

## GELAH PENN

### *Detour*

A guy sets out, full of hope, on a cross-country road trip to California. Thing is, he picks up a hitchhiker who mysteriously dies in his car. Soon a siren-of-a-girl is blackmailing him to keep quiet. The next thing they know, they're locked together by Fate, sliding headlong into one noirish, innocence-snuffing event after another.

This scenario may sound about as far from the brightly colored, evanescent sculptures made by Gelah Penn as anyone could get. But the Brooklyn-based artist (a self-confessed cineast) named the main installation in this show "Detour" (after the noir B-classic described above), and it's a telling fact. Partially because she likes to refer to the larger clusters of knots and loops that hang within it as "events"; but also because the path of her own creative journey is full of events that she coaxed along until they seemed to know just what path to take on their own.

Penn started out her academic studies at Brandeis, but before her degree was over she found herself at the San Francisco Art Institute pursuing a B.F.A. in painting. The work was abstract, colorful, but, says the artist, "somehow not enough. So I started putting things on the paintings." One of those things was human hair. Back in New York in the 1980s, Penn was walking down lower Broadway one day when she spotted some old, wooden hat-blocking forms. The connection was soon made: how perfect it would be to put the hair on those head-like forms instead of flat canvas.

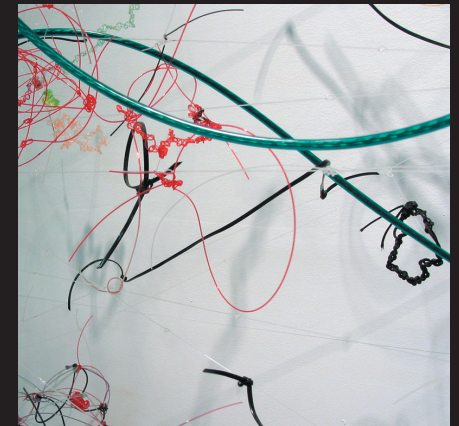
So for most of the '80s Penn, now a sculptor, started working things through, ultimately trying to reconcile her painterly roots with all these new materials. The hair-covered forms grew larger, more totemic. They started leaning against the wall. Hair got augmented with clear, vinyl tubing. Then came the next, and very important shift. Penn decided to lighten everything up a bit. But that wasn't enough. "So, I thought: why not eliminate structure altogether?"



Penn has developed her work over the last 15 years to the point where she's liking the language of installation so much that it seems like it's here to stay. There was copper mesh and Ping-pong balls, pipe cleaners, and the most prized of materials, monofilament (fishing line). Now it's mostly fishing line that's in the mix: 20-lb, 50-lb, 350-lb, stuff the diameter of dental floss on up to thick, vinyl-coated clothesline. The forms are fewer and farther between, until the whole piece is the form. There are decentralized, but highly reflective clusters of neon orange, of an underwater dark green, or a fleshy pink. Sometimes hundreds. All become little worlds, inextricably linked, that take no notice of each other. Like a good film, or a good painting, they catch the light and spread it around. "They're explosive things," as Penn points out.

So, A new scenario. You start out a painter. But you decide it's not enough. So you work and work, until you figure out a way to say something painterly in three dimensions, to translate your life experiences and what interests you in general into a new language of wire and plastic. "First, I'm finding a way [to work], then I'm finding another way," says the artist. Sometimes the detour is what you're after.

Sarah Schmerler



Detail photos of *DETOUR* (studio views)  
Monofilament, Dacron line, vinyl lanyard,  
plastic beads, lead weights, copper mesh,  
2005

### BIO:

Gelah Penn received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She has exhibited her work at Carl Berg Gallery in Los Angeles, Vox Populi Gallery in Philadelphia, and Kentler International Drawing Space, Sculpture Center, Sideshow Gallery, Realform Project Space, and Jack Tilton Gallery in New York. She has received a MacDowell Colony Fellowship and is in the Kentler Flatfiles and The Drawing Center's Viewing Program. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn.