HYPERALLERGIC

After All These Years: Richard Van Buren's Work of the 70s

by John Yau December 22, 2013

Richard Van Buren, "Bennington V" (1970), polyester resin, milled glass, plaster, glitter, and dry pigment, 20 x 18 x 11 inches

You never know when a work of art might become part of your DNA, the visceral memory of which you carry around with you, even if you seldom have occasion to think about it. The exhibition, *Richard Van Buren: The 1970s*, at Garth Greenan (November 26–January 4, 2013) reminded me of the first time I saw his sculptures in the mid-1970s. It was at a dance concert at Paula Cooper Gallery that I went to one evening with a friend. Little did I know that I would have to wait more than thirty years before I would see his work from this period again.

At Paula Cooper, Van Buren's largely grayish-black resin pieces were mounted high on the wall. Despite low lighting, there was a prismatic spread of color from a fan of colored light undulating on the wall, in apparent defiance to the darkly colored form, that seemed to throb almost in time with the music. I would later learn that Van Buren was playing the saxophone that evening and that his wife Batya Zamir was among the dancers. I had just moved to New York and, despite the terrible state the city was supposed to be in, I felt it was all exciting, as there was no end of free or inexpensive things to do. What stayed with me from that evening was how mesmerized I was by the sculptures.

In "Strata" (1976), a wall piece of variable dimensions, the tops of the hollow steel tubes, which are full of stuff, are conterminous with the resin's form, leading to a contradiction: if the tubes running completely through the resin were once part of something larger, then the resin's smooth, flat surface would suggest that the resin is a form that is both complete and incomplete. Another tension exists between the resin's coldly sensual surface and the bits of gritty matter stuffed into the tubes.

While "Strata" can be read as a critique of Minimalism and the underlying assertion of stability that is replete in Donald Judd's boxes and stacks, I think the issue Van Buren raises is equally philosophical and aesthetic. In many of the works in the Greenan exhibition, the tension between form and fragment, completeness and incompleteness, stability and instability, cannot be resolved.

Van Buren's refusal of completion is in tune with our present, anxiety-ridden condition—the feeling that society is nervously awaiting the next catastrophic rupture. However, if we do think of the individual pieces in "Strata" as fragments of something larger, we have to recognize that we have no idea what its former, complete self looks like, and, more importantly, we should consider the possibility that there was never a monument or original moment to remember.

What I didn't see in my initial experience of Van Buren's work, but which became evident while examining the sculptures in the exhibition—and, like pieces of amber preserving remnants of prehistoric bugs, they do invite scrutiny—is the degree to which he seems to have absorbed and transformed the coarse and decayed layers of Soho's industrial lofts in the decade before Ronald Reagan and gentrification.

In "Untitled" (1975), a small work made of paper, printer's ink, and pigment, which the artist framed (or literally and metaphorically preserved), I felt that I was looking at a piece of urban history, something that might have once been part of a downtown dwelling. The fact that I didn't recognize what its former function helped it resist being merely archival. As with "Strata," the refusal to fit into a familiar stylistic category infuses the work with a particular, unnamable identity that transcends the label of art.

This was certainly true of "Angels" (1969–70), the earliest piece in the show, in which gobs of dried acrylic paint are affixed to the heads of T-pins pushed into a wall—each pin sticking out into the room. There was something smart, funny and even nasty about "Angels," the little bits of multi-colored paint adhered to hundreds of pins, like balls of dried snot.

Van Buren's understanding of time is what sets him apart from his peers. His works are not about the timeless present (Judd and Dan Flavin) or the body (Eva Hesse), nor do they reference art history—Jackson Pollock's poured paintings, for example. Rather, they acknowledge that time shapes us into forms that we may be unable to recognize, which, if you think about it, is a rather disquieting perception of infinity. Add to this Van Buren's embrace of disparate, seemingly incommensurable materials, as well as the processes that he invented, but refused to turn into signature gestures, and one begins to get a sense of the enormity of his achievement.

Although I knew it wasn't true, at times I felt as if some of the pieces in the exhibition had been spit out of a volcano or formed in the aftermath of some kind of cataclysm. Rather than modeled or constructed, Van Buren's sculptures from this decade seem to have emerged as residue from two ends of time that are seldom joined together. This is particularly true of "Bennington" (1970), a large floor piece made of separate forms, which don't fit together. Folded, twisted, sharp and lumpy—the forms are shot through with colors that are simultaneously toxic and beautiful.

In each of the cast resin forms, Van Buren embedded milled glass, plaster, glitter and dry pigment. At times, the semi-transparent forms resemble a crumpled piece of trash that has been frozen in order to encase another piece of trash for forensic reference. We both look at and look into "Bennington."

There are those works that we remember, which diminish over time, and there are those that grow denser and richer when revisited. My initial experience of Van Buren's work was brief but memorable. As the years passed, I wondered what it would be like to see it again. While there was no fan of colored light fluttering on the wall this time around, there was much else to see and reflect upon. Most striking to me was that the sculptures had escaped their era and looked as if they could have been made yesterday or, for that matter, tomorrow.

Richard Van Buren: The 1970s continues at the Garth Greenan Gallery (529 West 20th Street, 10th Floor) until January 11.