

Grand Rapids

Sharon Louden

Urban Institute for Contemporary Art

Sharon Louden thinks of her sculptures and installations as three-dimensional line drawings. Her blank sheets of paper may be indoor or outdoor settings, her linear markings drawn from lengths of wire, rubber tubing, and other industrial materials.

Winkers, a recent indoor installation, showed clear connections to Louden's gestural drawings and derived considerable expressive power from their example. The installation consisted of 25 metal units, disposed in groups and singly across the gallery floor. Each of the units combined lengths of black tie wire, ordinarily used for fencing. Most of the standing wires were topped with small, oval mirrors, backed with the reflective material used on road markers



and traffic signs. The standing units somewhat suggested bouquets of flowers, with the vertical and diagonal wires acting as stems, the mirrors as blossoms. Both the wires and mirrors were illuminated by three stage lights, mounted on the gallery's eastern wall. Viewers, moving through

the installation, saw the eye-shaped mirrors briefly catch, then beam back light—hence the title, “Winkers.” At the same time, the units patterned the floor with shadows and dappled the shadows with light spots from the mirrors’ reflective material.

Continuing Louden’s abstract drawing, *Winkers* redoubled her decade-old rejection of figurative painting. As a Yale graduate student in the ‘90s, Louden painted landscapes and figures, in particular self-portraits. But an injury to her right, working hand—it was locked in a cast for three months—caused her to temporarily abandon brushwork. To remain busy, she began drawing with her serviceable hand, finding it surprisingly deft. She discovered too that drawing was much more satisfying than painting had ever been. Painting in oil, Louden realized, was prohibitively expensive and cumbersome; the time-consuming preparation of canvases especially seemed a hindrance when, accustomed to drawing spontaneously in ink and graphite, she wanted to get to the image right away. Drawing on paper afforded a directness Louden appreciated and subsequently developed in three dimensions.

Besides the black tie wire in *Winkers*, Louden has used antenna wire, cotton dental rolls, latex, and rubber tubing to create sculptures and installations. While she finds these and other industrial materials beautiful, she delights in denying, at times negating, their physical properties, so that the viewer perceives only line. In this, she continues the lessons of Minimalism, but aims to charge her minimal line with character. Whether drawn or embodied in manipulated, industrial materials, Louden’s lines continue her preoccupation as a painter of human figures, evoking motion and life. Often, Louden’s three-dimensional art has a pronounced organic character—witness *Winkers’* resemblance to a field of bouquets.

Louden also invests her installations with surprises and quirks, which serve the same energizing function as the intentionally off-center compositions in her drawings. She arranged the 25 units in *Winkers* thoughtfully, with the aim of creating unexpected tensions among grouped and individual units. Some of the units had few or no oval mirrors; read as bouquets, lacking blossoms, these units seemed very strange indeed.

Finally, Louden often animates her installations with light. *Winkers* advanced Louden’s strategy of drawing with light, seen in an earlier installation, *Tangled Tips*, which featured luminescent wires wound through a tree. *Winkers’* more environmental and interactive light—the viewer had to walk around the installation to see it wink—seemed effervescent. Recapitulating many of Louden’s strategies, *Winkers* afforded considerable visual pleasure and food for thought.

—Roger Green