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Dorian Gaudin: *The Coffee Cup Spring*

By Louis Bury

The sculptor Dorian Gaudin has been making a name for himself with kinetic installations that combine Alexander Calder's economy of form and Jean Tinguely's gearbox aesthetic, teasing viewers with the stirrings of what seem like autonomous machines. For Example, his disquieting 2016 exhibition at Nathalie Karg Gallery, *Jettison Parkway*, contained an imposing, 9-foot-wide aluminum cylinder whose constellation of visible internal gears propelled it back and forth across the gallery in wobbly, unpredictable lurches. His jittery 2017 *Rites & Aftermath*—a solo exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo—centered around a 36-foot-long steel sheet that resembled a conveyor belt and whose gradual

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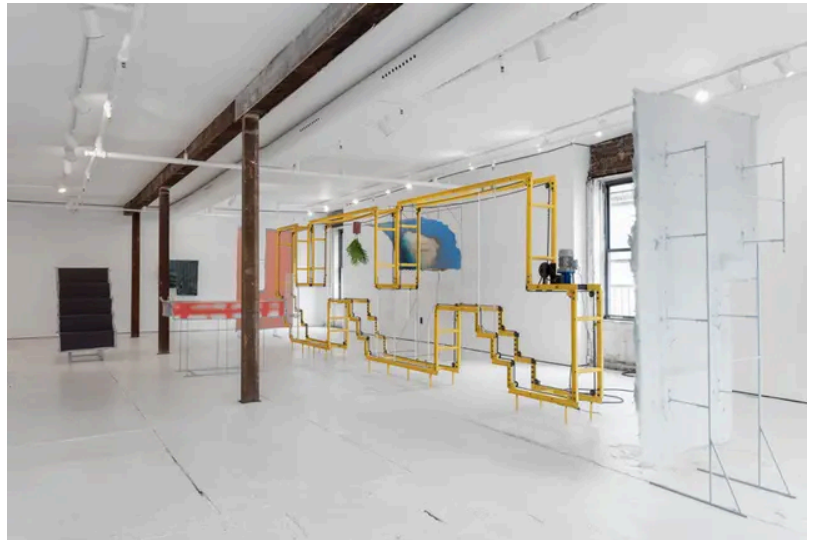
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because so little changes from moment to moment, tiny plot developments produce outsized effects. In other words, as in a Beckett play, the action's apparent pointlessness is part of its point.

The centerpiece of Gaudin's current exhibition at Nathalie Karg is an eponymous, 25-foot-long installation (2018) constructed out of two parallel tracks of interlocking steel I-beams, spaced a foot apart from one another, evoking a jungle gym, a roller coaster, and an assembly line all at once. Painted warm yellow, the I-beams have been bolted together to form stepped, rectilinear circuits. A long gear chain, like that of a bicycle, runs along each I-beam track as a quietly droning motor inches the chains along the tracks. In two places, a flat metal bar has been affixed to both chains and is then used as the base for a sculptural object—a fiberglass disposable coffee cup; a fiberglass flower pot containing a synthetic palm plant—that completes droll, unhurried loops around the machine. How viewers understand the sculptures' surrealistic procession—whether a jokey critique or eccentric embrace of technological monotony—depends, in part, on how they construe the installation's suggestively ambiguous title. The “spring” in *The coffee cup spring* could be read as an ironic verb or an ingenuous noun.



Dorian Gaudin, *The Coffee Cup Spring*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery.

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The choice of a coffee cup as the titular sculptural object provides an important clue here. The contents of a coffee cup induce jumpy excitement when consumed by humans, but the vessel itself is tranquil and impassive, a relationship not

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Jettison Parkway and *Rites & Aftermath* both performed jerky movements that evinced anxious discomfort—a large cylinder staggering like a drunk across a sidewalk; clattering metal chairs skittish as colts—*The coffee cup spring* performs one steady, continuous movement that evinces yogic calm. The machine’s actions still appear arbitrary and futile, but the machine itself appears untroubled by that fact.

Gaudin’s commentators often note the way his kinetic installations invite descriptions that ascribe agency to machines. The exhibition’s press release makes a similar case in its invocation of object-oriented ontology, a prominent recent strain of anti-anthropocentric philosophy that ponders questions of being and agency in non-human entities. While such considerations are perhaps inevitable when it comes to Gaudin’s work, his installations’ droll, mechanical repetitions make this line of inquiry less techno-utopic than it might appear. His machines do seem to exercise a type of agency but it’s a circumscribed, impoverished one. *The coffee cup spring*, in particular, restricts the range of movement of both the machine and its passive component sculptures in a manner that verges on mocking.



Dorian Gaudin, *The Coffee Cup Spring*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery.

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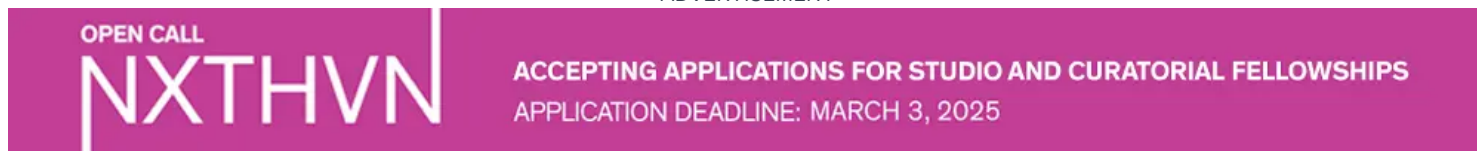
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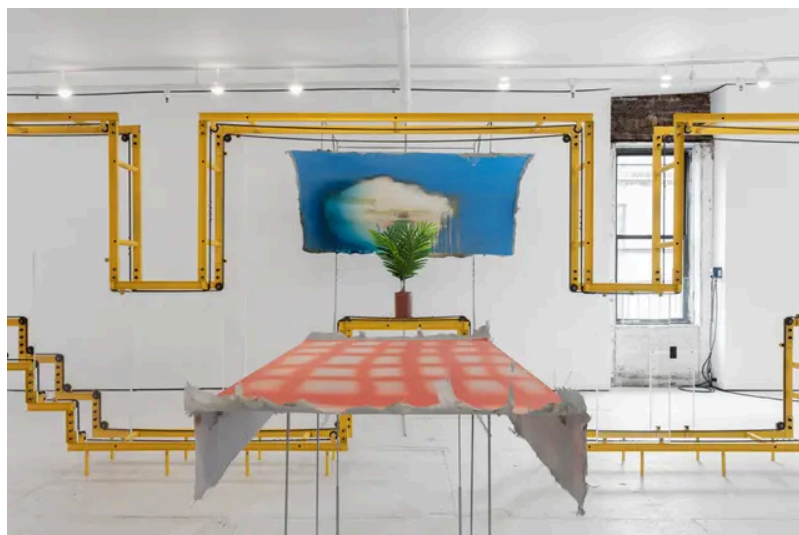
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titular installation is a series of multiform and multicolored fiberglass sculptures. Each sculpture consists of a thin sheet of fiberglass that has been set in predominantly rectilinear—sometimes curved—forms whose edges have been left frayed. The fronts of each fiberglass sheet have been painted with a reverse printing technique—akin to the inky impression a newspaper comic strip creates on silly putty—that has left behind variously colored wood grain and floral patterns. Mounted on the wall or floor with steel support rods, the fiberglass sculptures look like floating fragments of wallpaper or paneling, as well as a staircase in one instance and a tablecloth in another.

In a notable development for Gaudin's work, the sculptures are positioned around the periphery of the central kinetic machine in ways that put all the artworks in architectural dialogue with one another. *Enduring sensual objects* (2018) and *Cloudy Day* (2018), for example, have been arranged to create a view of an artificial horizon at installation's mid-section. *Forget me not carnation* (2018) and *Routine from outerspace* (2018) bookend the installation lengthwise to produce a demarcative framing effect. Even the sculptures' structural supports signal architectural intent in the way their rods and right-angles echo the forms of the central installation's I-beams.

These architectural configurations make smart and pleasing use of negative space. Both within and across the exhibition's artworks, openings, gaps, and cutouts abound, ventilating the mood. Several plexiglass panels affixed to the central machine also serve to partition and define space without making it feel congested. These airy qualities contribute to the sense of calm



Dorian Gaudin, *The Coffee Cup Spring*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery.

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teleological—from Tinguely’s self-destroying sculptures to Survival Research Laboratories’ agonistic steampunk robots—*The coffee cup spring* incorporates light, sometimes humorous touches that soften the feel of its hard-edged components.

More than any of its specific effects, *The coffee cup spring*’s architecture stands out in Gaudin’s developing oeuvre for its deliberateness. His previous installations contained architectural elements but none so holistically articulated as here. *Jettison Parkway*, for example, also contained a central kinetic installation (the steamroller-esque cylinder) surrounded by peripheral wall-hanging sculptures (John Chamberlain-esque panels of crumpled metal). But while the conceptual relationship between that exhibition’s center and periphery was apparent, the individual artworks’ spatial and compositional relationships across the gallery space were less developed. *The coffee cup spring*’s architectonic cohesion is a subtle and compelling sign of growth in a body of work that trades on the tension between subtlety and spectacle.

Louis Bury is an art writer, author of *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, 2023) and *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), and Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.

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