

Charles Dee Mitchell, "Critical Mass: More Than Meets The Eye," The Dallas Morning News, February 3, 1995

'Critical Mass': More Than Meets The Eye

The Most talked-about piece of work in "Critical Mass," the exhibition of 14 New York-based sculptors currently at the McKinney Avenue Contemporary (MAC), will be an untitled piece by Tom Friedman. What at first glance appears to be a wooden box from which a work of art has been removed is revealed by the materials information on the checklist to consist of "human feces on white cube."

So when you look again you see it, about the size of a roach dropping, dead center on its pedestal. Actually it's pretty easy to see the first time around, but because it's only 5 millimeters in diameter it's also pretty easy to dismiss, until you know what it is.

Here is a work of art tailor-made for criticism. It enters into the discourse on "baseness" – a gleaming white "base" supports a speck of the world's basest material. It is a metaphor for creativity – "Mommy, look what I did!" "That's nice." In the form-vs.-content department, the object vigorously wages a debate that belies its minute proportions. The same can be said for its "presence," one of those attributes that works of art are hardly expected to have anymore. This one's presence, however, permeates the gallery, despite its antiseptic presentation. In his catalog essay, curator Charles Long defines critical mass as "the quantity of matter necessary to sustain a chain reaction, when a mass can no longer contain itself and becomes an "event." For the purposes of his exhibition, this term from the physical sciences informs his inquiry into what constitutes an object. When does matter become a sort of "wholeness" that can then command our attention as a work of art?

Mr. Friedman's infinitesimal dropping proves to be the ideal work for Mr. Long's purposes. It is, after all, the end product of a chain reaction, and, as an object, it commands an amount of attention comically disproportionate to its size. Just look at the space already devoted to it here. But it is only one work out of many at the MAC, and the pleasures of Mr. Long's exhibition lie in the variety and relative abundance of objects on view.

Taking a Tour Carl Ostendarp's Anything to Please is the best place to begin a tour of the exhibition. By mixing epoxy and urethane foam and spilling it onto the floor, the artist creates a solid baby-pink puddle that engages our attention as a thing while at the same time barely distinguishing itself as an object. It qualifies as sculpture by being substantial enough for one to trip over.

Mr. Ostendarp's work is typical of those in "Critical Mass" in that, despite its appearance of having just happened, it is actually the result of complicated processes and sophisticated choices on the part of the artist. At the other extreme from Mr. Ostendarp's spill is **Drew Shiflett's Landscape Around a Copper Plate, a peculiar accumulation of wood, styrofoam, metal tubes, gauze and probably a dozen other materials that have been piled together to make a thing that – despite its absolute lack of structural cohesiveness – succeeds in being as much a "wholeness" as any of the more unified works in the show. Ms. Shiflett added to her work until it was full, and found a point at which she could declare it so with conviction.**

Lillian Ball explores a different sense of fullness in her piece. This artist scours the world for containers whose empty volumes she can cast in urethane foam, in this case a Dogloo, which is apparently a prefabricated plastic dog house turned on its side. Working with a factory that produces commercial pillows and seats, Ms. Ball has filled the form with fire-engine-red foam, working quickly to create a smooth surface that retains a disturbingly organic mess of red coils.

Process Interrupted In several of the works, there is a sense of how the object presented to us has been caught at some stage of transformation that may not yet be complete. Maya Lin, a sculptor best known for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., shows here her stillgrowing ball of shattered safety glass, which is currently about 24 inches in diameter. The glass Ms. Lin uses has progressed from its silicate stage to a pure sheet form to being a kind of mess to being now a jewel-like sphere. This beautiful object carries a sense of the small, as well as suggesting major disasters that could have provided its fragmented materials.

Erwin Wurm's 10-inch-tall lump of oil paint has, like Ms. Lin's glass ball, been gathered together over several years. It might contain as much paint as many artists use in a lifetime. Looking at

it sitting on the floor, one can imagine works destroyed in frustration – scraped off the canvas and thrown away like an author’s crumpled first drafts. Or perhaps there are potential works buried within it, waiting to be drawn from its primordial ooze. This last reading is appealing in its optimism, but there also is a well-known expression: You can’t unscramble eggs.

Viewing Mr. Wurm’s lump as a source of potential new work helps justify its manure aspect, since it also looks like nothing so much as a cow patty. This manure factor also figures prominently in William Tucker’s bronze sculpture Thales. Mr. Tucker is of an older generation than most of the artists in this show, and his presence here seems to be that of a tutelary spirit.

He is well known for work that evokes the Titans and Olympian gods in human-scale castings of crudely organic shapes. His monumental works exert a sense of heroic struggle, hard labor and bravura artistic gestures. On a “table-top” scale, the work often simply doesn’t work, and in Thales, named for the Greek who made what is considered the first recorded philosophical statement, excremental connotations win out over those primordial.

A Living Dialogue In his introductory essay, Charles Long provides images of our lives as a walk along the outside edge of the Earth, surrounded by objects with which we engage in a kind of living dialogue. In “Critical Mass” he succeeds in creating an environment in which we act out that image, as we most often tower over these “things” that lie scattered about the floor. They invite us to observe them, to relate to them and ultimately to judge them.

Whether one finds here much to his or her liking, there is overwhelmingly the sense that in presenting this show the MAC is fulfilling its role in the Dallas art scene. Nothing like this has been brought to town before, and with luck it is just the beginning of what is to come.

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