

From the Floor

Writing about looking at art. From the floor of the gallery, the museum, and the private collection.

By Todd Gibson

Thursday, July 14, 2005

Janet Cardiff, *Off with Her Head*

Maybe it's due to the summertime dearth of art world activities, but Janet Cardiff's work is popping up all over this week. Seeing one of her pieces, though, is no longer at the top my list of things to do this weekend.

Cardiff's Internet project *Eyes of Laura* received a [tepid review from Sarah Boxer](#) in the *NY Times* earlier this week. Greg [chimed in today with a riff](#) on Cardiff's work and on Boxer's piece, mentioning that the 33,000 art world insiders who subscribe to the [e-flux mailing list](#) are already in on the site's secret.

I've seen significantly less coverage, though, on what looks to be a truly interesting project—Cardiff and George Bures Miller's installation *Pandemonium* (at right) at [Eastern State Penitentiary](#) in Philadelphia. From the e-flux press release for this work (does Cardiff do anything that *doesn't* get e-fluxed?):

Cardiff and Miller will present *Pandemonium* in Cell Block Seven, a massive, cathedral-like, two-story wing completed in 1836. It has never been open to the public, and has been stabilized especially for this exhibition. . . . Using the existing elements in the prison cells Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller have made the entire Cellblock Seven into a giant musical instrument, producing a percussive site work. This instrument, controlled by a computer and midi system, is made up of one hundred and twenty separate beaters hitting disparate objects such as toilet bowls, light fixtures and bedside tables found within the prison cells. The composition begins subtly as if two prisoners are trying to communicate and then moves through an abstract soundscape and lively dance beats until it reaches a riot-like crescendo.

I had made tentative plans to piggyback a visit to ESP onto a trip I was supposed to make to that area on Saturday, but then I saw mention on the website that children under seven are not allowed into the facility. I tried pulling the few short strings that I have, but no luck. They won't let me in if I have the kid with me. It's a city of Philadelphia rule, supposedly. Can the government really deny admission to a public



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About the Site

From the Floor

From the Floor focuses on viewers' engagement with contemporary visual art. The site covers several topics: arts interpretation, institutions that present art, the strategies they use for mediating the public's experience, and (on a more subjective, and frequent, basis) things that I've been looking at recently.

Todd Gibson

I trained as a literary critic, but I sold my soul and now work for The Man. I keep it fresh, though, by giving gallery talks for the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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facility because of a person's age? If I want my Cardiff fix I guess I'll have to remain satisfied with [a Cardiff-led walk through Central Park](#).

It's probably for the better anyway that I'm not going to ESP because now I come to find out that this Saturday is the day for their annual Bastille Day celebration.

This year's event will culminate on Saturday, July 16th at 5:30 PM when dozens of French revolutionaries, armed with muskets and cannon, and singing "La Marseilles," storm the grim walls of "the Bastille" (Eastern State Penitentiary) and drag Marie Antoinette to a real, functioning guillotine, built for the occasion.

I've heard that in past years Marie Antoinette has thrown Twinkies to the crowd from her position on the parapet prior to the storming of the walls. Let them eat cake, indeed. No mention is made, though, of whether or not the crowd gets to parade her head around on a pike after she visits the guillotine.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 12:02 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

So THAT'S What They Look Like

What a [ragtag bunch](#) [via].

Posted by Todd Gibson, 11:12 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Bronx Museum, Part 2, and a Tangent

I figure that since I went to all the trouble of leaving Manhattan to see a show I need to get at least two posts out of it.

Add the Bronx Museum to the list of art museums that has started [its own blog](#). It will be interesting to see if these institutions are able to balance the spontaneity and irreverence that make good blogs sticky with the need to represent the organization to the public.

On a separate topic, there is a piece included in AIM 25 that I didn't mention in yesterday's post but that I thought I would highlight today--for a purely self-indulgent reason.

Esperanza Mayobre's work, *y dio a luz* (at right), is sort of a conceptual portrait in neon of my kid. (In Spanish-speaking countries, when a woman gives birth people say "Dio a luz" which translates literally as "She gave light.") The cool white neon looks great in the gallery space, and seeing it installed there gave both the real baby and her dad a smile.



And, speaking of irreverent blogs and kids, for the last couple days I've

Discussion with Robert Lazzarini
Five Simple Rules for Talking about Art
Respect and the Forty Year Itch
Walking the Jetty
Made for TV at Rockefeller Center
The Thomas Kinkade Company
Acquires Maurizio Cattelan

Discussion Fodder

Current Exhibitions

Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture closes 07/24/05

Contemporary Erotic Drawing closes 08/07/05

Prints into Drawings closes 08/28/05

Greater New York 2005 closes 09/26/05

AIM 25 closes 10/02/05

Remote Viewing closes 10/09/05

Robert Smithson closes 10/23/05

Unknown Territory: Agnes Martin's Paintings from the 1960s closes 11/17/05

Daily Reads, Arts and Culture Blogs

About Last Night

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Artblog.net

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A Daily Dose of Architecture

Fallon and Rosof's Artblog

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In Search of the Miraculous

Insurgent Muse

James Wagner

Life without Buildings

Modern Art Notes

Modern Kicks

NEWSgrist

The OC Art Blog

Slower

Studio Notebook

Thinking About Art

The View from the Edge of the Universe

Wooster Collective

Zeke's Gallery

been in stitches over the (four-year-old but new to me) blog [Dooce](#). I guess it's not just in [arts-related matters](#) that I'm the last one to find out about the good stuff.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 7:40 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Tuesday, July 12, 2005

A Different Sort of Summer Group Show

It's become a seasonal event—the flocking of dealers and collectors to Columbia and Hunter open studios and MFA exhibitions. With all those birds [migrating elsewhere this weekend](#), anyone staying in the city has the opportunity for a peaceful, quiet viewing of an exceptionally strong group show.

The Bronx Museum isn't usually thought of as prime hunting ground for emerging talent, but it should be. Its annual Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) exhibition features notable work by a talented group of young artists, most of whom don't yet have gallery representation.

This year's exhibition, [AIM 25](#), has no overarching theme, and there's no curatorial vision imposed on the works included. The show simply presents pieces (ranging from the very strong to the moderately interesting) from this year's program participants. The show includes work in diverse media—from painting to video to drawing to performance. Some of the most interesting work, though, is sculptural.

Olen Hsu's installation, *Anacoluthon* (installation view at right), raises more questions than it answers. Made of paper, latex, and twine, this soft sculpture of withering objects used for making music (a piano, music stands) emits a soft, pleasing algorithmically composed melody that draws viewers into the work's presence and provides a soundtrack for their exploration of the piece's surface and forms.



Installed nearby, Tom Kotik's *Brown (Maximum Volume)* also uses sound to hook viewers, but in Kotik's case the sound made by the work is inaudible. The piece—an amplifier connected to an exposed speaker which pulses slowly and regularly—plays a tone so low as to be outside the range of human hearing. Expecting to hear something interesting emerging from this simply presented, out-of-date audio technology, viewers instead are transfixed by the disturbing pulsing of the woofer, becoming mesmerized by the strange soundless motion it makes.



[Meridith Pingree's](#) kinetic sculpture, *Worm Decay* (at left), also commands interest as it pulses, wiggles, and jerks in response to movement in its environment. Across the gallery, [Beth](#)

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The Morning News
3 Quarks Daily
WPS1: Art Radio

From the Floor's Archives

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Legalese

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Gilfilen's quiet and still three-dimensional installation of cut and drawn-upon commercial paint chips sits firmly within the body of work

emerging in recent years that will be seen by future art historians as having meaningfully expanded the possibilities for the medium of drawing.

This is not to say that only the sculptural works in the show are of interest. Vlatka Horvat's four photographs from her *Searching* series present a young woman—head stuck into a bush, under a car, and in other strange places—obviously searching for something. But what? The ambiguity of the poses and the implied narrative delight. Thessia Machado includes a wonderful two-minute-long soundless digital video that focuses on a woman's navel. Her belly is covered with small moles which she flicks with her finger. When each is touched it spirals down into the vortex of her belly button and disappears into the folds of skin. Equally as quirky and engaging as Horvat's photographs, this piece is a small humorous gem.

Rather than turning it into a hodgepodge of recent work, the lack of curator-imposed homogeneity in this show is refreshing. It's the summer group show that is an antidote to what's currently on display around Chelsea. If gallerists from that neighborhood would be willing to make the train trip up to the Bronx (note to galleristas: it doesn't take as long to get there as it does to get to the Hamptons), they'll be sure to find much of interest for their fall and spring seasons.

AIM 25 is on display at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#) through October 2, 2005.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 7:10 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Monday, July 11, 2005

Sound Advice for Young Artists

The July/August issue of *Art on Paper* leads with an interesting cover story. A young, anonymous artist working on the publication's staff wrote letters to several established artists seeking advice on building a career in the art world. The issue reproduces, exactly as submitted, the dozen letters the writer received in response. Some are hand written while others are typed. Some are coherent; others ramble and are painfully indirect.



Gregory Amenoff's response, the most practical and probably the most sound in the lot, so impressed me that I wanted to share a short summary of his major points. His advice comes one main point per paragraph, and he makes my job easy by printing each of his major suggestions in red caps.

- Artists drive the bus (not critics, curators, art historians, etc.)
- Let your studio be a sanctuary
- Don't be afraid to do dumb things in the studio
- Keep away from art fairs ("Instead visit a museum and spend time in the wing housing art from centuries past. You will be rejuvenated not demoralized.")
- Support your fellow artists as they support you
- Read biographies of artists
- A life in art is a long race not a short sprint

For the remainder of Amenoff's thoughts, and to see the other 11 responses, pick up a copy of the issue on the newsstand.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 7:33 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Friday, July 08, 2005

Summer Doldrums

The lazy, quiet July and August artworld summer days are here (the horrific events in London yesterday, [notwithstanding](#)). Blog readership is down, posting fodder is scarce (but, thank goodness, [there will always be the *Wall Street Journal*](#)), and there's not even that much of interest showing around the city to write about.

Last week I spent an afternoon walking through Chelsea. After seeing group show upon group show my mind began to wander. I began wishing I was at the beach instead.

Holland Cotter doesn't feel the same way. In today's *Times* he has [a long piece highlighting this summer's selections](#). The piece is so long, in fact, that my mind started to wander while reading it. Maybe it is time for a trip to the beach.

But if I were to head to the shore, I wouldn't know what book to bring along because this week I have all but polished off every art blogger's requisite summer read--the new [de Kooning biography](#). Following the narrative of the painter's life has left me feeling depressed: all the years of poverty, the vagaries of his critical reception, the inability to form and sustain interpersonal relationships, the chronic inability to make decisive decisions, the battle with alcoholism and the continual binges, the slide into dementia. The list could go on. It's almost enough to make a bourgeois suburban life sound idyllic.

Ouch. I think I do need a vacation. A few days in Chicago, perhaps? Flavin at the [MCA](#), a Cubs game, a day at the beach on Lake Michigan. I ought to look into booking tickets.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 11:41 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Wednesday, July 06, 2005

Boston [Hearts] Las Vegas

I don't love Las Vegas. I hate it actually. I find myself having to go every few years for work, and I don't look forward to the trip anymore. But Boston's Museum of Fine Arts doesn't seem to feel the same way.

Tyler Green takes the MFA and its director, Malcolm Rogers, to task in a [Boston Globe op-ed piece this week](#) for sending another selection of paintings from its collection to Sin City. While I find myself agreeing with my friend's opinions most of the time, on this issue I don't.

Green seems to think that this heralds a new approach to museum management, dangerously shifting the paradigm of what a nonprofit art museum should do. I'm not so sure I agree. As I see it, the MFA has just taken to the next level what every other major museum is already doing—curating traveling exhibitions and partnering with for-profit entities to earn income from its assets. And I'm not convinced that, in theory, that's necessarily a bad thing.

While most don't admit it, museums often hope to make a profit from the exhibition fees they charge other institutions for hosting the shows they organize. Additional revenue is generated by the gift shop sales that accompany these shows. The book publishers, post card printers, note card producers, umbrella manufacturers, etc. who create the swag that gets sold are always for-profit partners who make money by establishing a revenue-sharing arrangement of some sort with the museum.

This model is, essentially, what we have with the latest MFA show in Las Vegas. In this case, though, the for-profit entity has taken a more active role in bringing the traveling exhibition to the public—by providing the exhibition space and managing the show. But that's nothing new or nefarious either. A couple of the best, most scholarly, single-artist shows I have seen in the last few years have been produced and exhibited by commercial galleries. Rothko at PaceWildenstein and Gorky at Gagosian come immediately to mind. Both these shows included works lent by nonprofit, museum collections. And, I daresay, their inclusion was justified by the quality of and insight provided by the exhibitions.

What Green, and many others, seem to forget is that it take cash (and a whole lot of it) to run an art museum. Just because an institution has nonprofit status doesn't mean that it can't or shouldn't try to make money on certain endeavors. A museum director would be remiss if he or she didn't maximize revenue-generating opportunities—as long as they are done in a manner that's consistent with the organization's mission. As a nonprofit, the organization is responsible for using the profits that it may make to subsidize its mission-driven operations and programs that do not earn enough income to cover their costs. I assume that is what profits from Las Vegas are being used for back home in Boston.

Rogers et al. at the MFA have broken new ground with these Vegas shows. The approach makes certain people uncomfortable and does set a precedent that sits close to the line of what constitutes ethical museum practice. I don't think that the line has been crossed by these two shows, though. But because the line is being approached it is

worth keeping an eye on future partnerships that the MFA develops. I know I'll be doing that. And I'm sure Tyler will too.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 11:03 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Monday, July 04, 2005

What the))<>((?

Have any idea what))<>((means? Don't bother checking the search engine of your choice. As of today, you won't get any results if you search for))<>((.

Is that because search engines don't index character sets that don't have letters, or is it that the spiders haven't yet found [this new Iconoduel post](#) or [Miranda July's delightful new blog](#) documenting the release of her first feature film, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*?

Well, don't hold your breath because I'm not going to tell you what))<>((means. But I will tell you that it's well worth your while to go see July's big screen debut to find out for yourself.

There's much, much more to the film than just this strange ASCII character set (you know, the))<>((I've mentioned several times now) to recommend it. The film is so good, evidently, that it brought Iconoduel out of semi-retirement. See [that post](#) for more detail, description, and insight on the film than I've given here.

See, this post isn't intended to be a review. It's actually more of an experiment. Will this entry get indexed by the major search engines and eventually be returned as a search result for))<>((? Exactly how many times do you think I need to use))<>((in a post before it gets noticed?

And, speaking of noticing, while you're watching *Me and You* see if you can spot the brief appearance in the film of a work that was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. Extra credit if you find it.

Update: I have it on good authority that punctuation doesn't get indexed--so no top-of-the-search-results listing for this post.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 4:40 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Friday, July 01, 2005

More Proof that the Cutting Edge Cuts Elsewhere

I've been uncharacteristically negative here over the last week. Let me head into the long holiday weekend by getting a little bit splenetic on myself for a change.

If you read From the Floor for up-to-the-minute news and notes, you're looking at the wrong site.

Case in point. The other day I walked past the former midtown home of art-loving Deutsche Bank. The building now has the law firm Clifford Chance as its marquee tenant. That's the same Clifford Chance that was a major sponsor of this year's Armory Show. It's also the same Clifford Chance that is building an important collection of works on paper by emerging artists.

Fortunately for us midtown suits, Clifford Chance has kept the building's small lobby gallery. Currently on view is an exhibition curated by the firm's art consultant, [Dinaburg Arts](#). The show, entitled *Woven*, features work by ten artists who are either working with textiles or are using what are traditionally considered to be textile methods of production (e.g., weaving, crocheting, etc.) in other media.

What stopped me in my tracks as I walked by the lobby windows was a fantastic, gigantic piece by Lucky DeBellevue. I did a double-take, then a triple-take. I stopped and stared at it through the window. I turned around, walked into the building and looked at it in person. I managed to snap a couple shots of the untitled piece from 2004 before I was told by the lobby attendants that photography was not allowed. (Not that it mattered much as my camera is now telling me I have a memory card error, and the images are not recoverable. So no pictures here, unfortunately.)

I'm not always a fan of DeBellevue's work, but this piece is stupendous. The contrast in color and texture between the chenille stems and the plastic pearl-like ball, the juxtaposition of forms on the right and left sides—everything about the work feels right.

When I got back to a computer I did a quick Google search to check a few facts before I wrote something on the piece for the blog. And what do I find near the top of my search results as I start reviewing them?

[This.](#)

James Wagner saying exactly the same thing as I intend to say about exactly the same piece. But he says it seven months before I do. And he gets his digital camera to work so he has an image to show. (There's another available [here](#), for the time being, at Artnet.)

DeBellevue's piece (*Untitled*, 2004), and the rest of the show, is on view in the lobby of 31 West 52nd Street through September 7, 2005.

Clarification (update): The lobby gallery of 31 West 52nd is sponsored by the building's management company, not by Clifford Chance. Dinaburg Arts, however, curates for both organizations.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 8:55 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Thursday, June 30, 2005

[A Monument to Disappointment](#)



If you do project-based work in a corporate environment for long enough, you're certain to run across a project that turns out to be impossible to complete to anyone's satisfaction.

Too many people have a political stake of some sort in the outcome. None of them want to be involved or helpful, and no one really cares about the project's ultimate success. But they all need to make sure that what's eventually delivered has some aspect to it that they can use to cover their ass someday in the event of failure.

The team running the project on a day-to-day basis gets fed up with the work. There's no way they can win because the project hasn't been set up to succeed. Every creative, novel, or unique idea they have tried to implement has been killed off by the whim of one stakeholder or another. Team morale plummets. Instead of wanting to deliver a winning solution, they begin wanting the project to be over, no matter how mediocre the final product. So everyone holds his or her nose and puts in long hours to finish off something that no one is proud of.

The individual who holds ultimate responsibility for the work eventually stands up in a big meeting somewhere and presents the results. Everyone involved in the effort knows that the work is mediocre, but no one admits it. (Maybe it's not a total disaster, but it's nowhere near what everyone thought they would be able to deliver in the early, heady days of the effort when anything seemed possible.) Instead, the team leader claims victory, and everyone moves on--hoping that no one asks them if they worked on this project when they interview for their next job. And people on the team will be interviewing for that next job shortly because working on this project has caused them to hate their company, their bosses, their client, and perhaps even their choice of a profession.

This scenario occurs all the time in corporate America. It's just that this week the results of one such project have played out in a very public way on a very large scale--a 1,776 foot scale to be exact.

Behold, Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill's revised plans for the Freedom Tower--disappointment made tangible, on a monumental scale. Or, rather, disappointment that will be made tangible by 2010.

A 200-foot high wall of concrete at ground level--right next to the planned World Trade Center Memorial? Every innovative feature of the somewhat lackluster original design stripped away in this version? Damn it. What a wasted opportunity.



The situation is almost enough to make me nostalgic for the days of Robert Moses, when a single individual with a strong vision had enough

political power to realize revolutionary public works. In the absence of that power, we get buildings like this--an embodiment of the lowest common denominator result that occurs when politicians and bureaucrats design by committee and architects agree to do their bidding.

Related: [New York Times slideshow of the new design](#). *NY Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff [doesn't attempt to hide his disappointment](#) with the new design.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 8:40 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Wednesday, June 29, 2005

Good Reads

A couple interesting things have popped up around the internets this morning.

Artnet has a piece about [the real-life adventures of a real-life art handler](#). The piece made me think of some funny stories I heard recently (which I can't really share) about the installation of the Smithsonian show.

Via ArtsJournal today, the *Times* (the other one) has an [interesting piece on corporate art collections](#). There's nothing too terribly revealing in the piece, but I did love this bit. Call it "art history in the elevator":

Over at [Deutsche Bank] corporate headquarters, the twin towers building in Frankfurt, "one of the briefest attempts at art history ever made can be seen in the lifts". Every one of its 55 floors is named after a particular artist, and when you reach, say, floor B – Beuys – you get "the inevitable picture of him in his felt hat", a statement about his work, and various works on paper. "Travelling down the building the artists get younger and younger," comments Hicks. "The floors are arranged chronologically."

Only the Germans.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 10:35 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Dia: Beacon, Two Years Later

Last weekend I paid my first visit to Dia: Beacon since shortly after it opened. I couldn't help but notice how little has changed there in the last two years, and I was surprised by how mediocre much of what's on display seems now that the gloss of the grand opening has worn away.

When Dia: Beacon opened in a former Nabisco box factory in May 2003, the building and the collection it housed were received with a level of media and public attention not to be topped until MoMA opened its renovated Midtown home last year. The facility drew 100,000 visitors in

its first six months (against an opening year projection of 60,000) and received ample coverage in the art and mainstream press—including a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Two years later, the institution pushes ahead, offering a few, small special exhibitions but sticking close to its mission of presenting long-term (very long-term) installations of works by select artists.

On the one hand, this is a blessing. The three Richard Serra **torqued ellipses and one torqued spiral** housed in the building's former train shed (at right) are so wonderful that it would be a shame to ever take them off view. Ditto for the **large number of works by Fred Sandback** that Dia: Beacon shows. Sandback's simple yarn pieces, the most minimal of all the minimalists' work, never receive this much attention elsewhere.



But much of the work at Dia: Beacon is second-rate work by well-known artists.

Walter de Maria's *The Equal Area Series* just isn't up to the task that it's asked to perform in the building's long, long, light-filled opening galleries. I would much prefer to see Dia move **de Maria's *The Broken Kilometer*** out of its Soho home and install it in these galleries. This space, with its long sight lines and beautiful light, would be the perfect location to view this much more interesting piece.

Along with de Maria, Andy Warhol gets too much space for what is pure second-rate work. His ***Shadows series***, installed in a large gallery here for the long term, failed to impress me the first time I saw it. It failed again this time. One current special exhibition "**Dia's Andy: Through the Lens of Patronage**" trots out a host of mostly mediocre works from the era when Warhol was more interested in making a buck than in making art. Seeing all these horrible, formulaic celebrity portraits from the 1980s gathered together in one place does nothing to enhance his reputation, Dia's reputation, or the reputation of the Warhol Museum which now owns the pieces.

Dia's mission has always been in its commitment to a limited number of artists and its willingness to collect their work in depth. In some cases that's a strength. Dia's collection of **Dan Flavin's works** is outstanding. So is its selection of **John Chamberlain's pieces** (at right). But often this approach results in Dia holding a few remarkable works by an artist and dozens of mediocre ones. The display of **Robert Ryman's works** illustrates this weakness. Two or three of his pieces on view are stellar. A number are good. The vast majority are not notable in any way.



To devote so much space to so much mediocre work by so many artists

for such long periods of time makes me think that other opportunities are being missed. Fortunately, the high points of the collection (the Serras, the Sandback installation, the [Judd pieces](#), the Flavin *Monuments for V. Tatlin*, the [special exhibition of Agnes Martin paintings from the 1960s](#), and Michael Heizer's *Negative Megalith* which takes my breath away each time I see it) more than offset that limited sense of disappointment.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 7:27 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Tuesday, June 28, 2005

Surprises at the Smithson Show

I have been looking forward to seeing the Robert Smithson retrospective since well before it opened in LA last year. I finally had my chance last Sunday at the Whitney, and it would be fair to say that my expectations weren't met.

I was surprised by several things:

- How horrible Smithson's paintings, drawings, and collages from the 1960s are. Most of this work is figurative, and his talent clearly wasn't in his ability to depict the human figure.
- On a related note, Smithson wasn't a very good draftsman, period. Even when he moved away from the figure and started drawing plans for site-specific works, the drawing has a hard time standing on its own, as one would hope that it would be able to.
- Smithson's early sculpture is painfully bad. Think of the perfect wall decoration for a 1960s-style conversation pit lined with shag carpet and filled with fuzzy throw pillows. There. You've got the picture.
- The [Whitney's own *Non-site*](#) is not installed as part of the show. It's just as good as, or better than, any of the *Non-site* works that are included.
- The films are horrible. In general, the bar for watchability is set amazingly low for artists' video and film, but Smithson's filmmaking has a hard time clearing even that bar. The production quality is low. There's no sense of drama or conflict or plot in the works; there's nothing to push the films along. And there's not much in the works of intrinsic interest to get someone to want to stay with them through their duration. (Nancy Holt carrying a camera through a swamp with Smithson giving direction from behind? I mean, really.) And, worst of all, most of the film work is painfully, painfully pretentious.

I did, though, find it interesting to finally have the chance to watch the 32-minute-long film Smithson made on the creation of *Spiral Jetty*. I had seen pieces of it in the past, but I've never had the opportunity to watch the whole thing from start to finish.

Like the other films included in the show it's hokey and arrogant. Smithson starts the film with close-up images of the sun and shots of dinosaur skeletons in a museum. (The dinosaur shots, for some reason,

were taken through a red filter.) By doing so, he chooses to situate *Spiral Jetty* in the context of nature and natural history. Throughout the film Smithson keeps the view of *Spiral Jetty* closely cropped so that nothing other than his work and the work's immediate surroundings is visible. This effectively established the framework for critical discussions of the work that would occur over the next two and a half decades.

This is interesting because Smithson could just as easily have chosen to place *Spiral Jetty* within the context of the industrial landscape in which he built it. At two points during the film, viewers get a passing, background glimpse of the oil-drilling jetty situated less than half a mile to the east. You have to be watching for it to see it, the shots are so quick. (See the satellite photo at right for an indication of how close these two jetties are--and by how much the industrial jetty dwarfs Smithson's work.)



I was surprised by these two shots in the film because they both show not just the oil drilling jetty that remains at the site today, but they also clearly show a giant drilling derrick at the end of the jetty that is no longer there. The site was even more clearly a working industrial landscape at the time Smithson built his piece than it is today, but Smithson chose not to highlight that fact in the film--even though his *Non-site* works had explored the concept of the industrial, entropic landscape a few years before. It's only been in the last few years, since *Spiral Jetty* reemerged from the water and people started visiting the site again, that discussion of this aspect of the work has arisen.

The show does an admirable job of providing context for Smithson's great earthworks, but the gallery-sized pieces themselves (other than the *Non-sites* and a couple of the *Displacements*) disappoint.

Related: MAN has a [great piece today](#) on the experience of visiting *Spiral Jetty* which also mentions the industrial landscape that Smithson chose to elide in his own presentation of the work.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 7:53 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Sunday, June 26, 2005

Weekend Reading

I paid a visit to Dia: Beacon on Saturday (more on that later), so I had several hours on the train to spend working through a pile of magazines that has been rapidly growing in the living room.

To recap a couple of the high (or low) points, we begin by continuing the architectural eyewear meme started [here](#). I finally finished a months-old issue of the *New Yorker* that has a profile of Rem Koolhaas by Daniel Zalewski. The author can't help himself, and he hits on the

topic on the first page of the piece:

Like many architects, he signals his profession with intimidatingly unusual eyewear. He currently favors a modular design, in which rectangular plastic lenses snap into chopstick-straight temples of various colors. Today's choice was reserved: tortoiseshell.

And I came across an [anti-almanac](#) entry in the most recent issue of *Artforum* (which is usually good for at least one per issue). This one comes from "a roundtable discussion on land art's changing terrain." The critic (as usual) remains anonymous here:

I completely agree with you that today the exterior lies in the social, in that so many artists posit the latter as the only authentic point of resistance to capital.

I don't know any artists who are resisting capital. If anything, they're using their social networks to try to get some of it for themselves.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 5:41 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Thursday, June 23, 2005

D'Arcy on Lewis, Krens, and the Guggenheim

In today's *Wall Street Journal* David D'Arcy shows that he's not going to be threatened by another major New York art institution and [goes for the Guggenheim's throat](#). (Or maybe he just figures that if it's only a single freelance piece [no one can get him fired for it](#).)

D'Arcy has former Guggenheim chair Peter Lewis on the record with details of what caused him to leave the board after a public fight with museum director Thomas Krens.

"In speeches, it was, 'We're the museum of the future.' It was sold that sort of way," he says. In fact it was driven by the need for revenue. "The rationale always was, 'We had a nongenerous, noncontributing set of trustees--therefore we had to have other sources of revenue and capital--that's why we must expand,'" he says.

"It's not the Guggenheim--it's the Guggenheim merchandising the Bilbao effect," says Mr. Lewis.

And on his partnership with Krens over the years, Lewis says the following.

"They tried to keep me from leaving. They told me, 'You two were such a team,'" Mr. Lewis said. "Yeah, we were a team. I wrote the checks and he [poured] the money away."

Lewis does plan to honor his pledge to support restoration of the Frank Lloyd Wright building, even though he has left the board. But he has his own architect monitoring the process and determining when, and how much, to dole out as work is completed.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 2:42 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Book of the Week

Loretta Lux has received a good deal of attention from collectors and the media over the last few years. The attention has been well deserved.

Her mesmerizing, highly manipulated portraits of children grab viewers' attention with the intensity of their color and the emotion conveyed through the poses into which she places her subjects. (At right, *The Blue Dress*, 2001.)



The Aperture Foundation has recently published the first [monograph of Lux's work](#). Entitled *Loretta Lux*, the book presents 45 of Lux's portraits from recent years and includes an essay on her work by Francine Prose.

Related: the [artist's website](#) with more examples of her work.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 12:49 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Tuesday, June 21, 2005

Back in Action Shortly

It's been unusually quiet here for the last few weeks because it's been unusually unquiet on the work front. But it looks like the worst of the marathon work weeks and visits to unattractive Midwestern suburbs are behind me now, so I'll be back with more frequent fresh content here shortly.

This morning I need to put together an acceptance speech for the [Encore Awards ceremony](#) this afternoon. After that item is checked off the list, I'll see if I can pull together a couple things I've been thinking about for the blog.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 8:36 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Wednesday, June 15, 2005

The Multi-Generational Curatorial Meme

I've been hearing a curious amount of talk lately about curating shows so that they are "multi-generational." It was a stated objective of the last Whitney Biennial, and the idea keeps coming up as I visit nonprofit exhibition spaces and talk with the curators there.

I'm not completely sure what's going on here. Is this just a reaction to a youth-obsessed market by those who aren't directly selling art? Or is it an emerging, latter-day, anxiety-of-influence type of movement

among youngish curators?

Posted by Todd Gibson, 12:01 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Monday, June 13, 2005

The Smell of 12 Tons of Prison Compost

The temperature had moved above 90. The humidity was unbearable. What better way to spend the day than visiting a room filled with 25,000 pounds of prison compost mixed into 50,000 pounds of Home Depot topsoil?

The surprise of the day? How little smell there was. Nothing noticeable at all, really.

The New York Dirty Room, Mike Bouchet's riff on [Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room*](#), is on view at Maccarone through August. Holland Cotter unpacked about everything possible from the work in a short *Times* review last month ([archived at NEWSgrist](#)).

Everything, that is, except the fact that the work lacks a revulsion factor. I was expecting a real, rotting stench. I was expecting to see steam rising from the piece as the compost continued to ferment on such a nasty hot day. But no luck.

Sure, the conceptual element is there—what Cotter talks about as the clean and the unclean—but the work suffers because it doesn't slap its viewers in the face (or, more precisely, in the nose) with a visceral gross out. Without something in the work itself that raises the ante or subverts the original, the piece comes across as a poor knock off of De Maria. It's not enough to be handed a Dia-like gallery guide (you know the kind, the 8 ½ x 5 ½ brochure) and told that this isn't the same sort of dirt that De Maria used.

It comes down to this: the work would be much better if it smelled much worse.

Posted by Todd Gibson, 12:01 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

Tuesday, June 07, 2005

And the Waters Keep Rising

By way of the [art blogosphere's native Utonian](#) (what do you call someone from Utah, anyway?) comes [this link](#) to a *Salt Lake Tribune* piece about rising water levels in the Great Salt Lake.

Spiral Jetty, it appears, may be spending a portion of this summer under water.

Elevation of the Great Salt Lake has risen, the



Tribune piece reports, a foot in the last thirty days, and it is a foot and a half higher than it was at this time last year. (Compare the photo in [this post](#) with the one from last June linked in the post.) The rise in water level has been attributed to low- and mid-range snowmelt. The lake will continue to rise over the next month as snow melts off the tops of the mountains in the Wasatch Range.



Posted by Todd Gibson, 10:15 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [E-mail a Link](#)

