



Avantika Bawa, *Experiments with Connectivity* (with audience participation), 2008; astro turf, wood, latex; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and Saltworks Gallery, Atlanta

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Avantika Bawa Saltworks Gallery

In *Perfect Distortions* Avantika Bawa employs contradiction as a conceptual framework for thinking about the interrelationship of formal, spatial and social concerns. More optimistic than ironic, Bawa seeks out the expansive possibilities of what she terms “serendipitous disjunction.” A mix of handmade and prefabricated elements, her installations and drawings are calibrated to accentuate rather than preclude idiosyncrasies. Consumer giants like IKEA and The Home Depot provide Bawa with material and conceptual fodder, as do the formalist and constructivist legacies of modern art.

Ellsworth Kelly’s elegant meditations on color, shape and site came to mind when I first saw Bawa’s *Yellow Rising*. Comprised of a large and slightly irregular yellow lozenge painted on a wall with a blue, bench-like structure affixed beneath it, Bawa’s installation stresses pure color, abstract shape and planar relationships. Simultaneously, *Yellow Rising* hints of other observed scenarios, such as a sunset vista or cinema projection. Like the best of Kelly’s work, however, Bawa’s is interpretative rather than descriptive, and its strengths ultimately lie in formal tension and its activation of the surrounding architectural space.

Many of Bawa’s works entail open-ended processes, structures and spaces. Of relevance here, the artist cites her relationship to Minimalism’s artistic legacy, and certainly, her penchant for reductive forms and serial configurations supports this observation. But historical citation runs deeper, as Bawa also taps into Minimalism’s situational circumstances. For many minimalists, this aspect of their practice carried social and political significance: the simplification and standardization of formal means entailed, paradoxically, an expansive concept of art’s public context and its potential to engage critically with cultural systems and institutional hierarchies.

Comparably, Bawa’s works, while not overtly politicized, nonetheless extrapolate the relationship between minimalist forms and social praxis. Indicative of this pairing is *Experiments with Connectivity*, a work Bawa initially conceived as part of an outdoor performance at Skowhegan. Consisting of two wooden chairs built to different sizes and placed at opposite ends of an AstroTurf runner, the gallery version is also interactive. The different scale of the chairs, which is also reflected in the angled cut of the turf runner, gives the illusion of a greater distance than what actually exists between them. In the modified gallery context, however, the difference in the chairs also introduces a power dynamic, and anyone choosing to sit in them must contend with this constraint.

Bawa’s drawings also reveal the artist’s dialectical interests. *De-shelved 1-4* depicts a series of empty shelving units drawn from different angles. Through a combination of perspectival distortions and misalignments, Bawa undermines the intended functionality of these objects: unable to hold anything, the crooked shelves become metaphors for the failed utopian promises of modern art and design. Conversely—and more whimsically—Bawa’s drawings expose the limitations of IKEA philosophy: anyone who has attempted to assemble one of their products knows how mistakes inevitably inflect the process. While this can prove frustrating, it also introduces the possibility for deviation and individuation in an otherwise standardized situation. This, I believe, is the crux of Bawa’s work. It invites viewers to follow its lead in productive maneuvering within—and against—the twin vectors of banal formalism and mindless consumerism.

Susan Richmond is a critic based in Atlanta.