

Lily Cox-Richard brings sculpture viewers to their knees

By Molly Glentzer Staff writer

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A floor-level view of one of the wall-fragment like sculptures of Lily Cox-Richard's show "Berm," on view at DiverseWorks through Nov. 3.

Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

The piece: "Berm"

The artist: Lily Cox-Richard

Where: At DiverseWorks, 3400 Main, through Nov. 3

Why: The transformation of Midtown into a ubiquitous urban utopia is so nearly complete, anyone other than an artist might not see the elements of the landscape Lily Cox-Richard brings to the fore – well, um, to the floor – with her show of 14 enigmatic sculptures at DiverseWorks, in the MATCH compound.

The five parts of “Berm,” the title piece, are scattered around the gallery to suggest rolling, manmade terrain. They are more easily recognizable as fragments of a brick wall defensively decorated with a topping of broken bottles – a sight that still exists in the neighborhood.

Viewers see these walls from the top down, like all the other works, because Cox-Richard has played brilliantly with the floor-level windows of the gallery’s long, exterior wall. The building’s architects gave viewers only a below-knee-level view so DiverseWorks would have more wall space to hang art. Cox-Richard forces viewers to reconsider that plane with sculptures that stand no taller than the windows.

Not that the show’s works are miniatures. Some of them have a massive presence, made with beefy-looking materials that suggest the debris you might see at a construction site – reclaimed bricks, reinforced concrete, rubber granulate, gypsum cement and aluminum slag. But Cox-Richard also incorporates organic elements, including oyster shells and tree bark, creating a sense of tension between the natural and the man-made.

In spite of the inherent ugliness of some of the materials, each sculpture is meticulously formed. And the whole show has a nostalgic sensibility, memorializing the disappearing older landscape. Midtown, with its massive new mid-rise apartment complexes, looks a little less scrappy every day, but there are still pockets with broken sidewalks.

One of the show’s most intriguing sculptures, “Woundwood,” is formed from silicone that was pressed to create a mold from the trunk of a decrepit neighborhood tree that has a cavity filled with concrete. People used to do that to stabilize damaged trees, so the sight of such a thing may be familiar. But Cox-Richard shows it to us in a way that is confounding – horizontal and turned inside-out.

The artist has supplied cardboard periscopes that allow viewers to peer closer at the sculptures without bending over. One, called “the creeper,” is meant to be used while scooting on your back. The gallery assistant encouraged us to take them outside, to view the show through the windows. I found that less than satisfactory because the mirrors in the scopes fogged; better to snake along the floor inside on your belly, wear kneepads and crawl, or just be prepared to bend over a lot.

The final stroke of genius appears along the base of the interior walls, where Cox-Richard has used reddish clay from a nearby construction site to paint what looks like the stained, murky waterline of a flood.

Cox-Richard probably explains it better. She'll give a gallery walk-through at 6:30 p.m. Nov. 3. Admission is free.

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