



Courtesy of the artist

An Explosion of Color, and of Bridal White. "Public art in private places has tricky status: It can seem by sheer quality and charisma to be fated for longevity," David Cohen writes. [Read more...](#)

## **An Explosion of Color, and of Bridal White**

### ***Public Art***

By DAVID COHEN August 17, 2006

Every morning I walk my dog through Washington Square Village, New York University's Corbusian, 1960s housing complex. This summer they have been renovating, ripping out sunken Zen garden-ish centerpieces in each lobby and replacing them with even tiled flooring.

Maybe this is no loss to art history — period charm or not, they were mere décor. But with permanently installed, site-specific schemes, even the fate of intentional artworks are no better assured. Public art in private places has tricky status: It can seem by sheer quality and charisma to be fated for longevity, but one has only to think of Jorge Pardo's exquisite 2004 bookstore for Dia. Soon after completion, the museum closed up its Chelsea operation (they plan to relocate to the Meatpacking District.) It isn't just *vita that's brevis*.

While it recalls Mr. Pardo's work in its spritely verve, there are no melancholy thoughts in relation to artist Helen Brough's sculptural installation, "Emulated Flora." It was completed in May for the new condominium conversion of 70 Washington Street, a sprawling block-wide warehouse in DUMBO.

The piece was commissioned by David Walentas, the property mogul who owns most of the area. Ms. Brough (b.1966) had been a participant of the Triangle Artists' Workshop's first residency program, generously hosted in 2002 by Mr. Walentas at 70 Washington before renovations began. This makes "Emulated Flora" a rare, happy link between the artists who helped put the neighborhood on the map and the affluent residents basking in its upward transformation.

The work consists of dozens of lasercut Plexiglas shapes — in a variety of colors and arranged in parallel lines — that are suspended from, or bolted to, a mirrored ceiling extending over the whole lobby. Each element is around 18 inches high and hangs well overhead. Some of the shapes are also themselves cut from sheets of mirror. From the street, and then more intensely within the lobby, one senses row upon row of translucent plastic, curvaceous shape, and chirpy, soft, nursery color. The layering puts you in mind of rows of scenery in a theater's eaves. The mirroring doubles the perceived depth of the work, giving a soaring sensation of light and color above.

This sounds cathedral-like, with the connotations of elevated vaults and stained glass, but the feeling is anything but solemn. On the contrary, a festive vibe — somewhere between science fair and nightclub — arises from a shape vocabulary that is sensuous and hi-tech at the same time. The irregular, fluid shapes recall the floral motifs in Matisse's cutouts, Arp's biomorphic forms, and molded French Curve geometry sets.

Many of the elements have holes in them, donut style, to look like painters' palettes. This, together with the sense of overlapping pools of color, gives the installation a painterly (watercolor) feel. A tilted mirror behind the reception desk composes cropped, oblique views of the piece in reflection. But part of the charm of this distinctive yet unobtrusive work is that it expands the space, filling it with a generalized major-key mood, rather than imposing specific meaning or asking to be looked at in sculptural terms. It works best subliminally and on the move.

Ms. Brough's vaguely retro look would work perfectly in a steel and glass corporate headquarters. At Gordon Bunshaft's Lever House on Park Avenue, however, the new owners have their own ideas about art and architecture. Aby Rosen, of RFR Holding, completed a renovation last year of this classic 1952 building and initiated a series of site-specific installations for the lobby and courtyard. After their allotted run, the works enter the Lever House Collection, which is curated by Richard Marshall.

"Virgin Mother" (2005), a 63-foot-high Damien Hirst sculpture, is somewhat bizarrely placed in the Isamu Noguchi garden, resurrected from an abandoned scheme commissioned by Bunshaft. In painted bronze, the work depicts a standing figure of a naked young woman (her face and pose recall Degas's "Little Dancer") whose skin is cut away from her right thigh to the right half of her head to reveal muscle, skull, and her pregnancy.

A theme of stripped virginity is taken up in the vitrine-like lobby where E.V. Day's "Bride Fight" (2006) gives new meaning to the phrase "window dressing." "Bride Fight," which could have been called "Bridezilla," is an exhilarating tour de force of camp theatricality evoking Japanese animé and an array of other art historical sources. Ms. Day has deconstructed two bridal gowns and accessories to depict a ferocious catfight, although it is tulle, silk, and lace — rather than fur — that is flying. Ingeniously, the couture fragments are held in place in an elaborate choreography by suspended fishing tackle suspended between floor and ceiling by metal hardware. Inside the Marilynstyle puffed up skirt of one bride are a pair of pink, full bodied panties, while her adversary, whose dress is the more shredded, opts for a skimpier white number with turquoise garters. Suspended between the pair are stretched lace gloves.

The title recalls Duchamp's "Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" (also known as the "Large Glass") (1915–23) although here the brides manage without male intervention. Formally speaking, the work evokes Abstract Expressionism in its "allover" web of line and shape, and Italian Futurism in its depiction of speed through fragmentation. It creates a tight, dynamic gestalt. But while it is fun to marvel at its ingenious construction and witty craft, the work is actually best enjoyed sweeping by at night in a taxi, when it is dramatically lit. The experience then becomes cinematic rather than sculptural, as the props bounce into action.

*Brough is permanent, (70 Washington Street, between Front and York, 718-222-5555).*

*Day until August 26 (390 Park Ave., between 53 and 54 streets).*