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At Home in Two Places

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"Celeste," by Carol Bove on the High Line. Credit...Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The stretch of the High Line from 30th to 34th Street, still semiwild and closed to the public except by appointment, is a challenging place to exhibit art. Anything installed there risks being overwhelmed by the beauty of the site itself, with its sweeping arc toward the Hudson and its picturesque weeds sprouting up between splintered rail ties.

The light-filled gallery on the Museum of Modern Art's fourth floor, just outside the rooms that house the permanent collection of painting and sculpture, presents a different set of obstacles for the contemporary artist. There are the Pollocks and Calder's at one end, the commanding view of the sculpture garden at the other. Viewers streaming single-file off the narrow bridge from the escalators don't have much time to stop and look before they're pushed along into the collection galleries.

The sculptor Carol Bove is now showing in both of these places at once, and managing beautifully. It helps that she is a master of nuance and understatement, and an exquisite calibrator of contextual relationships. It isn't lost on her that her shows arrive at a moment when both sites, MoMA and the High Line, are transitioning from 20th-century relics — both dating from the 1930s — into 21st-century civic landmarks.

With these exhibitions Ms. Bove is also branching out from the scholarly eclecticism of her earlier artworks, which incorporated found objects like books and crystals, into a more elemental kind of abstract sculpture that at times evokes Richard Serra, Franz West and Mark di Suvero. It takes a certain kind of courage for a post-Post-Minimalist artist, born in 1971, to make such clearly articulated forms.

The High Line show, titled “Caterpillar” and organized by the High Line art curator and director Cecilia Alemani, savors this last opportunity to see the elevated railway in its undeveloped state. (It remains on view until May, when construction begins on this final section of the park.) The show has seven sculptures, distributed relatively evenly along the C-shaped length of track.

Two are looping, hollow noodles of white powder-coated steel, from a series called “Glyphs.” They have been given playful, anthropomorphic titles, “Prudence” and “Celeste,” but these squiggly creatures call less attention to themselves than to their postindustrial surroundings of gravel and rusted iron. Viewed on approach, their coils coalesce into a kind of tunnel; from the side, they look more like a stretched-out Slinky.



The artist Carol Bove has installed her works in the the final undeveloped section of the High Line, from West 30th Street to West 34th Street.



“Celeste” is one of the works in the High Line exhibition, titled “Caterpillar.” The show remains on view until May, when construction begins on the final section of the park.



"Visible Things and Colors," made of brass and concrete, is one of the show's seven sculptures, distributed along the C-shaped length of the track.



"Monel," a low, bronze platform.



Ms. Bove also has an exhibition, "The Equinox," at the Museum of Modern Art.



"Disgusting Mattress," one of the show's seven sculptures.



An installation view of "Silver Compass," a silver-beaded curtain.

Three other sculptures, Tetris-like arrangements of steel I-beams, are well camouflaged by comparison. They evoke the frames of nearby buildings under construction, as well as the titanic outdoor works of Mr. Di Suvero, but seem to have more in common with the dilapidated skeleton of the High Line. The steel is rusted, and crisscrossing components that look like they should be joined together for structural purposes often aren't; pieces wobble, unexpectedly, when the breeze picks up.

Ms. Bove, who lives and works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, knows how precarious solid-looking infrastructure can turn out to be. Another of the show's sculptures, a low bronze platform titled "Monel," bears traces of damage from Hurricane Sandy: a creeping discoloration at the edge. These marks add character and contingency to what is otherwise a harbinger of the Hudson Yards development; the piece has been laid across a portion of the High Line's tracks, anticipating the covering-over of the rail yards below.

A similar platform links the seven sculptures in Ms. Bove's show at MoMA, which is titled "The Equinox" and was organized by the curator Laura Hoptman with an assistant, Margaret Ewing. It includes a glyph and a piece made with I-beams, but unlike "Caterpillar" it's installed as an ensemble. It also features materials much less sturdy than steel; one sculpture takes the form of a shimmering, silver-beaded curtain and another consists of parts of a used mattress salvaged from the trash.

Altogether "The Equinox" has a very different mood from the High Line show, mystical and more in keeping with Ms. Bove's earlier sculptures. An intricate open grid of brass supported by painted fiberboard is titled "Terma," after the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism; "Triguna," which incorporates a peacock feather, a shell and a hunk of found metal makes reference to the Indian ayurvedic tradition. Even the I-beam sculpture is titled "Chesed," a term from the kabbalah. Everything here might also be taken as sly commentary on the religion of modernism. The mattress piece, for instance — "Disgusting Mattress," Ms. Bove has titled it — gestures to Rauschenberg's "Bed" assemblage and Calder's wire sculptures with its gray stuffing and flyaway springs. And the whole grouping of sculptures, on the white platform, seems to miniaturize the sculpture garden below. (Ms. Bove has spoken about the importance of this view from the gallery's large, east-facing glass wall.)

Ms. Bove is very good at working with, or against, the personality of a given site as the situation demands. (Sometimes, though, you wish that more of her personality, strongly influenced by her Bay Area upbringing, would come through.)

On the High Line she renews our appreciation of a truly unusual public space that's become, at its southern segments, an overtrafficked urban fetish. And at MoMA she refuses to be intimidated by the collection or sanitized by the building that contains it. Certainly, the architects and urban planners in charge of Hudson Yards and MoMA's expansion could learn a thing or two from her.

"Carol Bove: Caterpillar" runs through May on the High Line between West 30th and West 34th Streets, Manhattan; thehighline.org; admission is free, but by reservation only, and the show is booked through Sept. 28. "Carol Bove: The Equinox" runs through Jan. 12 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.