APPEARANCES VS. REALITY
Rachel Harrison’s lobster pageant
by Sarah Valdez

“Consider the Lobster,” an ambitious survey of Rachel Harrison’s installations created over the past fourteen years, makes a delightful case for the inherent deceptiveness of appearances and the partial nature of all attempts to re-create reality. In scale and scope, the exhibition—through December at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College—begs Harrison’s place in the pantheon of post–World War II male sculptors prone to outsize work, as she simultaneously embraces and lays waste to conceptual hauteur and the propensity toward the colossal. More fun house than staid exhibition, it includes collages, photographs, paintings, videos, sculptures, and more than a little ephemera. It also includes a tangential exhibition, “And Other Essays,” for which Harrison invited six artists to curate their own exhibitions with the museum’s collection at their disposal. This resulted in such disparate outcomes as Nayland Blake’s installation of a DJ spinning the likes of Nina Hagen and Malcolm X to Harry Dodge’s walls crammed Salon-style from floor to ceiling with ninety-seven artworks that, according to the artist, “might be employed to function (as fuzzy integers, say).” Indeed, for Harrison, the influence of other artists isn’t so much a cause for anxiety as for a party.

Hanging alone on a wall at the entrance to the show is a found plaque bearing columns of multicolored, uniformly sized paper labels from a mental health clinic. “Adult Home,” “supported employment,” “Julia Romanus,” “Sunday,” “home attendant,” “Brooklyn Apt. Programs,” and “RN Article 16” (among many other designations) are typewritten on the labels. The plaque conjures up a picture (so to speak)—albeit an incomplete one (incomplete pictures are Harrison’s specialty)—that subtly
draws attention to the impossibility of recording anything through words (or pictures for that matter) with absolute precision. No matter how much verbiage or footage you cast on a person, place, or thing, there's always a missing perspective rendering the representation incomplete.

The plaque is an element from a 1997 installation titled *Snake in the Grass*, the rest of which appears around the corner. Walls are strung up from the gallery ceiling with twine and eye hooks, and held aloft from the floor by the weight of green plastic garbage bags filled with bricks. A python skin rests, coiled up like a scroll, on a shovel. A cookie sheet on the ground holds a smattering of olive pits, which look rather like animal droppings. On the dangling walls are photographs—photographs of photographs, in fact, perhaps alluding to the fact that all photography amounts to an act of appropriation—showing stills from the Zapruder film of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. While these elements make no literal sense but evoke plenty all the same, it's easy enough to imagine that Harrison's interest in the Zapruder imagery has less to do with what the widely parsed film actually portrays than with the fact of the footage's fundamental inability to definitively capture the events of that day. It came closest of all, but—no cigar. (Speaking of which, a Cuban cigar is included in the installation as well: perhaps a nod to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 or even the implausible notion of getting “it”—a rather phallic and reductive notion at that.)

Most artists working at such a large scale tend toward the monolithic. Harrison, on the other
hand, works with scavenged materials carefully arranged to seem haphazard, suggesting not the ruins of a great culture so much as a state of precariousness as a universal given. *Perth Amboy*, a variegated installation from 2001 and the high-water mark of “Consider the Lobster,” involves a life-size, Richard Serra-esque maze made of cardboard rather than the famously macho artist’s signature steel. Instead of dwarfing people as Serra does with his work, Harrison cut the cardboard so that viewers see one another as part of the work, thereby creating an interactive spectacle of one another’s subjective encounters with several miniature marvels on plinths hidden within the maze: a small Native American figurine gazing at a painting of a sunset; a little, powder-blue Confucius; and Becky, Barbie’s perfectly coiffed wheelchair-bound friend, staring at a tiny blue screen, the sort of backdrop used in creating cinematic illusions. A pile of hundreds of multicolored plastic straws cascades from one cardboard corner like a mirthfully inorganic Robert Smithson artwork. A bust of Marilyn Monroe sits in a cardboard box on the floor. And like a contemporary cabinet of curiosities organized according to the principle of fascination rather than monetary value (Harrison’s taste is cool and thrift-store chic but generally not expensive), *Perth Amboy* is surrounded by photographs of various people touching the same upper window of a suburban home: one arm in a plaid coat, a middle-aged hairy arm with sunspots, one hand with a wedding ring, another with manicured ruby claws. The hands belong to religious pilgrims visiting a spot in New Jersey where the Madonna is said to have appeared—these are people not unlike artists who like to see something in order to believe, even if what they’re trying to pin down isn’t really there.

According to Harrison, “Consider the Lobster” takes its title from a collection of essays with the same name by David Foster Wallace. But it may also have something to do with “Brassieres of Atlantis A Lobster Sunset Pageant,” by Jack Smith, a screenplay that Harrison displays in a shiny, stainless-steel mixing bowl on the floor as part of another installation, *Indigenous Parts* (1995–2009).
Smith's drama includes "The Lobster" in its colorful cast and takes place in a rather Harrison-esque setting:

Ten Million BC in the prehistoric
Brassiere Atlantis of the Future;
A volcano-shaped pyramid provides
the background of the pageant.
In front of it and to the right is a
spectacular pile of garbage.
Also on the right and further back
is a clump of cornstalk.

The installation also includes a head shot of Mel Gibson with a mullet and sporting animal pelts as part of his Braveheart costume (with the CMYK color-correction key kept in the picture, lest you forget it's not really Gibson, just an illusion wrought by a four-color process); appropriated footage of ants building a colony; car tires; a sports jersey; and footage of a community auction of sundry items in upstate New York, among other potentially fascinating, oddly grouped specimens of cultural flotsam. Like the rest of Harrison's work, this installation gathers evidence of attempts people (and in this case, insects) have made to manage the appearances and realities of their lives. As inconclusive as the myriad parts may be, the piece makes the messy sum seem quite spectacular—despite, or because of, its lack of traditional grandeur.