



Donna Dennis, *Deep Station* Brooklyn Museum Installation, May–June 1987. Courtesy Richard Green Gallery. Photo: Peter Mauss/Esto.

DONNA DENNIS: INTIMATE IMMENSITY

CAREY LOVELACE



Donna Dennis, *Deep Station*, 1981–1985, Mixed media, 135" × 240" × 288". Courtesy Richard Green Gallery. Photo: Peter Mauss/Esto.

A home that is not a home. A home on a journey. A home, a shelter, but without warmth or comfort or security. A "place to stay" just for the night before moving on . . . The dark, "warm" and comforting is all around the cabin, as Hopper knew. Any warmth is temporary. There is comfort only in moving and moving. The dark is always waiting. (Donna Dennis's journal, 12/30/75, writing about Tourist Cabin Porch)

The front porch light is on, and a light beckons in an upstairs window. Yet. Donna Dennis's 1983 *Skowhegan Stairway*—a covered stairway detached from a house, a large, self-contained, freestanding bit of sculpture-cum-architecture—is not altogether a friendly place. It resembles a building compressed into a narrow suggestion of itself, a sliver of a building. The front door's open window reveals, through lace curtains, a bleakly lit hall, a sign of absence—everyone is asleep, or gone, except the (unseen) occupant of that upstairs chamber.

Areas of intimacy sheltered within an environment of bleak alienation has characterized Dennis's later work—sculptural abridgements of architecture—from her first freestanding structures, *False Fronts* (1972–73—a series of hotel facades) to her most recent and ambitious piece, *Deep Station* (*).

Focusing on examples of "humble" American architecture, Dennis has created a significant oeuvre within an individual style consisting of large, almost lifesized, constructs that elide

or abridge architectural details and create rich metaphors for the self. Her ability to make articulate commonplace, unpeopled structures brings to mind Edward Hopper, particularly in paintings like his *Rooms for Tourists*, which depicts a small-town house, its windows partially "lidded" with shades, alit with a warm glow. Her tourist cabins (raised on stilts and slightly too compact), subway entrances (collapsed into vault-like structures) and a castle-like tunnel toll booth—these are all points of passage.

A former painter, Dennis brings into the three-dimensional arena concerns of pictorial representation—particularly that of "framing" and of the illusory space of the canvas. And as a woman who found her style at the same moment as the emergence of the feminist art movement in the early '70s, the "self" that Dennis depicts is, above all, that of the woman in the outside world.

... thoughts about the "public" (platform, lighted to-be-seen) and "private" (track, dark and lighted-only-for messages and for manouevering by vehicles. . .) in this large new piece of mine. Or is the platform "private" (home, female) while the track area is public, meaning male. . . (Dennis journal entry, about Deep Station, 11/24/81)

In *Deep Station*, perhaps Dennis's most complex work, it is at first difficult to find such spaces of "intimacy." Although it is slightly miniaturized, as is all of the artist's work, it seems an almost literal representation of a subway stop—as if a hefty chunk of the I.R.T. had been transposed into the context of a museum. Resembling a stage set, it is best seen when set in a larger arena of darkness, framed as an "imaginary place."

There is the platform—unpeopled—in the nocturnal ambience, lit dimly with bare bulbs. Vaulting arches of soiled, white subway-style tile loop majestically over a track ending in an abutment. Next to the archways is a structure of exposed I-beams, and overlooking the track is a two-story tower, and in the lower room, a clock is visible. There is a panoply of entranceways (usually blocked by barred gates), rampways, stairways, hanging wires and exposed conduits.

Yet the piece can be seen as an elaboration in space of the places of the self: the hidden passageways to which one is refused entrance, lights that provide places of clarity, or offer forth areas that are "presentable." The I-beams themselves point to subjectivity, while the tower, with its electric clock, is a place of control and surveillance—the mind and heart together. It is the tower, with its illuminated windows, that provides the place of most intimacy, of habitation—one imagines a nightwatchman sitting at a table, gone for the moment. But as the eye enters into these tower-spaces (the viewer doesn't enter the piece, but can walk around it), they seem starkly unpopulated, collapsing into a kind of alienation and disappointment.

The kind of emotional longing elicited by these windows, illuminated in the stark setting of the subway terminal, is characteristic of Dennis's work; it can be seen also as a rumination on pictorial space—the window as metaphor for painting's "window on the world"—the ambivalent relationship of the postmodern artist and traditional verisimilitude, the nostalgia for, as Greenberg put it, "those spatial rights which images used to enjoy back when the painter was obliged to create an illusion of the same kind of space as that in which our bodies move."⁽¹⁾

To fully grasp some of the historical/formal issues that appear in Dennis's three-dimensional constructions—those of "framing" and representation—it is important to remember a moment in the early '70s when the art world was dominated by the constrictions of the then-reigning Minimalist and Con-

ceptual art, and when the artist (no doubt imbued with Greenbergian notions of the necessary flatness and "objectness" of the picture plane) began her struggle as a painter to find her own voice. ("I'm tired of doing works that are big and bold and fit the current aesthetic . . . but which don't fill me up with a sense of what it is to be alive. Something of the feeling I want is that sense . . . that you get when you are alone in the plaza of a foreign city at dusk."—Dennis journal entry, 4/7/69) Imagery had been banished—and yet there was a subterranean longing for emotion and expression. On the other hand, there was no going back to the "happy childhood" of Renaissance perspective: painting had, indeed, become flattened through the course of Modernism until it was a real object in a real space.

Simultaneously came the emergence of the women's movement—Dennis was deeply affected by it. With its potential for recasting the entire language of art, feminism opened up a range of new possibilities—autobiography and references to the female body. In her search for meaning in her work that transcended the dictates of Minimalism, Dennis began to cast back in her own memory, and summoned up images of houses, imaginary spaces, that she built as a child, like houses made of blankets and furniture:

... What does this house idea mean to me? It's taking me closer and closer to things important to me in childhood . . . First I thought of the doll house . . . then there's the tree house . . . there was the snowhouse I always wanted to build . . . All these "houses" provided a large part of the great, promising, tantalizing, mysterious feeling I had throughout my childhood . . . a kind of vague, mysterious sense of unlimited possibilities. . . (Dennis journal entry, 11/12/71)

There were, of course, other influences as well: Walker Evans photographs, the architecture of buildings around Gramercy Park—and the Jane Bowles novel *Two Series Ladies*. And they all led to a series of whimsical hotel facades, set in an environment of palm trees, called *False Fronts*: the beginning of Dennis's particular brand of compressed architecture—two-dimensional stairways eliding with rectangular fronts (on which "Hotel" was inscribed), the entrances very narrow. It was like structural details mixed and matched in a dream.

But these phantasmic structures that evoked, at the same time, the allure of travel and the security of home, also referred to questions of painting. The structural encasements were, in a sense, "frames," and the illusionary space they enclosed were the constricted entrances—which the imagination, but not the body, could enter. Keeping to the Greenbergian sense of the pictorial space that increasingly became literal, a part of the "real" (the framed space was an actual one) and yet one that had room for fantasy to wander within. To the degree that Postmodernism is involved with questions of how representation and meaning can be put into play after the lessons learned from Modernist art about the problems of pictorial illusion, the *False Fronts* put Dennis at the forefront of artists developing a Postmodernist approach.

In the sequence of freestanding structures that Dennis developed following *False Fronts*, she elaborated the space behind the facade. *Subway Station with Lighted Interior* (1974), *Subway Station with Yellow and Blue* (1974–76), and the *Tourist Cabin* series (1976) are box-like structures—again with a compression of architectural detail—elevated above the ground and featuring two or three stairsteps that ascend to their entrances (which are narrow, or blocked). An internal life is hinted at by an interior seen dimly through a screen or a narrow space, sometimes further articulated through the lighting.



Donna Dennis, *Hotels* Installation, 1973. Mixed media. Installation West Broadway Gallery.

The significant 1979–80 work, *Tunnel Tower*, is an elaboration on these themes. Again, a narrow entrance in a box-like structure, elevated, and connected to the ground through stairsteps. But the architecture here is far more phantasmagorical: it was inspired simultaneously by White Castle hamburger stands, a white-tiled building, now demolished, which stood at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, and the “tower” card of the tarot. Added to that is the humor of the word “Tunnel” blazing in neon above the structure, and the “bug-eye” industrial lamps, as if the structure were turning attention onto itself.

Dennis has described her works as “self-portraits”: these were made so that the entrance-lintel is the same distance from the floor as her height, 5 feet 8½ inches. Viewed also as a generalized portrait of the female (artist) in the world, there is an evident progression, that might be seen to follow the course of feminism: from the pleasing facades of *False Fronts*, to the “armored,” protected shells of subsequent installations—as if the artist were arming herself for her encounter with the world. Then *Tunnel Tower*—the woman in the world, still armored, but turning its lights onto itself—basking in the spotlight (while the more difficult parts had been forced “underground”).

Dennis has a feminist (and utopian) reading of her two subway station pieces, *Subway with Silver Girders* (1982–83) (an abbreviated portion of a subway stop) and *Deep Station*. To her, they represent an inquiry into the “foundation” of things, with the thought in mind of making fundamental changes. “. . . I thought of the platform as being public and male and the track as being private and female. I thought of the track as it moves out diagonally from the platform as representing infinitely expanding possibilities . . . as a rhythmically flowing river overhung by trees and vines, a ‘jungle’ full of life and unharnessed potential, unknown, underestimated, and possibly dangerous. . . . Is the control tower the palace of an old order? Control doesn’t seem to reach very far. One thing is certain. The track expands outward, growing ever wider and more complex.”⁽²⁾

A significant detail in *Deep Station* is that, on the platform, one of the I-beams and a connecting girder shift (as if, in a Hitchcock movie, moving of their own volition), so that they align not with the platform’s horizontal-vertical, but with the diagonal of the track. This signals, in Dennis’s mind, a “re-orientation” of masculine and feminine: “. . . things shifting at their very roots.”

On the other hand, *Deep Station* can be seen as one of the most formal of Dennis’s statements. Its very structure is composed of a number of classical “framing” devices, or meta-

phors, superimposed upon one another: rounded arches moving backwards recalling the niche, stretcher bars horizontal and vertical (formed by I-beams), the barred gateway doors (skeletal, prohibiting entry yet transparent), the illuminated rectangular window. Yet, the overall structure is abbreviated abruptly at numerous points—walls cut off suddenly, for example, indicating that the reality of this subway station is plucked out arbitrarily, and has no delimiting structure. Yet another “framing” device: The viewer can walk around the structure, peering into it from numerous vantage points—back, front, and both sides.

Deep Station also represents a passage to the underground, betokening the courage to explore these dark, subterranean, subconscious realms—places of danger. Her description of *Subway with Silver Girders* as a “jungle,” and her evocation of the “forest” in her journal as she notes the evolution of *Deep Station*, brings to mind (as often happens with the contemplation of Dennis’s work) Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*:³

We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of ‘going deeper and deeper’ into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know who we are. . . . With these images of the ‘deep’ forest, I have just outlined the power of immensity that is revealed in a value. But one can follow the opposite course. In the presence of such obvious immensity as the immensity of night, a poet can point the way to intimate depth.

The numerous points of entry that *Deep Station* provides are perhaps its greatest gesture of intimacy. Otherwise, everything we know of the subway speaks of loneliness and danger: its darkness, its ongoing nocturnality, its subterranean state, the alienation of passengers from one another, the threat of robbery or abuse.

. . . Hopper, Burchfield and me. It strikes me that a feeling we all must have shared would be the feeling of the VOYEUR. Feelings aroused by seeing lighted interiors in other people’s (strangers’) houses. I doubt that any of us would really have wanted to talk with the real people in those rooms. It is something else we’re after—something of ourselves. Something interior. (Dennis journal entry, 4/29/79)

In making a space for herself, Donna Dennis has taken the materials of a “man-made” world—beams, concrete, cables and wire. Perhaps, for women, this is a kind of temporary condition—a kind of hermit-crab shell. One of the early inspirations for *False Fronts* was the Egyptian mastaba—the ancient tomb structure an example of which she saw as a child at the Metropolitan Museum—with its narrow entrance and its feeling of both claustrophobia and of an unseen labyrinth.

These elements indicate the dark side of Dennis’s work—themes of death and the underworld appear throughout; also her structures are about transience, shells through which one can enter life. Insofar as they are of the body, they leave us when we go to another world. They are indeed points of passage, stopping points in the night. □

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* *Deep Station* will be on exhibit at the Delaware Museum from March through June, 1988; it was originally exhibited at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst from November 6–December 22, 1985, and last summer at the Brooklyn Museum.

1. Clement Greenberg, “Abstract, Representational, and so forth,” *Art and Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, p. 136.
2. Artist’s statement, 1985.
3. (Maria Jolas, trans.) Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, pp. 185; 189.