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Peekskill Project V

A review by Talon Gustafson

[Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art](#)

I was sitting at the local brewery bar in Peekskill, looking at the menu, deciding between two beers, "Amazeballs" or "Midnight toker" (I went with the Midnight Toker), when a stumpy, older man approached the bartender leeringly. "Do you mind if ask you a question? What THE FUCK are we listening to here?" He phrased the question as if we were listening to breaking glass. I hadn't been paying attention, so absorbed was I in my Toker, but I stopped to take a listen – if it wasn't "Smooth" by Santana, it was something very similar. In a moment of, what I would imagine for him to be, rare humility, he addressed the bar with his concern, "Do you people fucking like this?" We nodded our heads "yes" and muttered "sure" and he sauntered back to his table with a what-the-hell-do-you-know? look on his face.

That was my parting impression of the opening of Peekskill Project V, a sprawling exhibition of contemporary art that dots the small of town of Peekskill, NY. According to the press-release Peekskill Project attempts to "bring cutting edge contemporary art out of the museum and into the community. Using the city as a stage, Peekskill Project activates the urban environment and its inhabitants through site-specific art exhibitions, performances and screenings sited in multiple venues throughout Peekskill." Having never heard of Peekskill Project, I had some false expectations. I fantasized that it would be set in a sort of Dia: Beacon-esque location, but more remote, tucked away in a pastoral landscape with animals canoodling in front of Thomas Cole panoramas. Instead, I found myself being jostled around on a school bus, climbing through the rustic town of Peekskill. I failed to pick up a map at the train station, so the first few stops, which were actually satellite exhibition sites, I assumed were local bus stops, blindly believing that Peekskill's local transit system was a big yellow bus. The bus driver dutifully stopped at each site, fielding annoying



Peekskill, NY



Michael Zelehoski, "Icehouse", 2012

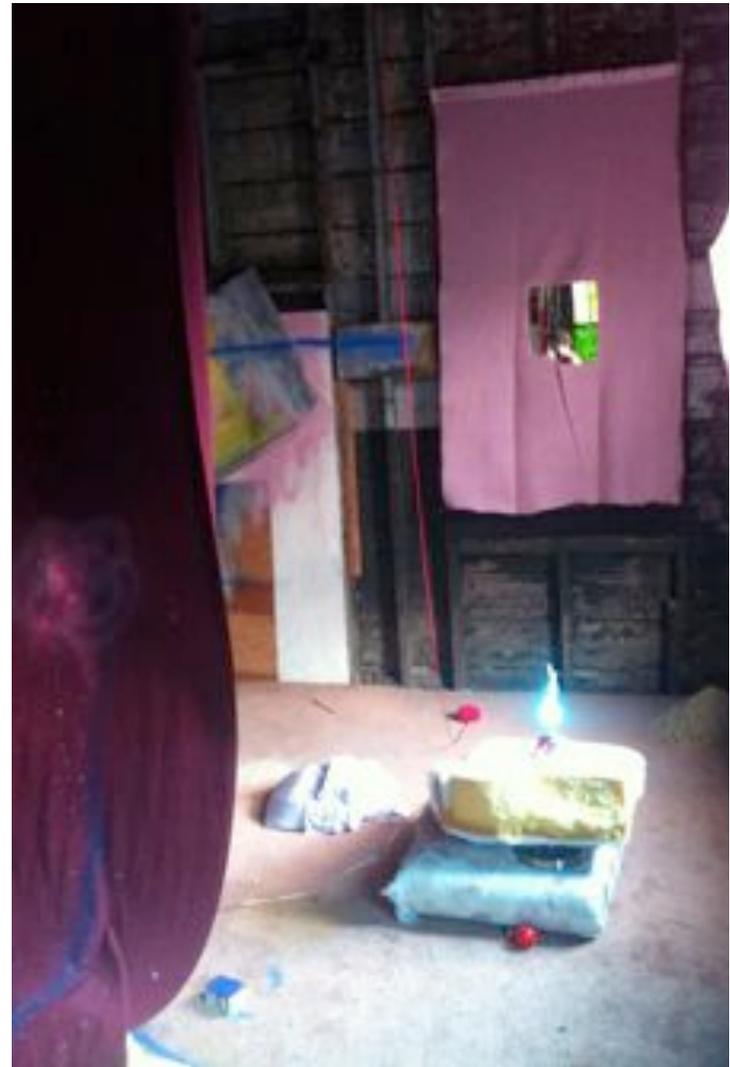


Virginia Martinsen, "A Refutation of the Argument from Design", 2012

questions from the passengers along the way such as “any good brunch spots around here?” To be fair, that was my question.

The hub of the exhibition is the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. Housed in what appears to be an old grocery store, the inside of the museum is surprisingly expansive, with two floors and a nice Thomas Hirschhorn installation, “Laundrette,” that is part of its permanent collection. This building is the only one of the several sites with a curatorial statement, which attempts to make a connection between the historical Hudson River School of painters and the contemporary artists exhibiting. The connection felt a little forced. Although most of the work did have notes of nature and the organic, it is mostly characterized by the imprint of humanity onto nature, focused on the flotsam and jetsam that scatters the earth: an abstract construction of shabby wood, an installation of found trash reconfigured into a viewing room displaying a video of the scavenger hunt, big stacks of cardboard piled into monolithic sculptures. Virginia Martinsen's large ab-exy painting was accompanied by a video of the artist creating the work set to a “pure moods” like soundtrack. Initially, I was hoping the video was a joke, maybe spoofing the documentation of Pollock's process, until I spent enough time with it to realize that I was most likely correct. Then I wanted it to be something else.

What about the key aspects of the Hudson River School? Romanticism? The sublime? Nature as a manifestation of Divinity? One artist does address these concerns. Directly across the street from the museum is another satellite installation. Walking up to the second floor of an old factory, the smell of shrimp(?) permeating the space, I was greeted by a friendly and charming but somewhat frazzled middle-aged woman, which I took to be the artist, Hanna Von Goeler. She opened up a black curtain and escorted me into a dark room. The windows were blacked out and blue lights hung from the ceiling. Three walls of the room had been completely painted from top to bottom, depicting a forest floor. She urged me to give it some time “It takes a while to take it in.” The lights, set to timers, changed at different intervals. Blue lights slowly dimmed as black lights slowly brightened, revealing



Martha Mysko, “Weekend Getaway”, 2012

glowing areas throughout the landscape. Finally all of the lights died out, leaving me with no vision (and the persistent smell of shrimp) before steadily turning on again. It was a nice experience. Somebody in my group likened it to the movie "Avatar" which made me think of a similar Rain Forest Cafe moment I had once. But the sincerity of the project, along with the artist's reverence for nature, moved it beyond any such associations into a charming meditation on the forest at twilight.

Back down the hill from the museum, along the river, I find a few scattered offshoot sites. One that stood out in particular was Martha Mysko's installation "Getaway Weekend," assembled in an old barn on the side of the road. Various pieces of thrift-store bric-a-brac and home furnishings were arranged with unexpected regard despite the scuzzy materials. At first glance you might think a group of mischief-making teens trashed the set of Married with Children and stole all of the nice stuff. But the work reveals itself to be formally polished. Mysko made the most of the space, contrasting bigger, shambolic gestures with nuanced details. A piece of green plastic covered the bottom portion of a window that framed a bush on the outside. The top part of the window was broken, disclosing the actual color of the foliage. In the middle of the space, a variety of scrap wood hung from the ceiling. Each piece is subtly painted in muted kool-aid tones, looking too considered to be graffiti but too modest to draw attention to itself. Above in the rafters, small bouquets of fake flowers decorated the barn with a funny pathos.

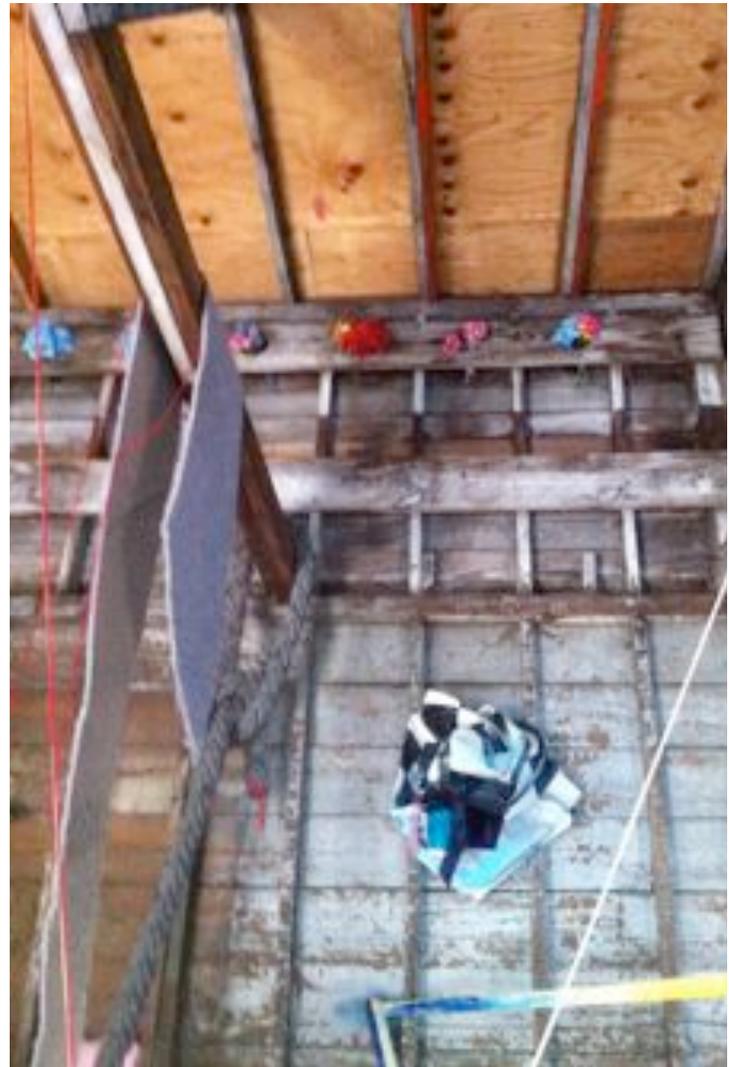
In these offshoot sites, such as "Getaway Weekend," the primary intention behind the Peekskill Project (using the city as a stage for contemporary art) gets articulated. I meandered along the town's streets and wandered in and out of old stone buildings and military structures, each showcasing an individual's work. The spaces were sizable. It's rare to see an up and coming or under represented artist in New York get even a quarter of the space these artists were given. Instead of a single piece in a group show or a basement, here these artists had copious amounts of room to show a body of work.

Peekskill Project occupies an interesting terrain. It's not schlocky like an art fair but it's not as



Martha Mysko, "Weekend Getaway", 2012

tight as a big museum or gallery show. The challenge with these types of get-out-of-town-exhibitions is how to get people interested. With so much art to see in New York, why would we want to go to Peekskill? Peekskill Project is trying to attend to this question. And perhaps with a little more organization (a clearer map, a few more buses) and a tightening up of the curatorial intention, it will become a destination in the years ahead. All in all, I enjoyed the exhibition. There are certain days when you want to ride around in a school bus, sip on an "Amazeballs", look at art, and get yelled at by disgruntled townies. And to Peekskill Project's credit, in my memory of that day, I do find it difficult to separate the art and the life in Peekskill.



Martha Mysko, "Weekend Getaway", 2012
