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In Peekskill, 2 Shows of Raw Works

By Benjamin Genocchio



CAPTIVATING From far left: Cal Lane's "Gated Community" (2006) sits by the Hudson as part of the Peekskill Project, which also includes Gregg Segal's photograph "Detritus and Elderly Companion, Tokyo Suburb" (2007). Sigalit Landau's "Mother With Peacock Baby (From the Endless Solution)" (2005) is part of "Origins," at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art.

To describe the artworks in "Origins" at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art as anything other than raw would be to deny the essential point about them. Made for the most part out of natural materials, they attest to the ways artists continue to use the plainest, simplest things to make objects.

They also attest to something startling about beauty in contemporary sculpture, something that defies explanation, like the unexpected appeal of a simple circular arrangement of Cornish slate stones, a work by Richard Long, one of 30 artists from 15 countries participating in this inviting exhibition.

As a whole, this show moved and stimulated me beyond what I had expected. It is one of the more thoughtful curatorial efforts by the Center for Contemporary Art, and certainly one of its most ambitious. In addition to featuring works on loan from collectors in the United States and Europe, the exhibition includes projects several artists produced specifically for it.

"Origins" opens with works by Ana Mendieta, a pioneer of outdoor site-specific installations. On display are two series of photographs and a video, all of which capture representations of the female body in the landscape using stones, sand and fire. When viewing Ms. Mendieta's art we contemplate the fecundity of the earth and the female body. They evoke a feeling of being at one with the universe.

Opposite Ms. Mendieta's photographs is "Sphinges" (1985), a sculpture by the minimalist Carl Andre, her former husband. It consists of half a dozen large rectangular blocks of weathered white pine arranged in a grid. This doesn't sound like much, but the piece has a very particular and subtle beauty. Mr. Andre takes care to let the material sing the song of its intrinsic visual qualities.

Elsewhere in the show, there is a lot of impressive craftsmanship using unusual or unexpected materials. Zhang Huan's sculpture of an anonymous soldier, "Ash Army No. (?)" (2008), is an extraordinary technical achievement. Loosely modeled out of nothing but powdery gray ash, it seemingly defies the laws of gravity and optics. This is one of the best pieces in the exhibition.

Not all the artists are well known. Among them is Bruce Bickford, an underground artist from Seattle who makes animations using little handmade clay figures. Many, many months of painstaking work go into the creation of each of his works. "Prometheus' Garden" (1987), an early piece, is a rudimentary but nonetheless pleasantly entertaining riff on the Greek myth of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the god Zeus and gave it to human beings.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's "Seated Bowl" (1987) is an older work by the artist. It is a conceptual-minimalist hybrid, consisting of a ball of birch twigs wrapped in wire and resting on a makeshift cart. Each little element is executed with exquisite finesse, creating a beautifully ambiguous whole. It is captivating.

The same can also be said for several of the works in the Peekskill Project, an annual citywide, site-specific exhibition of contemporary art. This year's event, the fourth — smaller and more compact than past editions — features 55 artists who make art about the environment at 16 sites around the city.

The location of works is roughly split between indoor and outdoor locations. Among the outdoor works, one in particular stood out — Cal Lane's piece "Gated Community" (2006), installed by the riverfront. Ms. Lane has cut detailed decorative patterns into the sides of an old, rusted Dumpster to create an astonishingly original work of art. It asserts an immediate gravitational tug.

Tucked behind the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art is Michael Peterson and Jade Townsend's sculpture showing the facade of a house and white picket fence made out of recycled materials from photographic shoots. But this is no happy vision of suburbia. The house and fence appear to be sinking into the ground.

Two indoor sites stand out for the quality of work exhibited. The first is a vacant storefront on Main Street in downtown Peekskill where you will find work by Almagul Menlibayeva, Johannes Girardoni, Carla Rae Johnson, Liz Magic Laser and Ted Victoria. My pick of this bunch is Ms. Magic Laser, who stages eroticized imagery of lusty, scantily clad girls alone in the woods.

A 19th-century hat factory on Division Street is another worthy location. Here you will find squashed into two galleries works by Stephano Cagol, Emil Alzamora, Lorenz Estermann, Angelo Musco, Carolyn Salas, Adam Parker Smith, Ryan Schroeder and Gregg Segal. All impress, though Mr. Schroeder's replica of a garbage can, made of bee's wax, dazzles with its technical virtuosity.

But in reviewing this collective artistic effort, one is inevitably confronted with the realization that the sum is probably greater than the individual parts. There is just too much mediocre work. If the Peekskill Project is to thrive, it needs to attract better artists.

"Origins," Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main Street, Peekskill, through July 26. Information: hvcca.com or (914)788-7166. The Peekskill Project, citywide, selected works on view through Nov. 23.