

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

Monday, August 11th, 2008

Tensegrity

by Nora Griffin

Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery's storefront entrance on Williamsburg's Union Avenue bears minimal signs of a commercial gallery space, seamlessly blending in with the neighborhood's perpetual state of transformation. As such it is an appropriate setting to view the work of five artists who each in their own manner transform the "non-art" materials of urban refuse and raw construction to create restrained and complex abstractions.

Michael DeLucia's "Gate," a cement encrusted section of a chain-link fence stands as a kind of portal into the inter-related world of each object in the one-room gallery. It's a vision that is both childlike and slightly menacing in its re-imagining of an ordinary street object. "Gate" is a strangely impassive yet tense object, able to carry on a conversation with the gallery's nearby free-standing radiator, as well as the totality of the space. Looking like a cross between a sublime construction site accident and Antonio Gaudi's drippy sandcastle architecture, "Gate" is an ideal entry point to understanding the spirit of transforming the quotidian that permeates each artwork.

Elisa Lendvay's sculptures, "Pass" and "Three," created from charred wood and papier mache, are placed on pedestals in the manner of a primitive shrine or devotional offering. The ageless materials could be scraps recycled yesterday and picked up on a street corner, or have existed for centuries buried in caves. The patterned rust of the tin ceiling is reflected in the mirrors that each piece sits on. An orange band painted around one of the wood pieces in "Pass" recalls nautical colors, a fragment from a buoy, or the remnants of driftwood grouped together to start a fire.

The flash of orange paint, the mark of the artist's hand on seemingly scrappy material, also appears in Jim

Lee's painting "untitled (History and Belief)." The painting is a slightly irregular grey shield-shape, supported by simple plywood pieces, constructed to be the painting surface's visible sides. Lee's other painting in the show, "Untitled (Shaft)," rests against the gallery wall like a stray ski, maroon and black diagonals give it a flag-like presence. A delicate framework of balsa wood supports the canvas surface, calling to mind the basement ingenuity of model airplane construction.

The tension between painted minimalism and a comparatively rough fabricated support is a personal signature of Lee's. The resulting Malevich meets Home Depot aesthetic is reminiscent of the experimentation in the 1960s and 70s towards a new poetics of painting supports and structures. Artists such as Ron Gorchov, who left the rectangle of the painting frame behind to work on a curved, sculptural stretcher, an intimation of the infinity of Space beyond the painted surface. Don Voisine, a New York painter whom Lee is currently in a group show with at the Thomas Robertello Gallery in Chicgo, paints hard-edged abstractions of color planes, X's and diagonals on feather-thin, industrial pink and yellow Styrofoam. The illusion of indestructibility and determined eternity of the painted abstraction is given a fresh mortality by the exposed material of its edges. Lee's wooden supports have a similar function to Voisine's Styrofoam, disseminating the tension away from the two-toned solid grey sublime to the handmade craft that supports it.

Joy Curtis's sculpture, "Eight," in dialogue with Lendvay's "Pass" and "Three," looks like a fragment of colorful wreckage from a ship or flooded house. The piece, standing 5' 5" tall, was created from household molding cut and glued together. The mottled rainbow colors against the white wood surface appear as the natural result of sanding the painted surface. Like a rainbow of oil in a puddle after a rainstorm the effect is one of elemental magic.

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Inhabiting the gallery's back wall and baseboard is Keiko Narahashi's installation, "assembler," a grouping of small boxy shapes of varying sizes, painted in bright white with red and black accents. The forms range in character from candy-like pills to geometric constructivism, effectively recalling both the building blocks of childhood, and the deeply learned lessons of painting all at once. Like "Eight," and "Gate," the objects of "assembler" were created from a repetitive process of material transformation. In this case paper boxes coated in layers of paint to achieve their own individual architecture.

The overriding mood in the gallery is inexplicably hopeful, perhaps a subliminal effect of the Buckminster Fuller term, "Tensegrity," given to the exhibition. Fuller's theory of tensegrity, the harmonious synergy and tension of parts within an integral structure, was later adopted by Carlos Castaneda to define ancient physical and mental exercises ("magical passes") practiced by Mexican Shamans. By doing so he effectively translates a construction-based theory of energy onto the human scale, as the bodily energy that passes fluidly from waking to dreaming consciousness. In narrative form this is perhaps best defined by Borges' magician of "The Circular Ruins," who at the moment of his death finds that he is not a mortal, but rather merely the dream of another. Witness to the ever-shifting zone between found object and art object, construction and luminosity, visitors to Klaus von Nichtssagend's "Tensegrity" are given the privilege of the dreamer forever awakening to new perceptual realities.