial recourse in terms of picking a title was a rock on her family's farm in Tennessee. Although, that doesn't necessarily suggest...

RAIL: ...That all the pieces in the show are exactly referencing a part of the biography.

GARTENFELD: It's being referenced for Virginia, but not for anyone else. Nobody knows this rock, nobody cares about this rock. It is a dumb object. And as this show evolved, *Flat*

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Rock came to mean instead the floor. It came to indicate Virginia's relationship to space, particularly and generally.

OVERTON: The title was a starting point. As was the lightbox that reads MOCA, North Miami. That's the only piece that I had fabricated and sent down before the show. This was the fourth in a series of signs that I have made for institutional shows. They give me a point from which to begin. I worked every day, all day long, moving things around, trying things. The wood was in a hundred different places; it was like a CrossFit gym in here with the crew working. Especially once I brought the tractor tire in. You choose an anchor and the process moves from that point forward until it's done.