

Time-Based Art + Things In Its Path

TBA rolls out the works for its visual arts exhibitions at Washington High

By TJ Norris

While mounting the steps of the former Washington High School, the oldest of its kind in Portland until its closure a few years back, I realized that I hadn't stepped foot in such an establishment since my own graduation a few decades back. Given that it's September, those awkward feelings about going back to school fluttered upward from my deepest recesses (no pun intended). I had arrived for the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's (PICA) Time-Based Art Festival. Here I would explore two full floors of exhibitions representing the visual arts component of its annual 10-day, mostly performance-based extravaganza.

This is what TBA calls The Works. The surroundings pave the way for the site-specific nature of most of the creations on view. Classrooms now video lounges, trophy cases transformed into polystyrene assemblage tableaux, neon-colored construction paper lines the walls like a scrambled message of scattered pixels. The festival is alive and well and, in 2009, deals with a relational sense of play, both on the audience and from the stance of the participatory.

Walking past lockers, ajar and filled with tests and documents as time capsules—sealed behind plastic—I land upon New-York-based artist **Fawn Krieger's** "National Park." This installation, composed mostly of various grades of industrial soft materials like foam rubber, comments on how the big picture—or our virtual representation—of our grandiose landscape has been all but replaced by the manmade. Toying with a faded sense of nostalgic postcard-beauty, the work is a bit of a playground for the audience to revel inside of, a small cave-like structure of 2x4s with felt lining. Viewers are invited to climb atop faux soft rocks, coarsely painted—but set inside an otherwise empty classroom filled with natural light and not much else, save for the original carpeting, it would seem that what's missing is the point.

"Forever Now and Then Again" is the title of Portland artist **Jesse Hayward's** interactive sculptural piece. Hayward picks up on similar motifs he workshoped in other regional exhibitions at The Art Gym (Marylhurst University), and the now defunct wafflehaus Jacé Gacé. Unlike those earlier shows, here the artist has completed about 150 cubes, each six panels (that's a lot of individual paintings). Colorful, crude and immediate, the work is a direct game of manipulation with his audience, invited to move the shapes around the classroom, lined with chalkboards of drawn possibilities for stacking its contents.

The childlike hues and harsh markings may be the hand of artist as father, but how does this progress the discourse of parenting or the aesthetic of pioneers like Lynda Benglis and Judy Pfaff? Of course I love the old tales of Georgia O'Keefe painting with intentional perspectives about orientation, but there's a sensibility here that the painterly aspect is secondary to the artist letting go to those who cross the threshold of this Endgame meets Dr. Seussian set-up.

Just downstairs Finnish artist Johanna Ketola (collaborating with Jan Wolski) pieces together a few rooms of multichannel video work to a random soundtrack of numerous radios, sparsely placed throughout the space, tuned to local stations. Similarly centered on this random tuning is the adjacent work by French artist Antoine Catala, in a shaped video construct called "TV" that scrambles and bends images like unearthly organic orbs by using whatever seems to be on the set at the time: news broadcasts, commercials, daytime programming.

Unlike Ketola's coolly quiet piece, which uses studio characters upon a starkly void background, Catala's imagery is like cluster blossoms created from readymade, real-time television. Both pieces recycle elements that seem inescapable if you submit yourself to advertising-based media, leaving you with a sense of abandon.

It is refreshing to walk into a completely unmarked work where two Latina attendants engage you to take part in what I found out later to be Peter Coffin's "Untitled" (which, for once, seemed unfitting). The work is simple. Walk into the classroom space, where one of the women uses chalk to circle around your feet, your personal space. Then she asks for a reaction: "Do you feel different?" The floor space is filled with pastel circles, and the sense of presence/absence is something light, making good context with the more playful signature throughout the building.

A continuous array of costumed cuties is the mass that makes up "We are Legion," Stephen Slappe's contribution to this year's festival. The piece works from the sense of empowerment that children (and some adults) get when zippered into the bodysuit of favorite cartoon characters, rock stars and religious icons. The eerie balance behind the mask of such a figure is at play here and what becomes questioned is that altered reality, the duality of the flesh and imagined self. You are invited to participate at the growing-before-your-eyes website, www.welcometothelegion.org.

"From No.4 Pingyuanli to No.4 Tianqiaobeili" is a moving video portrait of Beijing-based artist Ma Qiusha. Throughout the subtitled, confessional piece she

speaks eloquently about being under the scrutinizing eye of her parents. The piece is a poignant return to feminist dynamics from an all-powerful country that takes no prisoners outside of its own women. Her struggle to become a fine artist, against the tide of gender expectation and family economics, is a heavy weight to bear. She makes consolations, all the way through unknowingly holding a razor on her tongue.

Lastly, composer and multimedia artist Ethan Rose takes his fascination for music boxes to the next level in "Movements." Anyone who has followed this Portlander may remember the gorgeous 2003 collaboration "Small Parts," and others, with videographer Ryan Jeffery. In the earlier piece they got extremely close to their subject, now stripped bare and wired for sound and space. "Movements" is a room-based wall installation consisting of a hundred music box parts, wired like a constellation upon stark white walls.

The sounds are coordinated and rhythmic as if being surrounded by a low-fi circus carousel—and with Ringling Bros. in town, this seems more pronounced. Rose has a wonderful way of making you feel a part of his altered inventions, playing on tropes from bell towers to roller rinks in his ongoing field recordings.

Also included are video works by Brody Condon, Kalup Linzy and robbinschilds with A.L. Steiner. That said, and given the ruptured economy, this variation is a bit less focused on physical works compared with prior TBA years, relying heavily on video work. Some of that work is of a caliber that is steeped in-between something playing on surface and obscurity, of loss and quiet rebellion. The intimate settings, open auditorium-like seating and wide hallways make it a fun trip down memory lane by reusing the shell of something that once was. Is this all past tense? Are we at a point of pause or of departure? It's hard to tell.

Most of these events run through October 18, noon-6:30 p.m. Thurs.-Fri., noon-4 p.m. Sat.-Sun. Extending the visual art programming this year are a few intriguing, associated exhibitions also taking place at PNCA, Lewis & Clark and Reed Colleges. For more information about the artists and locations visit www.pica.org.

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