

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Zoë Ryan, "Twists and Turns," *Blueprint*, January 2002

## BLUEPRINT



# Twists and turns

Ricci Albenda delights in subverting space, distorting our perceptions of what we see and what we are. His latest installation, on show in New York, manipulates our senses on a variety of different levels, says Zoë Ryan

PORTRAIT RICHARD MITCHELL/RETNA

**Enter a Ricci Albenda** environment and you are in for a disorienting, non-Euclidean experience. On first inspection, the structures created by this US artist resemble any other white-cubed space, but on closer investigation reveal a visual head-trip of bent perspectives.

Albenda plays with the conventionally right-angled spaces of galleries and museums by building within them new spaces, where right angles do not exist and floors are not parallel to the ceiling. Only when walking around his installations, taking time to inspect where points converge and diverge do you begin to understand his complex manipulation of space and his ability to create visual illusions.

"I like playing with people's expectations and turning attention to their own physicality to inform their sense of being." The 35-year-old artist is standing in his studio, which contains a quarter-scale replica of his latest installation that is on show the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in *The Accidental Phenomenologist: Ricci Albenda and the Almost Knowable Space* exhibition.

The starting point for all Albenda's works are models made from wood and string, which are translated into computer programs to generate further scale models and drawings. Albenda has to work with a scale model. "I can't finish it," he explains, "if I can't walk through it."

Long before he graduated from Rhode Island School of Design in 1988 with a BA in Fine Arts, he had begun experimenting with art that had a relationship to the built environment. At

secondary school he tried to take a 360-degree photograph of his room by placing tape at the edges of each frame, taking photographs of each frame, then trying to piece the separate images together. "It didn't work but it gave me the idea to explore ways to pull together a 360-degree experience into something you can grasp," he says. In addition, the architecture studios at RISD informed his geometrically driven work, which crosses the boundaries of painting, sculpture, graphics and architecture.

Albenda has been active in the contemporary art scene in New York for 10 years. He is one of the growing number of artists working in Williamsburg, an area of Brooklyn that's emerging on the international art circuit. A lucky break in the mid-1990s – his work caught the eye of art dealer Andrew Kreps – gave him the exposure that led to a breakthrough exhibition as part of the 1999 Greater New York art show, a work on permanent display at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York.

More recently, his work has featured in the Casino 2001 show in Gent, Belgium, and the *Americans* new art at the Barbican Centre, London. Mark Sladen, curator of the latter exhibition, says, "I am fascinated by the way Albenda brings maths and science into art, mining these disciplines as much for their metaphorical properties as their practical applications. It seems to me that in his application of personal or subjective filters to collective or consensual disciplines, such as science or even minimalist art, he is right up

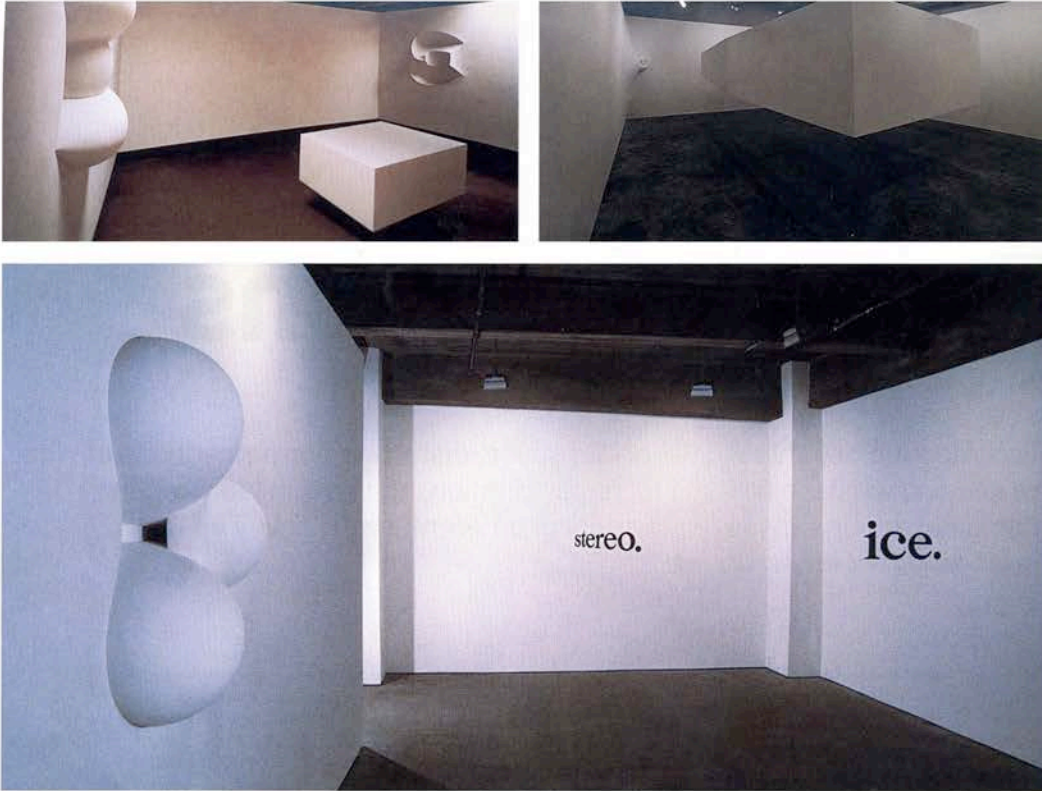
there with the most interesting trends among international contemporary artists."

Until 22 January, the new work by Albenda is on display at MoMA as part of the museum's prestigious *Projects* series of contemporary art. Laura Hoptman, an associate curator in the Department of Drawings who curated the exhibition, says: "What strikes me most is that Albenda takes us in a certain way into a different reality à la science fiction. His is an alternative take on reality. Other artists work with mirrors to try to give us a take on what a hallucinogenic experience would be like. He attempts to show how reality is created by the senses. His spaces remind me of the sets in the 1919 silent movie *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*."

For the MoMA exhibition, Albenda has transformed the mezzanine level by creating a site-related installation or, as he describes it, a "site-co-optive" piece. The term is inspired by the way media and advertising co-opts spaces and manipulates our sense of space and identity.

On first glance, one can see three identically proportioned rooms, yet up close one reveals itself to be a *trompe-l'oeil* room painted on a wall and another a relief made from plaster that recesses 30 inches into the wall. The third is a real space and looks perfectly normal, apart from the sloping floor that culminates in a narrow passage that disappears to the right. As you move through the space, however, you become aware that all is not as it at first seems. The floor slopes downward at unexpected points, baffling your senses, and the walls

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converge alarmingly, only to diverge just as quickly, giving you a mild sense of vertigo.

Like Alice in Wonderland you feel you are shrinking and growing as you move through this spatial environment. On turning the corner and following a short corridor, it is disappointing to reach a dead end; you turn to inspect the junctures where walls, ceilings and floors come together, captivated by the illusion; you realise nothing moves, just your perception.

Although Albenda's work references are pop art and optical art, Hoptman says: "Ricci's work does not have an immediate suck like Brigitte Reilly's. You have to travel through them to get a similar sensory experience." Other artists exploring objects and space include Robert Morris, whose installation *Untitled* (1965) is made from four waist-high mirrored cubes. As you walk around them you become aware of your own physicality in relation to other people and the gallery space. Similarly, by disorienting the viewer with walls that are warped, Albenda heightens your perception of yourself.

Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson also works in this field. A concurrent installation at MoMA by Eliasson, *Seeing Yourself Sensing* (reviewed in the November issue of *Blueprint*), works in a

similar way to Albenda's pieces. By drawing attention to the gallery space, he heightens the visitor's perception of their place within the museum. Albenda jokes that his untitled work could be called *Feeling Yourself Being*.

In other works, such as *Action at a Distance*, at P.S. 1, he further explores the notion of disorientation and sensory estrangement by incorporating what he refers to as "portals to other dimensions"; negative and positive reliefs are reminiscent of bulbous Brancusi sculptures that protrude from the walls. P.S. 1's dingy basement walls are covered with immaculate white plaster and sheetrock.

A slightly warped square platform is positioned in the centre of the room, neither high enough to be used as a seat nor low enough to stand on. Seamlessly embedded in the walls, vortex-like holes represent what the environment would look like were it to be sucked inward by gravitational force and viewed from multiple viewpoints. These forms resemble the detailed interiors of parts of the human body: an ear or a buttock. Hoptman argues that this resemblance adds to the feeling of destabilisation. "Albenda's spaces give us the uncanny feeling of being inside a human body."

Other works have included words painted on the walls to add dimension and sculptural force to the piece. For the Barbican show, Albenda even devised a colour spectrum for the exhibition catalogue. "I wanted to create colour identities for the alphabet," he explains. "Giving each letter a different colour added a sensual perception and enriched how the words functioned."

Words also functioned in the installation at the Barbican. Albenda built a U-shaped corridor in one of the galleries, which served as both entry and exit points. You passed through the entrance between a concave portal and a word painting that said "little". In the opposite direction, through the exit, you moved between another portal, this time convex, and the word "little" again, but written backwards. In a sense, Sladen explains that Albenda likens the experience to "coming in a man and going out a woman, or coming in via the men's room and going out via the women's".

Albenda's vanguard approach to dealing with 3D space creates an interesting physiological experiment that adds a new dimension to contemporary sculpture. You'll never look at a hallway or doorway the same way again. **B**