

Mixed-media artist has a line on the ethereal

By Joel Weinstein

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No matter what its imagery has been about—autobiography, ancestry, race, all those things that comprise memory and its inexorable corollary, the passage of time—the art of Annette Lawrence has always been, in some respects, a practice, a concerted making of circles, squares, grids, and spirals. In her most recent monument of string and air, now on view in the Northeast Quadrant Gallery at the Dallas Museum of Art, this discipline has achieved an austerity nearly as taut and spare as Agnes Martin's. And like Ms. Martin's paintings, it relies largely on the unyielding authority of horizontal parallel lines in space to convey almost the opposite of mathematical precision: a universe of whispery, protean evocations. How little there actually is to Ms. Lawrence's installation: postal string, butcher paper, cellophane tape. Lines, circles, rectangles. Brown and white. An empty gallery. It is important to know that this piece fills a washed out, perfectly rectangular room, because Ms. Lawrence's recent installations have fit the spaces they were made for. In the African American Museum's barrel vault gallery, she created a long, tapered tunnel of string. At the University of Michigan Museum of Art, cones, also made of string, spread from a balcony to the floor below like spidery searchlights caught in mid-sweep. Here, the centerpiece of the installation is a dense curtain of string in the shape of a cylinder, falling from the gallery's ceiling to concentric circles of butcher paper on the floor. Its tension looks fragile but absolute. Surrounding this cascade of white lines are fences of string, each made of nine parallel strands about a half-foot apart, in several series: stretching from front wall to back wall and front wall to side wall, side wall to back wall and side wall to opposite side, back wall to side wall and back wall to front wall, and so forth. In plan view, the installation would look like a pentagon crossed by perpendicular lines and having a circle in the middle. If this sounds complicated, once you are inside it you see that it is simplicity itself, almost nothing, and its cottony, ambiguous presence—how can you feel so contained by something so ethereal?—fills the room like an atmosphere you breathe rather than a construction that bears thinking about. Yet unraveling

the installation's formal complications is one of its pleasures. Even though it is made entirely of parallel lines, for example, you see intersections everywhere. Unexpected details fluoresce even as you look into corners you've examined before. The strings are held to the walls by a kind of post made of brown paper with paper-punched holes, and you might notice that the post in the center of each wall, along with its departing lines, casts tree-like shadows. There, just above the cylinder's brown paper anchor, the strings' knots look like a profusion of ghostly fungi emerging from a rain forest floor. So even amid the evidence of elaborate calculation and careful making, a wash of associations emanates from the room like swiftly changing light, and uncannily each emanation seems to carry with it its opposite: spontaneity and rigor, solidity and effervescence, architecture and psychology, history and the end of time. This piece has fewer narrative clues than some of Ms. Lawrence's previous works. In its exact symmetries and all-encompassing lighting, it not as immediately evocative as, say, the African American Museum piece, where theatrical spotlighting, an empty pair of shoes, grids of floating numbers, and tombstone shapes foreshadowed death and its aftermath. Of course, the shape of that piece was not exactly a reflection of the space it existed in, but an harmonic tangent, a tunnel of diminishing size—as we seem to diminish toward death—within the vaulting tunnel of the gallery, which is as relentlessly regular as time. You could bemoan this lack of devices or see it as another way in which Ms. Lawrence has taken the merest of circumstances—the severe geometrics of the Quad Gallery—and found poetry in it, as if naming something so quietly that we can barely, though distinctly, hear.

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