

Brushes With the Past

By Jeffrey Cudlin

"Sharon Louden:
The Motley Tails"

At Numark Gallery to Feb. 19

Painting must have been dead, at least for a second. There's really no other explanation for the way its essence has transmigrated into so many other media. Consider Sharon Louden's current site-specific project at Numark Gallery, *The Motley Tails*, which consists of nothing more than some tangled clusters of monofilament held together with metal clips and attached to the ceiling. Hanging at various heights in the gallery's main space, these cascades of acidic green, fluorescent blue, watery translucent orange, and plasticky opaque yellow might at first seem to be the product of a committed postconceptualist — someone way beyond calling attention to her skill or talking about such quaint concepts as the soul of her artwork.

But a second look reveals that Louden is thinking about an entirely different, much more traditional medium than installation art. And it seems that the 40-year-old Philadelphian is a bit of a showoff after all: In a 2003 solo exhibition at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Mo., she used 850 miles of monofilament to create *The Attenders*, another hanging installation, which filled 6,000 square feet of space with thousands of shimmering phantoms in glossy shades of silver and black. It was no accident of association that the project called to mind transdimensional gallerygoers milling about in a massive art-world purgatory. "I consider these forms 'creatures' with whom I have an ongoing dialogue," Louden said at the time. "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."

Louden's creatures, then, are really just line drawings in the round. Add some color and you've got paintings with an extra dimension for compositional play. At Numark, one cluster of bright yellow towers over the viewer, its tight curls extending from ceiling to floor; a nearby array of more lazily curving green threads winds its tentacles through its neighbors'. The stiff strands of another bundle are nearly an eighth of an inch wide, all cool, silvery, and transparent like some exotic deep-sea invertebrate; they trace uniform semicircles in the air. Everywhere, light is caught, reflected, and refracted; a viewer crossing the gallery floor and winding his way between the hangings passes through alternating patches of visual warmth and coolness. It's all just



Sharon Louden, *The Motley Tails* (installation view), monofilament, cage clips, glue, 2004

amassed plastic thread and small but perfectly visible bits of metal, but the sheer volume of it provides a surprisingly complex interactive experience in which gallerygoers must navigate around and through groupings of thread bundles, accidentally disturbing some, discovering unseen others tucked into corners.

The seemingly obvious model for Louden is Eva Hesse, the '60s semiminimalist known for making sculptures out of everyday materials. Typical of her work—at least in its more modest, less room-filling mode—is 1966's *Hang Up*, a wall-mounted sculpture consisting of an empty 6-by-7-foot cloth-and-wood frame and a long, narrow steel tube. The tube gracefully pokes into the room from the frame's upper-left-hand corner and traces a sagging semicircle down to the floor and back to the lower-right corner. It's an absurd, gleefully ugly piece that announced an end to the supremacy of traditional painting and its trappings, as well as the beginning of Hesse's trademark obsession with limp cords hanging in space.

Hesse also made hanging webs of translucent fiber remarkably similar

only slightly distinguishable from the wall on which it hangs. The 24-by-20-inch piece on the west wall of the office contains in its lower third a grouping of many tiny, semi-transparent blue and yellow shapes resembling macaroni noodles or teeming bacteria on a microscope slide. Louden's grouping of these organic forms in one small quadrant of a precise, bounded area is a succinct expression of the general idea of *The Motley Tails*: the relation of an overarching geometric order to looser, gestural forms.

But while these painted works make Louden's intent loud and clear, their tentative acrylic outlines are a poor substitute for the string beings in the next room. Compared with their sister installation, which recalls the energetic reiterations and accumulations of line in 2-D works by Giacometti and Willem de Kooning, these paintings seem inert. Louden is simply too precious in her treatment of these meticulously sanded panels. Her painterly marks are a cautious, hushed addition to already perfected rectangles of white.

The *Motley Tails*, by contrast, courts no such perfection. It's an exuberant overflowing into the viewer's personal space that's very nearly as spirited as Louden thinks it is—a reassertion of traditional artistic practice that also happens to be a direct physical challenge. **CP**

to Louden's monofilament installations: *Right After*, from 1969, consists of polyester resin and fiberglass threads strung between metal hooks. Tellingly, Hesse was dissatisfied with that piece: "It left the ugly zone and went to the beauty zone," she said. "I didn't mean it to do that." Louden, by contrast, is unafraid of superficial prettiness or its implications. Her material of choice recalls wrapping paper, shiny notebook stickers, and rebellious teenage hair made day-glo for a few hours with Kool-Aid. Even the novel method by which Louden has financed her work is comfortably immersed in consumerism: The initial \$20,000 for the construction of *The Attenders* was solicited from investors, who were guaranteed a high rate of return whenever the piece finally sold.

Rather than comment on the uselessness of two-dimensional art, as Hesse did, Louden instead throws herself into the same search for rightness that motivated her patronage-age colleagues. This search becomes clearer in four additional painted works hanging in Numark's office. Each shares the same title, *The Lingering*, and each was executed on a smooth wooden panel that has been painted a uniform satin white and is