HYPERALLERGIC

Mary Mattingly's Poetry of Things

Mattingly makes the case that poetry is precisely what's missing from mainstream responses to anthropogenic climate change.

Louis Bury May 13, 2018

Mary Mattingly, "Between Bears Ears and Daneros Mine" 2018, chromogenic dye coupler print, 30 x 30 inches, © Mary Mattingly, (all images courtesy Robert Mann Gallery)

The title of Mary Mattingly's fourth solo exhibition at Robert Mann gallery, ***Because For Now We Still Have Poetry***, has, like the artwork in the show, more than a touch of poetry. The title's "for now" pointedly conveys the show's twin strains of ecological optimism and pessimism, but its invocation of "poetry" is more mysterious. Among the world's resources imperiled by climate change, poetry would seem to rank far down the list for most people. Yet Mattingly's work makes the case that our capacity for poetry, writ large — what the ancient Greeks called *poiesis*, or

imaginative creation — is precisely what's missing from mainstream aesthetic, political, and cultural responses to anthropogenic climate change.

For a small exhibition, comprised of about 20 works in total, *Because For Now* encompasses a wide variety of styles and media. Just under half the works are 30 by 30-inch still life photographic assemblages, including a medley of objects arranged and superimposed atop desolate landscapes. Other 30 by 30-inch photographs portray U.S. mining sites from conventional landscape vantages. A grid of 8 by 10-inch black-and-white photographs depicts isolate silvery chunks of raw minerals, while three Joseph Cornell-esque wall-mounted box sculptures contain found objects underneath skeins of thin nylon rope. Three cylindrical concrete sculptures, each about a foot in diameter, intended to resemble core samples of New York City streets stand in the center of the gallery.

Mary Mattingly, "Cobalt Box" 2018, mining axe from Appalachia, West Virginia, heating coil from car engine, cobalt core from Michigan, agricultural tool made from steel and copper alloy, phosphate, lime, sand, and calcium aluminate chunk from Bone Valley, Florida, nylon rope, aluminum printing sheet, ink in a pine box, 31 x 21 x 4.5 inches, © Mary Mattingly

In all of her works, Mattingly's compositions are deliberate and lyrical. Spare and simple objects, such as leaves, vases, tubes, rocks, and dirt, agglutinate in her still life photographs into more complex, interrelated wholes; in the box sculptures, found industrial objects — for example, a mining axe; a car engine heating coil — are covered in tangles of rope that resemble a game of

cat's cradle gone awry. In both series, paintball-like splotches of cobalt powder punctuate the works, and wooden rectangles imprinted with ominous iterations of Samuel Beckett quotes enhance the poetic mood. The artist consistently employs visual and thematic intricacies that draw attention to part-whole relationships in both the work itself and the larger world.

As with her previous exhibition at Robert Mann, *House and Universe* (2013) — in which Mattingly bundled her worldly belongings in sacks roped together into ungainly forms — much of the work's poetic power derives from makeshift acts of combination and suture. Yet, whereas *House and Universe* expressed a sense of accumulated material burden, the current exhibition emphasizes the positives and negatives of a more abstract ecological interconnectivity. On a conceptual level, such tensions manifest in her critique of mining practices using photography, a medium whose material technology relies on mined ores. On a compositional level, the works' discrete components — clustered and stacked in space; often bundled or linked together through ropes or tubes — hint at a system or order whose underlying logic feels just out of reach.

Mary Mattingly, "Lead Box" 2018, aluminum printing sheet, ink, pliable lead chunk, nylon rope, car radiator coil, plywood panel with text from Samuel Beckett's The Unnamable, steel lamp hood, farming soil and wax block from Utah in pine box, 21.5 x 31 x 4.75 inches, © Mary Mattingly

In the box sculptures especially, viewers interested in art history and theory will find no shortage of suggestive references to networks. The sculptures' crisscrossing black and white nylon ropes, nearly as thin as string, are affixed to screws and the found objects themselves to form a tattered web just barely tying together the boxes' disparate contents. This overlying snarl of rope evokes

doctrines such as Timothy Morton's concept of the mesh, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, and Bruno Latour's Actor-network theory, as well as such artworks as Marcel Duchamp's spidery 1942 installation, *his twine*.

For all their learnèd allusions, the boxes just plain work as objects. Like Joseph Cornell's boxes and the diorama form at its best, they embody a beguiling world in miniature that manages to feel at once self-contained and part of a larger whole. Mattingly is best known for her social practice work — *Swale* (2016-ongoing), for example, in which she grows and gives away food on a barge docked along New York City's waterways, has garnered mainstream attention. However, over the past decade-plus, she has also produced uncanny objects and images that, if less likely to attract publicity, are equally compelling in their own right.

One feature that cuts across both strands of her work, the retinal and the social, is her interest in improvisatory, self-contained structures. In social practice works such as *The Waterpod Project* (2006-10), *WetLand* (2014-ongoing), and *Swale*, Mattingly constructs provisional, often aquatic, habitats — boats pocked with domes, huts, tents, sheds, and gardens — as quixotic experiments in ecological self-sufficiency. Her boats are floating architectural poems, utopic DIY propositions addressing the types of thought and action needed for the coming floods. For Mattingly, the poetic sensibility manifests as the ability to entertain — and enact — alternative relational structures.

For now, we still have that ability. But it's not hard to imagine a future in which what today seem like fantastical alternatives — for instance, Mattingly's boats; Andrea Zittel's living units; Bonnie Ora Sherk's living libraries — have become, for many, necessities. Mattingly has long worked, Cassandra-like, in this cautionary register; *Because For Now* refines our sense of why. Connections abound within and across the works in the show, but those connections are precarious, ramshackle, and fragmentary, riddled with holes and frayed ends. The abiding sense is that although feats of poetic reorganization can't preserve intact our world as we know it, such feats are all that's available if we want to preserve our world in any form at all.

Because For Now We Still Have Poetry *continues at Robert Mann Gallery (531 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 9.*
