

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS



Donna Dennis: *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift*, 1991-93, mixed-medium installation, 12 by 14 by 24 feet; at the Sculpture Center.

Donna Dennis at the Sculpture Center

Donna Dennis is a poet of infrastructure. Drawing her inspiration from overlooked fragments of vernacular architecture—a subway station, a dingy bungalow, a musty old stairwell—Dennis creates sculptural installations of surprising lyricism.

Her striking installation at the Sculpture Center, the product of three years' labor, was based on old railway drawbridges. Titled *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift*, this new piece was a dramatic 24-foot-long symphony of metallic-silver-painted girders, arrayed in four parallel rows and embellished with lines of rounded bolts, and two giant cable wheels. At the center, bedecked with a row of blue light bulbs, was a corridor: a train track, leading into darkness. Two small houses tucked among the beams—one of them suspended above the corridor—suggested a human presence, conjuring the mood (as her work so often does) of an isolated way station and imbuing the work with a Hopperesque sense

of transience and loneliness.

Thrusting into the dim room on diagonal struts, the work was a forceful presence, at once dazzling and disorienting. Indeed, with its oddly reduced scale (which varied from element to element), it seemed both mammoth and diminutive. Situated at the far end of the room, *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift* glittered like an industrial mirage, its blue lights beckoning in the darkness.

Walking around the work revealed myriad evocative details, such as the tiny clock, set at 12:05, visible through a window in the building above the tracks; or the coils of tubing spilling out like electrical guts from the second house, which glowed red, like a heart chamber; or the eerie tape loop of a fog horn bleating in the distance.

There is a fine line between drawing from a source and copying it. Despite its affection for factual detail, Dennis's work is far from "realistic." In fact, her prototypes are generously deconstructed, her sculptural elements highly formal and steeped in a deep well of personal emotion. Her atmospheric stage sets represent the theater of everyday life, but they also represent metaphorical states of being. In *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift* these metaphors are quite complex, even contradictory, implying a sense of dislocation and being cast adrift, but also of

voyage and direction. The work uses its constructivist language to achieve an almost mythic invocation of mortality; in fact, it was created under the shadow of the death of the artist's mother.

Appropriation as a strategy is accepted unquestioningly when it applies to the easy gesture, the gibe at consumerism or sexism. What really sets Dennis's work apart is the way it draws its inspiration from the real world, rather than from art theory, and the way it speaks to the heart rather than the intellect. *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift*, Dennis's richest work to date, is all the more appealing for its lack of esthetic narcissism. It dares the viewer to interact with it on a variety of levels and repays that attention every step of the way.

—George Melrod