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Carol Bove Brings Her Balancing Act to MoMA
Her First Solo MoMA Show, 'The Equinox,' Opens Saturday

Andy Battaglia



Carol Bove's sculpture 'Celeste' (2013), on the High Line. ILLUSTRATION: TIMOTHY SCHENCK/FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE

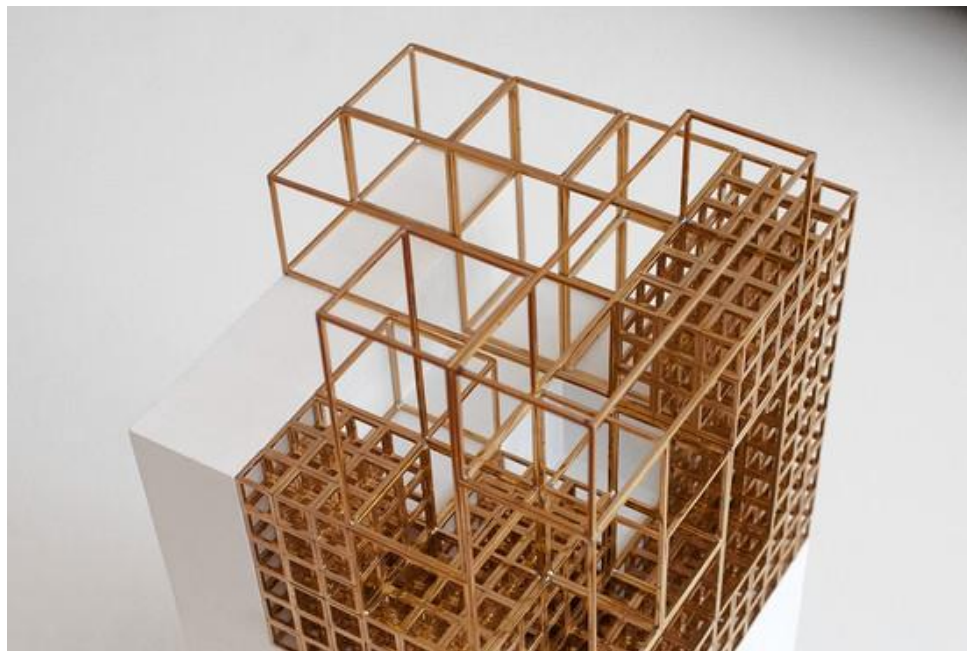
With an assortment of materials—feathers, steel, seashells, brass—sculptor Carol Bove makes art that feels both monumental and light. From her studio in the industrial neighborhood of Red Hook, Brooklyn, she casts forged and found objects into poetic shapes, all with a sense of quiet command that will be featured in a serene solo exhibition, "The Equinox," opening Saturday at the Museum of Modern Art.

The show marks a momentous year for Ms. Bove, who also has seven pieces currently on view at the High Line at the Rail Yards, the ungroomed final section of the elevated park. (That show, titled "Caterpillar," is open to the public through next year, but only by way of tours organized by the High Line Art program. Registration is required online.)



The artist at MoMA ILLUSTRATION: DAVID KASNIC FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Common among her work in such disparate settings—indoor and outdoor, institutional and untamed—is a fluency with abstract arrangements that signals a fascination with the industrial and the fantastical by turns. Her favored materials for both "Caterpillar" and "The Equinox" include old metal beams rusted by the elements as well as large tubes of steel that are curved and powder-coated to a high shine.



One sculptural element of her show, 'The Equinox.' ILLUSTRATION: DAVID KASNIC FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

On Tuesday, Ms. Bove was making adjustments to her exhibition at MoMA. When a curator suggested that the movement of a certain piece by two inches failed to change anything, Ms. Bove replied, "Oh no, we changed it—mega, totally." In the midst of the installation, the 42-year-old Swiss-born artist spoke with The Wall Street Journal about the thrills of art history, experiences of the divine and a nasty old mattress given a notable new home.

How does it feel to install your first show at MoMA?

In a way, I live here, in my mind, so it feels very natural—an uncanny experience when something in your mind becomes real. There was a moment when I was looking at the Brancusi arrangement [a famed group of works by the Modernist sculptor Constantin Brancusi], which is a real touchstone for me, and I realized that a lot of what I like about the sculptures is MoMA itself.

How do you mean?

So much of what you experience at MoMA comes from strategies of display. You're seeing real objects, sensual and kind of erotic, but because of the way they're handled, with layers of display and a lot of elegance and coolness, you experience your estrangement from the realness of them. There's this unlikely experience of the divine, or numinousness, through your knowledge of that estrangement.

Your show overlooks the famous sculpture garden, too.

I think about the sculpture garden as a starting point for a lot of my work. It has been really provocative for me. Also there's this excitement when things far away look small. It's such a simple-minded idea, but there's something exciting about it, because you can see the monumental in the miniature, or objects' arbitrary relationship to scale. It's another way of revealing one's own perceptual apparatus.

With the sculptures finished, what does arranging the show entail?

I'm still walking around trying to figure out if everything is in the right place. Things are roughly where they should be, but there are adjustments that I still want to make. I want to play with this black tube thing. It doesn't feel quite right.

How do you know when it's right?

I think of the word "click." I feel it. It's not metaphysical—it's physical. But, you know, there is a chain of correspondences to maybe some sort of celestial realm that ends in the body.

Where did you get that big piece of wood at the start of the show?

It's driftwood. I live on the harbor in Red Hook, and it just washed up. [She points to a mattress.] This was nearby my studio too, this disgusting mattress.

"Disgusting Mattress" is actually the name of the piece.

For a long time it was unofficial, and then I admitted to it. I've been living with it in my studio for two years. The worst nightmare I've had in a long time involved art handlers who took it out of my studio and cleaned it up. I was like, "Noooooo!"

Was its current state of disarray arranged?

It's totally unaltered, which is a way of working within an arrangement with different registers. I saw it on the sidewalk and had this sense of recognition with it. It's the subject of total indifference for years, completely unhandled by me. And then that [she points to a small, elaborately fastened brass piece, "Terma"] is 1,000 hours or more of polishing and handwork. I have to order the screws from a miniature train company. Having those two things in the same arrangement, I think, causes the viewer to have to engage and disengage and recalibrate their approach. That things have this unevenness is important.

The ungroomed setting for your show on the High Line is very different. How did the wildness of that stretch of railway appeal to you?

I was pleasantly surprised by how weird the white stuff [the powder-coated steel tubes of large curved sculptures like "Celeste"] look up there. For me, the perfection of the surfaces, their cleanness, makes me look away, so I'm really aware of what's around them. Everything looks hyper-real—the gravel, the rusty stuff—like it was painted by a Renaissance painter.

What is the significance of the new exhibition title, "The Equinox"?

I'm happy when things are multivalent and balanced. The equinox is when there is equivalence between day and night. Also, [early 20th-century occultist] Aleister Crowley's magazine, where most of his writings were issued, was called the Equinox. Their motto was: "Our method is science, our aim is religion." That helped me understand this idea of equivalence and balance between different sorts of forces.

What does that balance of forces mean to you?

The idea of mind-boggle is important. If you're an educated viewer, you want to read an object as a text. I give you a lot of come-ons so you think you get it—but then no, you don't, you can't read it. If you arrive at that place of having legibility developed and then frustrated, then you can be in a state of not-knowing, when you can actually encounter things in a different way. It's like withdrawing your programming, finding different ways of expanding the channels of perception.