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Robin Hill

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<http://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2017/04/poet-iris-cushing-robin-hills-solo-lennon-weinberg.html>

TWO COATS OF PAINT

April 22, 2017

Poet Iris Cushing on “There Was,” Robin Hill’s solo at Lennon, Weinberg

A “cairn” is a group of stones, arranged in some intentional configuration, to mark a place along a trail. To make a cairn is to leave a point of reference in the present for one’s future self to encounter; its message is simply that the builder of the cairn was, at a past moment, *here*. *Cairn*, a piece in [Robin Hill’s](#) show “There Was,” currently at Lennon, Weinberg, gathers dozens of sea bricks—pieces of red brick that have been tumbled in the ocean—found by the artist on the shore near her home in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Hill gathered these bricks over the course of decades, while the bricks themselves were smoothed in the turbulence of the sea for untold lengths of time. The kind of quiet, temporally-engaged presence of *Cairn* permeates the work in “There Was.” Throughout her 35-year career, Hill has collected objects and arranged them in a careful system of aesthetic and symbolic tension: between lightness and weight, rare and ordinary, permanence and change. Underlying these very alive tensions is a rigorous material investigation into the passage of time. “There Was” presents some of the findings of this investigation.



Robin Hill, *Cairn*.



The differing temporal scales that appear throughout the exhibition are at once subtle and dazzling. *Concretions* consists of a long wooden bench covered with irregular limestone spheres collected by Hill as they dropped out of eroding Nova Scotia cliffs. These dinosaur-egg-like rocks were formed over millions of years inside sedimentary layers of sandstone. They radiate an obstinate energy that seems to predate human ideas of meaning. A wall-sized

cyanotype titled *Collapsing House* shows a ramshackle house, surrounded by woods, falling into the forest floor. Made from 16 sheets of delicate aqaba paper, the flickering, twilight quality of the cyanotype gives the perishing house an intimate charge. The piece is a still tableau that easily lends itself to storytelling, as suggested by the show’s title: “There was a cottage in the middle of a wood...”

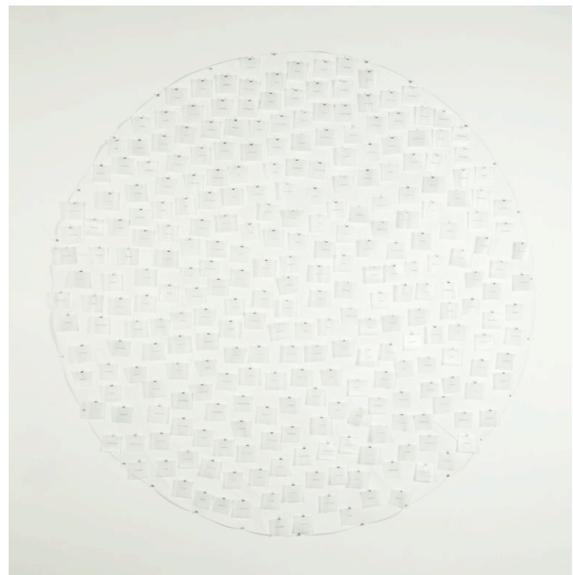
The invitation to imagine a story can also be found in Hill's photographs and objects titled *Thought Bubbles*. Using items such as dried lemons, mica washers and glass beakers, each of Hill's *Thought Bubble* compositions makes a story out of its own time, which is also the earth's time and the artist's time. An excellent example of this is the thick stack of layered dryer lint that appears in *Thought Bubble #1*. Each layer in the stack is composed of the most quotidian stuff. Close examination reveals the presence of hair, straw, paper, and fibers from countless pieces of clothing. As an object, this stack marks the continuation of the artist's (and her family's) bodies through time and space. It tells a story—of someone carefully collecting dryer lint—and at the same time infers the multifold stories that people inhabit simply by existing.



Among the many mute pieces in "There Was," there is one piece that offers *words* as material. For *Weighing Papers*, Hill clipped hundreds of phrases from the daily *New York Times* and affixed each phrase to a small square of translucent paper. The squares are mounted on pins inside a large circle of white canvas, so that they flutter slightly as a viewer leans in to read them. The phrases are no more than four words long: "under the rosier assumptions," "at risk of succumbing," "ground shifts constantly," "rigor and flow." The field of these squares is so large that one can't really read the edges of it. The eyes make their own path through the field, and

trail off. The molecular poems in *Weighing Papers* give a certain focus to the poetic nature of "There Was." Rather than nouns and names, the papers contain prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives and adverbs—the connective tissues of our language, the small workhorse words that so often escape attention. In gathering these words, Hill shines a light on the transitive elements of thinking, just as she does with materials in the midst of transformation.

The poet Wallace Stevens wrote that "one is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry. One is the *true subject* and the other is *the poetry of the subject*." I consider Hill a poet of objects. With "There Was," she engages the tension that Stevens describes, by making work that is "about" her subjects—which are objects—all the while revealing the poetry of her subjects. This poetry is utterly alive and thus impossible to pin down. Being with this work, one gets the feeling of entering a story that is actively evolving. What's marvelous about it is that it's the story of our very real Earth, entwined with our very lives.





“[Robin Hill: There Was,](#)” Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., Chelsea, New York, NY. Through April 22, 2017.

About the author: [Iris Cushing](#) is the author of [Wyoming](#) (Furniture Press Books, 2014). She teaches at Queens College and lives in Queens, New York.