



Sharon Loudon: The Attenders

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Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art



above: *The Attenders* (detail), 2002–03
monofilament line, cage clips, electrical wire
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
photo: Fred Scruton, Brooklyn, NY

cover: *The Attenders*, 2002–03
installation at the Kemper Museum of
Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO
photo: Dan Wayne

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Sharon Louden's sculptural installations are exuberantly minimalist explorations of form and space that she effects through uncomplicated material such as monofilament and wire. While her material is reductive (usually thin strands of stuff she can bundle), she uses it in lavish abundance. More than 15,000 units of gathered monofilament comprise the installation *The Attenders*. In this site-specific installation created for the Kemper Museum, the bundled strands of thin black and gray monofilament look like hair or some other natural fiber. Typically Louden's installation materials end up looking like something they are not, complicating an easy read of her work. This installation—an experiment in physically and intellectually modifying material and environment—suggests that material and space are shifting and negotiable ideas.

The Attenders is a visual and spatial field of relationships between artist, material, viewer, and museum space. For Louden, the individual bundles (the units get bundled during installation) of monofilament have become if not exactly lifelike, then *beinglike*. She speaks of them as beings that are "passing through" the gallery space. The accretion of time spent here in this site will compound what Louden believes is the identity of the individual sculptures or units. When the units are reconfigured for another installation they will carry the aura of this one. Her sculptures are almost literally drawings in space, and when she redraws them in another space, this configuration will be embedded in the sculptures, in Louden's memory and, since material has memory, perhaps even in the material itself, suggesting the performative aspect to the installation.

Altering, dividing, and reestablishing the gallery's proportions with utilitarian material is in turn aggressive and modest. Louden's materials dominate the space, but they are usually delicate looking and manufactured for common use. For instance, monofilament is primarily used for fishing line. Louden's respect for the creative possibility of space and material confounds an instant understanding of either. She understands the mutability of her material and how that very changeability destabilizes any fixed notion of her sculpture and the space it is in, suggesting minimalist sculptors of the late 1960s such as Robert Morris and Eva Hesse. Like them, Louden creates sculpture that often has no fixed form.

The size and character of the sculptural units and bundles of Louden's installation emerge from her body, more specifically, her gesture. She chooses materials that are linear, that lend themselves to a long, gestural stroke, and that animate the space. She notes,

My work is about giving character to individual gestures through the illusion of movement, placement, and direction of marks. I consider these forms "creatures" with whom I have an ongoing dialogue. They come from a long history of development that originated from simple

lines observed in bodies in motion and glimpses of curious attitudes of posture. Manipulating these representational lines over time has turned them into forms that constantly evolve. I am interested in placing these figures within a frame or a specific space and having them come alive as individuals, humorous, elegant entities unto themselves. My work is a continual investigation into the many characteristics that lie within these forms. (Tamarind Institute brochure, *New Editions: David Bates, Sharon Louden, Wes Mills, Juan Sánchez*, April 1999, a division of the College of Fine Arts of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque)

Certainly Louden understands the impact of language on her work. Choosing the title *The Attenders* confers animation to the pieces and narrative to the installation that wouldn't have already been present. Louden has titled other work *Fairies, Winkers, Flaps, Swells & Extensions*— words that conjure liveliness and animation. She has used television antenna wire, monofilament, cotton dental rolls, latex, and rubber tubing. These installations are not simply extensions of her physical gesture, or a formal exercise, but emotional extensions of herself. Her feeling that the bundles are "beinglike" substantiates the emotional impact on her. The work doesn't emerge from the politicized body, but rather from simply the body as an animated, sentient, gestural being.

By nature, installation is an impermanent art form. *The Attenders* installation will never be the same again, despite other iterations, so every site is one in which to encourage new dialogue with materials and viewers. In part, understanding Louden's sculptures depends on the relationship of the viewer to the material itself, for Louden hopes that the viewer will draw her or his own thoughts about the material into the discussion about ultimate meaning. And, although captivated by the idea that the material has a "life" before it becomes part of a sculpture and after it has become the sculpture, Louden ultimately chooses the material for what she believes is its beauty and its sculptural potential. Her approach to material is both practical and reverential. The time spent gathering, bundling, and working with the material (more than 15,000 units) becomes labor that like any repetitive act may become a devotional practice. Ultimately, this site-specific installation is a performative extension of Louden's body, gestures, and her passion for material, space, and their emotional and intellectual possibilities.

Dana Self

Curator

Sharon Louden is an artist in residence at the Kemper Museum. This is her first major solo museum exhibition in the Midwest.

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