

## HOUSTON

### Jillian Conrad

DEVIN BORDEN GALLERY

Jillian Conrad, *Flag* (detail), 2011, slide projector, opal shards in resin, Plexiglas, wood, brass clamp, dimensions variable.



Had Stan Brakhage been a sculptor rather than a filmmaker, he might have made works like Jillian Conrad's recent projection pieces on view this winter at Devin Borden Gallery. For Brakhage, film was essentially made up of the shadows cast by film stock as it passed in front of a projector's light. As he described in his "Manifesto" of 1992, "each smudge a filmmaker puts upon filmstrip is interference with the flickering

window-of-white." Film, he declared, "is projective hubris-of-form interruptive of purest incandescence."

Conrad's *Flag* (all works 2011), one of two projection works in "Splits," a spare four-piece exhibition, was composed of just such disruptions. The first intervention involved bits of opal suspended in a shard of resin that was affixed to a slide and inserted into the empty gate of a projector perched about six inches off the floor. The white light of the projector was thus interrupted by the jagged outline and opalescent colors of the resin fragment even before it beamed diagonally across the darkened

room toward a freestanding perpendicular wall. The second interruption came from a simple prop—a milky Plexiglas rectangle fixed on one edge to a wooden brace by a brass clamp. Resting against the wall, the prop appeared much like a flag as it intercepted the path of the projector's light. Given this setup, the Plexi simultaneously blocked part of the projection—cutting a sharp trapezoidal shadow out of the projection on the wall—and diverted the light onto (and through) itself, both front and back illuminated with the opal-and-resin-inflected light.

*Arch de*, the other projection-based work in this show, demonstrated a similar double-interruptive structure, which again incorporated an unorthodox slide configuration: Here, before being placed in the gate of a slide projector, the mount was fitted with a piece of raw-edged woven fabric. Conrad then directed the light beam straight at the opposite wall of the gallery, where it was met by a provisional wooden frame fashioned from two perpendicularly opposed two-by-fours (each painted white on two sides) and a third, narrower piece, set slightly off the grid. (The fourth side of the "frame" was left open.) Resting on the floor and leaning back toward the wall at a twenty-degree angle, the structure intercepted (just barely) the left and bottom edges of the square projection.

Conrad's installations called Brakhage to mind not simply because of their material use of light and shadow, but also because of their aim to undo our learned assumptions about perception. They ask such counterintuitive questions as: Is color tactile? Is light a three-dimensional form? In *Arch de*, for example, the enlarged image of a tiny piece of wool gave the fabric's individual threads and irregular weave an overwhelming physicality, and yet what the viewer saw were merely shadows on the wall. At the same time, the work's actual three-dimensional elements—the painted two-by-fours and one-by-two—were so crisp and simple that they functioned more like drawn lines than as sculpture. The two works on paper that were also included in this exhibition similarly inverted relationships of sight and touch: For instance, in *Two Cities*, Conrad interchanges four materials of very different tactility—thread, paint, pigment, and graphite—rendering them almost indistinguishable from one another.

Many of Conrad's past sculptures have shown the Houston-based artist to have something of a decorator's eye; her careful use of color accents, her sensitivity to spatial arrangements, and her consistent return to materials such as wood and concrete have tempered her entropic compositions with a highly refined design aesthetic. But with "Splits," Conrad seems to have moved away from the constructedness of those works and into a more speculative, cerebral realm. Still, even in a show consisting primarily of intangibles, one couldn't help but detect a certain "hubris-of-form" that nevertheless connected past works to present.

—Jennifer King