



Elsbeth Pratt

Vancouver Artgallery **offsite**

June 29, 2011, to January 8, 2012

Offsite is the Vancouver Art Gallery's outdoor public art space featuring a program of rotating projects. Located downtown at the foot of the Shangri-La skyscraper development, Offsite serves as a hub for local and international contemporary artists to explore issues related to the surrounding urban context. As artists consider the site-specific potential of art within the public realm, projects may inspire, bemuse and stimulate broad audiences, and will respond to the changing social and cultural conditions of our contemporary world.



LOCATED on West Georgia Street between Thurlow and Bute Streets, Vancouver



Offsite is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and funded by the City of Vancouver through the Public Art Program. The Gallery recognizes Ian Gillespie, President, Westbank; Ben Yeung, President, Peterson Investment Group; and the residents at Shangri-La for their support of this space.



CURATOR: Kathleen Ritter, Associate Curator, Vancouver Art Gallery

FABRICATION AND INSTALLATION: Blair Gardner and Gary Smith, Boelling Smith Design

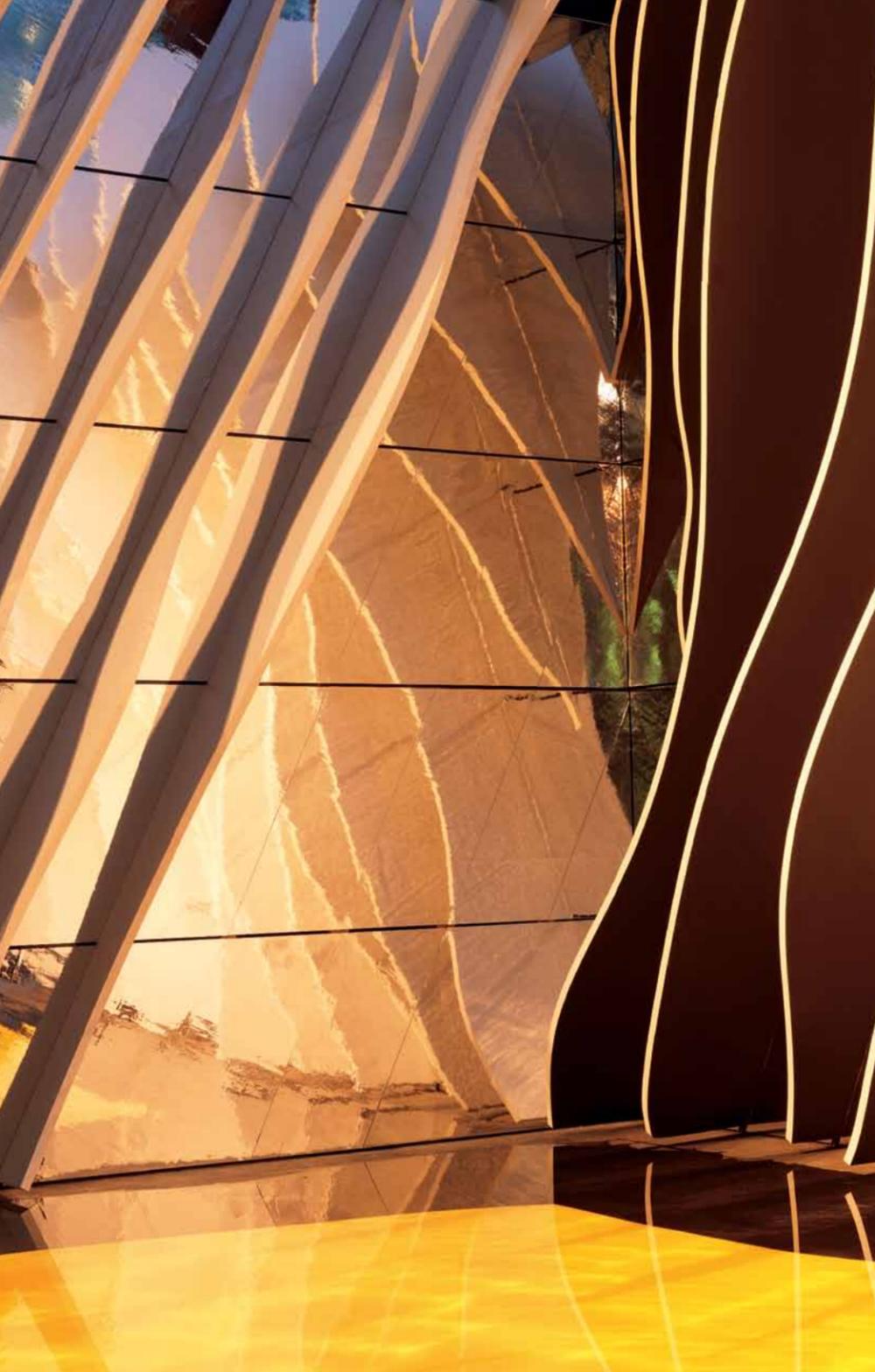
LIGHTING: Elia Kirby, Great Northern Way Scene Shop

The Vancouver Art Gallery is a not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Offsite is generously supported by our Visionary Partner: **Michael O'Brian Family Foundation**

Vancouver
Artgallery

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Second Date

The work of Vancouver artist Elspeth Pratt brings to mind words like “doubt,” “contingency” and “precarity.” These words suggest a lack of stability at odds not only with the tradition of sculpture, but with the world at large. Pratt’s delicate assemblages, typically pieced together with prosaic construction materials, are found perched, leaning or balanced against the surrounding architecture in ways that appear entirely provisional. The frictive interaction between Pratt’s artworks and the spaces they inhabit calls into question our perception of architecture as solid, stable and fixed. Pratt’s ongoing investigation into architectural space made her a fitting choice for Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite.

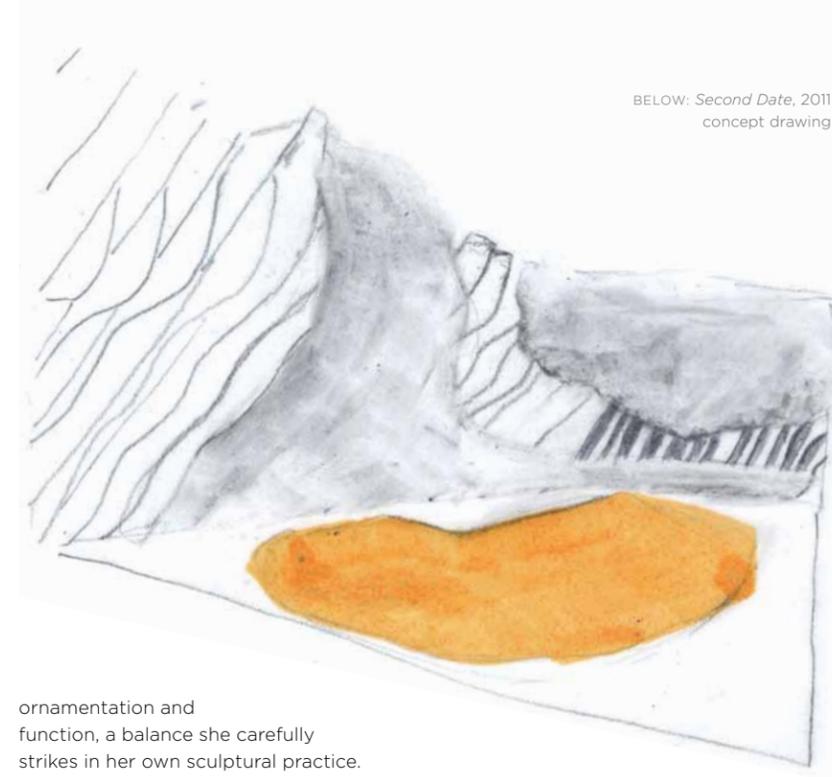
Pratt’s site-specific artwork, *Second Date*, is a direct response to and a subtle provocation of its surroundings—one that suggests the form of our built environment be as varied and inventive as imagination (and gravity) allows. Surrounded by a sea of grey and glass gridded office towers in Vancouver’s downtown core, Pratt’s artwork proposes a fundamentally different engagement with urban space than its neighbouring structures because of its irregularity, its levity and its playful humour.

As a starting point, Pratt took the two main architectural features of the existing site—the L-shaped framing wall and the reflecting pool—and transformed them with an economy of gestures and materials. Pratt designed a series of perpendicular “fins”—irregular wave-like protrusions—set at a diagonal angle against the original horizontal and vertical grid of the wall. Cut from high-density Gatorboard, the shapes appear to float out from the wall as if suspended halfway between falling and flight. Painted white on one side and mid-grey

on the other, the fins faithfully replicate the standard mat board from which Pratt made her original model. As passersby move from one end of the space to the other, the tone of the work shifts dramatically from light to dark, giving dimension to the space and underscoring the idea that there is no singular perspective from which to view the artwork. Instead, viewers must move around to experience the work’s multiple perspectives. Likewise, the wall holding the fins in place is laminated with silver Mylar, which casts irregular reflections of the surrounding city and people passing by. Pratt’s final intervention in the space is a lozenge-shaped, yellow-orange vinyl liner placed on the dark stone of the reflecting pool—a splash of colour set in striking relief to an otherwise grey field of concrete buildings and asphalt streets in the neighbouring urban field. As evening falls and theatre lights illuminate the work, reflections multiply and dance over the work’s varied surfaces, further activating a dynamic, ever-shifting relationship between viewers and the artwork.

Pratt’s deceptively simple sculptural gestures reorient our perception of urban space through subtle dislocations in the existing architecture that turn rigid angles into curves, opaque surfaces into reflective skins and dark stone into bright colour. These formal interventions work against the impulse to standardize our built environment, and instead champion an architecture that is elastic and unpredictable, opening up new possibilities for imagining space within the urban fabric.

Pratt’s ongoing research into ideas of ornament in contemporary architecture led her to the Aqua Tower in Chicago, designed by Studio Gang Architects (2010), as a source of inspiration. Its distinctive undulating, concrete terraces, which differ in shape from floor to floor, give the tower an ornamental veneer while providing functional balcony space. What is of particular interest and key to Pratt’s research is the complex dynamic between



BELOW: *Second Date*, 2011
concept drawing

ornamentation and function, a balance she carefully strikes in her own sculptural practice.

In Vancouver, the reigning architectural typology—the multi-purpose podium tower—is exemplified in Offsite’s adjacent Shangri-La development. Currently the tallest building in the city, its prominence on the skyline reflects a vertical ambition and capital influx that drives Vancouver’s ever-changing face. By contrast, the off-kilter arrangements in *Second Date*, their variegated surfaces and misaligned planes, situate viewers in a fragile, make-shift world with a dubious structural logic. *Second Date* deliberately works against the slick finish of the surrounding towers with a self-deprecating humour that appears to both playfully and critically undermine them.

Pratt’s interest resides, in her own words, “in the creation of new relationships between the users and the urban fabric, in the manner that they prescribe our interactions, and how they subtly shift our interactions with the public spaces located in the voids.” Pratt’s astute observation reveals that her interests extend well

beyond the walls of the gallery and into the street. It is no surprise, then, that people have responded to the project by physically interacting with the space. On any given day, cyclists ride their bikes through the water, passersby snap pictures of themselves in the reflections on the walls, or children wade into the enticing yellow pool. This spontaneous, unscripted interaction on the part of the public demonstrates a curiosity and excitement for unexpected moments in the shared fabric of the city—an engagement as unconventional as the artwork itself.

Kathleen Ritter,
Associate Curator

About the Artist

Over the last twenty-five years, Vancouver artist **Elspeth Pratt** has developed a unique sculptural language that is largely dictated by her choice of materials and their juxtapositions. Pratt has had numerous solo exhibitions nationally and internationally, most recently at the Charles H. Scott Gallery and Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, and the Cooley Gallery in Portland, Oregon. She has exhibited in group exhibitions in Canada, Japan, Australia, Taiwan and Italy. Pratt is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the VIVA Award in 1993. She is represented by Diaz Contemporary, Toronto. *Second Date* is Pratt’s first public artwork.

CREDITS:

Elspeth Pratt
Second Date, 2011
(front and inside images)
Gatorboard, Mylar, vinyl, plywood
7.15 x 16.71 x 9.14 metres
site-specific installation at
Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite

PHOTOGRAPHY: Rachel Topham,
Vancouver Art Gallery

ISBN: 978-1-895442-91-5
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