

*Stargazing: Léonie Guyer's Constellations no. 1-7*

By Lisa Radon

May 2010

I nearly missed the small, urn-shaped drawing. Twice. But there it was, a pale outline of a palm-sized form traced directly on the white wall, open and organic among the straight lines in the room. “Constellation no. 7” may have been the last wall drawing Bay Area-based artist Léonie Guyer did during her Lumber Room residency, but it was the first she sited and conceived. Almost on arrival, Guyer taped a drawing of this glyph to the wall between the vivid, meaty Yves Klein and the Fred Sandback corner piece (one of the yarns is a Klein-ish blue). Excited and awed by the prospect of locating it where she did, Guyer let her proposal ripen before execution.

Hovering as it does between visibility and invisibility, it could not be more unlike the neighboring Klein. It has a quiet energy that invites the viewer closer to see its two rounded triangles with little nodes protruding at their ends echoing but not replicating one another about a horizontal axis. It seems, in fact, as if we are catching a glimpse of this modified figure-8 form at the moment of its becoming. This is the magnetic quality of “Constellations no. 1-7.” Because “Constellations no. 1-7” bear traces of the activity of discovery, evidence of the hand of the artist in the short brushstrokes visible in

layers of thin paint or the outline of form jostled by the texture of the wall, it's as if we can almost be present as each moves from the unseen world to the seen.

It doesn't seem to be an accident that Guyer's previous residency (resulting in the solo show *Gift*) was at The Shaker Museum and Library, New Lebanon, NY. In addition to fine American craft, Shakers are known for “gift drawings” that the artists reported they had “received” from God . Gift drawings were meant to share directly with the viewer the artist's experience of receiving the drawing. Guyer's “Constellations” perform this same function of articulating the experience of their making to the attentive viewer.

To begin at the beginning, “Constellation no. 1” greets the visitor at the foot of the stairs at the entrance to the Lumber Room. Bathed in the natural light spilling down the stairwell, it is an intimately-scaled figure in a rich, earthy red painted directly on the white wall. There is no further visual context for this thumb-length figure. It is simply a v-shaped form perched on a tiny foot and reaching out two curving handle-like limbs that might read as a diminutive loving cup if one were to squint one's eyes or glance at it sidelong.

Like a visual kōan, “Constellation no. 1” will not be understood logically but intuitively. Organic and each with its own singular sense of history, Léonie Guyer's “Constellations no. 1-7” are individual forms painted or

drawn on the wall at sites throughout the Lumber Room. As enigmatic as they are specific, each has a central volume that typically suggests but confounds symmetry and at least one extension, a bump, quirky limb, or tendril. All but two take as their ground the wall itself, as if Guyer had cut away all extraneous visual information leaving simply the thing in itself. And each determinedly refuses signification even as it can't help provoking a flicker of recognition in the mind's peripheral vision. In *The Life of Forms in Art*, Henri Focillon argues that forms are not born of a purely cognitive act, but of discovery; that forms are pre-existing, not only in the mind, but in the world. This goes a long way toward explaining the uncanny familiarity of Guyer's singular forms. Like a kōan, “Constellations no. 1-7” requires that we quiet the flickers of recognition or the logical mind that wants to identify to create the necessary conditions for what Aldous Huxley called, “sudden openings into hitherto unglimped regions.” And like a kōan, “Constellations no. 1-7” function as perceptual toeholds in the expanse of white space on the walls of the Lumber Room.

With “Constellation no. 1,” Guyer issues a quiet invitation: be aware, slow down. These are not works that will trumpet their presence with scale, Klein blue, or even a conventional canvas or other ground. No, just as each of the Constellations rewards a sustained looking, so too does discovering them require keen observation over time. Looking is therefore slowed to a pace that approaches

that of making.

On alert, tuned in with an acute attentiveness to every aspect of the space, I move slowly through the Lumber Room seeking out the remaining six constellations. I'm made aware of the light cast by a skylight on a high vertical wall, the multiple whites of intersecting planes of the patio walls, the walls' textures, and other wonderful aspects of the Lumber Room like the fact that designer Randy Higgins installed the recessed lighting in the hall and bedroom as constellations of stars. That's Cassiopeia in the hall. So the art talks to the space and the space talks back, constellation to constellation.

There is a sense of rightness of in space, a rightness of the location of each of the seven "Constellations" (even as those locations are sometimes surprising) that reflects Guyer's very close reading of the space, from wall surface, architectural planes and elements, the ample light, the works from Miller-Meigs collection, to the ways these elements inform one another, and further, influence our perceptions of both part and whole. "Constellations no. 1-7" engage in a dialogue with the Lumber Room and the works within it. "Constellation no. 2" rises above the stair landing to address the Jo Baer diptych hung high on the North wall of the stairwell. Black as the border of the two canvases, "no. 2," with its bell-like shape topped by a wispy knob, is as round and full as the diptych is linear and empty. On the patio, "Constellation no. 5," an elongated form outlined in red, balancing on a triangular

base and sprouting two leaf-like extensions at the top, shapes the space around it by pushing and pulling the planes of variously sunlit and shaded white walls that wrap around the patio. The white of the wall that appears to fill the outline of “Constellation no. 5” becomes a zero point for the eye, making the more distant but brighter white plane rush forward while the shadowed greyish planes fall away.

Only “Constellation no. 3,” ghostly white in the center of its grey rectangular ground and “Constellation no. 4” are contained by an obvious frame, one painted, the other found. The rest of the Constellations hover, most frequently at a height where the gaze might naturally hover, on a ground of indeterminate borders. We might locate edges of the picture plane at a nearby corner or at the top of a bench or headboard, or where the wall meets the honey-colored wood of the beams above. But it's equally possible to conceive of the ground for each “Constellation” as having not only no vertical edge, no beginning and no end—the white walls wrap, after all, throughout the rooms of both the exhibition and more intimate living spaces. Thus “Constellations no. 1-7” embraces and encompasses the entire Lumber Room and everything in it, Guyer's forms inhabiting space beside the major works in Miller-Meigs' collection, but also slipping behind and between them.

In the end, I return to “Constellation no. 4,” it's form-within-form painted on one pane of the Lumber Room's

big front windows. Because it's painted on glass, the ground for this form is the out of doors. Depending on where you stand at what time of year, what time of day, and what the weather, the ochre of "Constellation no. 4" snaps into focus against a deep blue sky, or shimmers in front of dancing green leaves. In fall its hue will fold into that of the leaves beyond, and in the winter it will strike a hopeful note against grey sky in a clutch of bare branches. In this way, "Constellation no. 4" as visual ambassador extends the reach of Guyer's works beyond the Lumber Room out into the world.