

Tara Donovan Haze





Tara Donovan **Haze**

6 November - 14 December 2003

Rice Gallery



Tara Donovan's work always begins with the properties of a single material. Typically, Donovan selects an everyday, mass-produced item that is so familiar to us that it has escaped our notice. Scotch tape, toothpicks, pencils, and clear drinking straws are among the items she has chosen as artistic media. She studies the medium's properties and by varying the light, quantity and arrangement, she develops a set of rules that serves to contain and guide the final form. Dictated by the material's unique properties, the installation "grows" through repetitive labor. Along with Tara, Rice students and others realized *Haze* through a time-consuming marathon that the artist humorously referred to as "a mechanized process without the luxury of a machine."

Donovan calls her installations *site-responsive*, in that she expands, compresses, or changes their shapes in relation to the spaces in which she installs them. *Haze* occupied the entire width of Rice Gallery's 44-foot back wall, and rose up to more than two-thirds of its 16-foot height. The work's gently curving top edge was echoed in swellings across the surface, making it seem vaguely organic. Its form seemed familiar, yet ambiguous. At a distance, one felt that he or she was looking at a formation of encrusted minerals, a cross section of a coral reef, or wisps of a strange, opaque fog. Up close, the image sharpened and the viewer's preconceptions changed instantly, swept away in the recognition of surprisingly familiar objects from which *Haze* was made. Viewed from any perspective, *Haze* was a beautiful and poetic presence, real yet indefinable.

I would like to thank Tara Donovan for a work that numerous visitors told us was a truly magical, transformative experience. "Eye opening and inspiring" wrote one visitor, while a Rice student admitted, "I liked it so much I'm back again rather than sleeping after my last final and a week of multiple all-nighters. It's breathtaking." Tara, and her assistant Jessie Henson, were two of the most delightful people with whom this staff has worked. I thank them, and join with the visitor who best expressed the effect this installation had — "Absolutely amazing — this is what I call ART."

Kimberly Davenport
Director





**Excerpts from an email correspondence between
Tara Donovan and Kimberly Davenport**

**Kimberly Davenport: You work with manufactured materials.
How much do you look toward nature for ideas?**

Tara Donovan: I wouldn't necessarily say that there is a straightforward relation to nature, or to natural and biological structures in my work. I am interested in different types of visual phenomena that occur in nature, but how this translates to my work is not a labored attempt to mimic these phenomena. It is more about the development of an intuitive aesthetic sensibility that helps me to understand the potential of using manufactured materials to create "experiential" objects. I understand my practice as realizing, or activating the inherent potential of a material by assigning predetermined rules for construction that allow a work to "grow" through repetitive labor. Living structures develop through similar means; they perform in predictable ways since the rules for growth are encoded in individual cells. My work might appear "organic" or "alive" because my process mimics, in the most elementary sense, basic systems of growth.

left: Jessie Henson, assistant to Tara Donovan



Please talk about *Haze*, specifically. Describe why you were attracted to the straws. How did you play with them to discover their properties?

Haze developed out of my continuing interest in transparent materials. Some of my past projects were made from Scotch tape, or monofilament combined in various ways. The straws were different, in that they have a more solid and definitive structure. This structure dictated the vertical orientation of the final form, because stacking was one of the few ways that the straws could be compiled without an extensive use of adhesives or other type of binding. *Haze* does require some adhesive on the wall; it is used mainly as a safety precaution in case the work is touched, or there are any unforeseen vibrations of the architecture in which it is presented. I had a really bad experience when the piece was first installed at Ace Gallery in New York. There was construction occurring in a lot adjacent to the gallery. I won't go into detail, but let's just say that the straws don't react well to pile driving equipment!

When I began working with the straws, I was looking at various ways of combining them. I tried interlocking them, melting them together, cutting them, bundling them — basically any way I could imagine them functioning as a structural unit. Not satisfied with any of these configurations, I began to look at each straw as an individual unit. This approach led me to stack them in a orientation perpendicular to the wall, which produced a visual effect that could be fully experienced only when the straws were looked at straight on. Since I wanted any view of the straw as an object to disappear, I had to stack them higher and higher, going far above a normal sightline. This is what creates the effect of *Haze* as a singular vertical plane when seen from afar. I am intrigued by how common, recognizable materials can masquerade as something almost atmospheric from a distance. The transparency and hollowness of the straws are extremely important in this regard, because both light and air are able to permeate the entire structure.

One of the most striking things about *Haze* is this change in appearance, how different it appears from a distance and close-up.

One of the things my work plays with is recognition. Because everyone has had an experience with straws, the viewers have a clear knowledge of how straws normally function. I try to draw upon this universal knowledge in some of my work, because it creates a real physical connection to the work that becomes evident only when people recognize the object or material that has been used. The works made with Scotch tape, toothpicks, pencils, straight pins, adding machine paper, Styrofoam cups, and Elmer's Glue — I have used them all — use this type of recognition to optimal effect. The point of recognition usually depends on the scale of the material itself. With *Haze*, because the straws are so minute, this realization occurs only when one gets up close.

How do you think of the human body in relation to your work?

Certainly, I always think about the scale of my work in relation to the human body. I also think about the viewer's experience of my work as theatrical, in a sense. The placement of the work in a space, how it is lit, as well as the amount of surrounding space are all very calculated. I have a sense of wanting to choreograph someone's experience of my work. I want people to move around the work and to take in as many viewpoints as I give them.







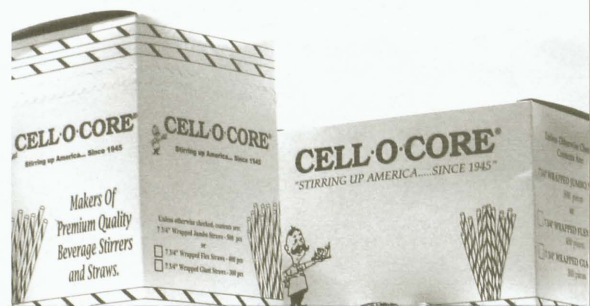


You have used the term “site-responsive” to describe your work. Is this your own term, and how does it differ in meaning from the term “site-specific”?

Site-responsive is my own term and I think it is most descriptive of the way my work relates to space. I am not sure if anyone else coined the term. Robert Irwin defined the relationship of outdoor sculpture by suggesting four classifications: site-dominant, site-adjusted, site-specific and site-determined. Reading about his classifications led me to scrutinize the relationship of my own work to space. I really felt that terms such as “installation art” and “site-specific” had lost their meaning and specificity through overuse. Anything presented in a gallery is both installed and site-specific in the most general sense. I see my work as perhaps having a more dynamic relationship to the space where it is presented. *Haze* is a perfect example of the site-responsiveness that characterizes my work. Two walls must buttress the straws in order for *Haze* to maintain its form; the work actually uses the architecture of the space as an integral element of its structure. *Haze* is not specific, however, because it can be adapted to any space that has the appropriate architectural format and dimensions.

What are the stipulations for the work’s re-creation, that is, what would a collector need to know?

The purchaser receives a contract giving ownership rights to the piece along with several contingencies relating to the scale of the work that was purchased. For lack of a more explicit answer, *Haze* is offered in small, medium, and large sizes. If someone owns a version that is 40-feet long, they would have 10-foot flexibility; they could install it in a space as narrow as 35 feet or as wide as 45 feet.









About the Artist

Tara Donovan was born in 1969 in New York City, where currently she lives and works. She received a BFA from Corcoran College of Art + Design, Washington DC in 1991, and in 1999 an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. Solo exhibitions include *Tara Donovan* (2004), Akira Ikeda Gallery, Berlin; *Curve Series: Tara Donovan* (2003), Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland; *Tara Donovan* (2003) and *Colony* (2001), Ace Gallery, New York and *Tara Donovan: Whorl* (1999), The Corcoran Gallery of Art's Hemicycle Gallery, Washington DC. Her installation *Ripple* was included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

left: Tara Donovan

Tara Donovan, *Haze*, 2003
Rice University Art Gallery

Haze was re-created courtesy Andrea Nasher Collection, Dallas and Ace Gallery, New York and Los Angeles. This was the work's second installation; it was first installed in Tara Donovan, Ace Gallery, New York, 8 March – 15 May 2003.

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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Susan Van Scoy: pages 6, 8, 10-12, 17-21, 24-25

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