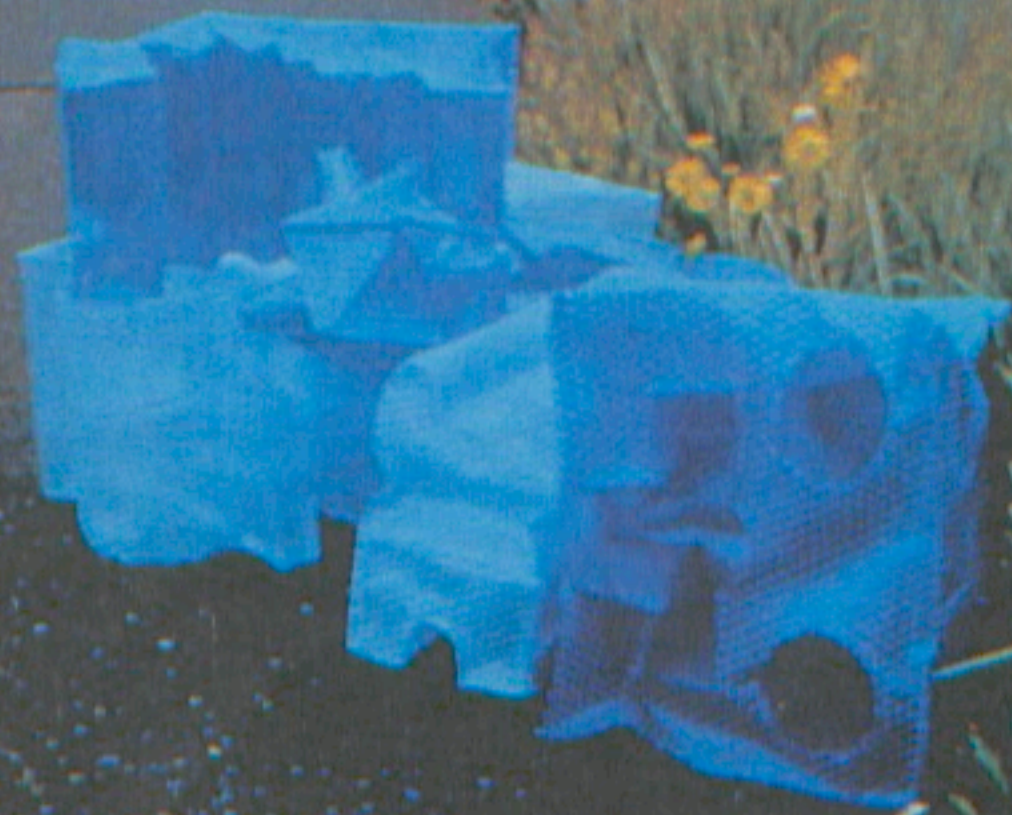


Left: Shirley Tse, *Diaspora? Touristry?*, 1999, color photograph, 26 x 40".
 Right: Shirley Tse, *Polymathicstyrene*, 1999–2000, extruded polystyrene, installation view.



FIRST TAKE

Ralph Rugoff on SHIRLEY TSE

SHIRLEY TSE CANNILY CELEBRATES THE PHANTASMAGORIC possibilities of polymers. The Hong Kong-born, Los Angeles-based artist transforms Bubble Wrap, Styrofoam, and polyurethane into pullulating constructions whose sagging and dented surfaces alternately suggest organic growths and abject industrial architecture. And just as the commercially formulated plastics that Tse uses are typically associated with packing and shipping, her sculpture likewise conjures a sense of work in transit, as if it were continually redefining its ultimate destination or even figuring out whether its field of reference is two- or three-dimensional.

This last tendency is particularly evident in two series of large color photographs, from 1998 and 1999, that depict Tse's vaguely geometric constructions in wilderness areas. Made from ingeniously manipulated inflated plastic bags and sutured solar blankets, Tse's objects initially seem as comically out of place as national-park tourists dressed in fluorescent sweats, but after a longer look, their awkward, rumpled shapes appear no less "natural" than the wind-shaped rocks and desert surrounding them, their plastic hues no less appealing than the blue skies and red sandstone cliffs.

With a nod to Robert Smithson, Tse's work wryly sidesteps the dead-end logic that defines nature and culture as oppositional terms, instead embracing the complexity and hybrid morphology of our actual envi-

ronment. Her chef d'oeuvre to date, *Polymathicstyrene*, 1999–2000, shown this fall at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica and Murray Guy in New York, develops this multiplicitous aesthetic to a brilliantly paradoxical pitch. Wrapped around the gallery in continuous segments, 135 pale blue polystyrene sheets bear elaborately hollowed-out forms that conjure everything from urban topographies to geological formations, from computer circuitry to imprints left by unidentifiable consumer goods, from archaeological sites to futuristic structures. Viewers peer down on the work, which is installed as a waist-high shelf, as if surveying an aerial diagram of a relentlessly overcoded planet, a disorienting landscape where the natural and built environments, as well as the micro and macro, seamlessly meld.

Suggesting something dreamed up by an offspring of Louise Nevelson and Gilles Deleuze, *Polymathicstyrene* reveals Tse's conceptual agility as well as her formal inventiveness. The work neatly collapses all kinds of seemingly contradictory elements: Its precisely scooped-out negative forms, carved with a router, fuse an aesthetic of the machined and the handmade, while its wraparound sequences conjure a narrative that is both linear and circuitous. As we walk around the sculpture, examining and comparing the myriad shapes that are the fruit of the artist's time-consuming labor,

it becomes a meditation on the relation between memory and perception.

In other words, the sculpture's values are as plastic as that permanent yet permeable substance from which it is made. Like a faithful modernist, Tse consistently exploits her chosen art supply as the springboard for her fluid investigations. Yet in manipulating a material to reveal its multiple "truths," her work bypasses formalist credos and instead persuasively demonstrates art's status as an exhilaratingly heterogeneous endeavor where form, material, and reference collide.

This spring Tse's work will appear in SF MOMA's "010101: Art in Technological Times." □

After several years in London, RALPH RUGOFF has relocated to the Bay Area, where he recently became director of the CCAC Institute. Heading this Kunsthalle-type program, Rugoff will manage exhibitions featuring emerging artists,



Ralph Rugoff at the Oliver Art Center, CCAC, Oakland, CA. Photo: Bob Adler.

architects, and designers. A contributor to *Frieze*, *Artforum*, *LA Weekly*, and the *Financial Times* whose essays are gathered in *Circus Americanus* (Verso, 1995), he is noted for such curatorial excursions as 1997's "Scene of the Crime" (UCLA Hammer Museum) and, with Lisa Corrin, last year's "The Greenhouse Effect" (Serpentine Gallery, London).