

6 OutdoorProjects @LIU 2005, essay by Matt Freedman, 2005, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York

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The cartoonist Art Spiegelman's father, who had survived the Holocaust, once drew young Artie a diagram to show him how to build a secret compartment in his house in the inevitable event of an American pogrom. When something needs to be made urgently clear, precise visual information trumps pure text every time. Spiegelman used this anecdote to help explain his commitment to cartooning, a populist art form that engages its viewers powerfully and immediately. I remembered it as the 2005 edition of the Six Outdoor Projects @ LIU began to take shape and the inclination of the participating artists – David Henderson, Thomas Houseago, Ana Linnemann, Joe McKay, Eung Ho Park and **Drew Shiflett – to utilize a diagrammatic cartoon style vocabulary became more and more obvious.** Linking sculptures to cartoons has complicated implications and in the status conscious world of fine art not entirely positive ones. In a postmodern discourse, cartoons are fine when exploited as cultural tropes, but many sculptors still wouldn't want their work to be characterized as being literally cartoons. There must be at least a nanometer of appropriational, ironic distance in between for decency's sake. You can have a good time with a cartoon, but you wouldn't want to bring one home to meet your mother.

Which is a shame, because for clarity and punch you just can't beat a good cartoon and this exhibition of three dimensional projects turns out to be a cartoon show without any artists who could be described as cartoonists or any sculptures that could be described as cartoons. As a group, though, they demonstrate the best of that peculiar art form: direct engagement, dexterity, elegance and clarity of line, wit, and ultimately, a certain pathos that is generated when these elements come together to form sympathetic yet strangely desolate objects. Shiflett and Henderson work with an emphatic, graphic clarity of vision; Park and Houseago layer humor with political engagement; Linnemann and McKay lure their viewers into a complicit, even inseparable relationship with their work.

Drew Shiflett has installed her cement sculpture "Fading Façade" along the lower edge of the crumbling slate retaining wall that follows the slope of the main walkway past the sunken courtyard on the eastern side of the campus. More precisely, she has insinuated her piece into the location and made it inseparable from the wall. Shiflett's remarkable touch overcomes the piece's relatively large scale and the rough cement she used as her modeling material, creating something both tender and intimate. The sculpture consists of three elements. The larger two contain a series of arches in low relief, each crafted with loving care and precision into the cement. The small-scale architecture suggests the lost civilizations imposed on derelict urban landscapes back in the 1970's by Charles Simonds, but the language here is poetry, not narrative prose. Shiflett's architecture merges with its surroundings; it does not strike a pose within it. To appreciate the sculpture fully you have to squat down and peer up at the sharp incised lines that follow the curve of the arches. When you do so, you disappear from view; you become small yourself and you are drawn into Shiflett's space. The incised lines are diagrammatic, but they do not describe a façade so much as a state of mind; the artist's bittersweet understanding of the mortal beauty of decay.

The "Untitled" figurative monument by Thomas Houseago stands in the center of a copse of trees in LIU's Schulman Garden. In basic details it references classic park statuary: a nine-foot tall hero on a four-foot tall plinth. We know he ("he" could be a "she", but that would sort of muddle the fine joke) is a hero because he wears a helmet, and because the size of the base underscores his greatness. But there are insoluble problems with the great man. For one thing, he is plywood and not bronze; for another, his helmet is a tin bucket. The base is plywood too, not granite, and everything is coated with pleasant if not terrible awe-inspiring aluminum paint. Still, we know a hero when we see one; he is in a park, bigger than us, made more or less of something more permanent than us. Our response is Pavlovian and the statue, its mission to inspire and intimidate accomplished, immediately becomes invisible – or it would, if the wittiness of its deliberate imperfections had not rescued it from the purgatory of superfluity occupied by more conventional public statuary.

Eung Ho Park's "Sad and Beautiful" consists of some ninety eyes drawn on nine inch discs

arranged in groups of nine and bolted nine feet off the ground to ten of the many light poles dotting the campus. Park refers us to many and varied associations, from the voyeur to the all-seeing eye of the Masonic temple to the Zen Buddhist contemplative visionary. From their commanding installation height they appear to be fancy blown glass ornaments of Chihoulian proportions. In reality the eyes are drawn onto clear plastic lids taken from Chinese restaurants, and the apparently fabulous glass dyes are in fact provided by colored magic markers. The gaze of this ubiquitous many-eyed creature wittily enlivens the campus, but the very gentility of the eyes' presence inspires comparisons to their less benign cousins the surveillant video cameras. To further complicate matters, Park's admittedly utopian impulse is for the fugitive colors to gradually fade to clear, producing a statement of post-racial harmony. In light of the government's reflexive targeting of ethnic minorities as likely terrorist threats to our cities, the piece is chillingly timely. We are watched for our own safety, we are told, but what sort of freedom-loving culture is it whose greatest civic good is having nothing to hide? To paraphrase Park's ambivalent title, it is a rather sad one. Ana Linnemann, with the collaboration of Pat Kilgore, has placed a joyous little gift to the college community in the middle of one of the campus' semi-formal flowerbeds. The piece consists of two arrangements of artificial flowers planted in the red tanbark, dead ringers for their living neighbors. Linnemann's flowers, though, are attached to buried turntables on timers that are hooked up to ship's batteries. Every two minutes the flowers execute several slow, somewhat graceful pirouettes. The placid attractiveness of the university's plantings presupposes a very disengaged and passive appreciation on the part of the viewing public. From the safe remove of the sidewalk, across a protective shield of hedges, we are expected to quickly assimilate the familiar beauty of the flowers as we hurry by on the way to class or work. By running some juice through her flowers and goosing them into motion, Linnemann literally animates the flowerbeds, caricaturing their traditional role as visual wallpaper and somehow in the process reviving the entire esthetic enterprise.

Joe McKay has just about managed to do away with the sculptural object altogether in "Big Ups". Besides a rubber automatic doormat in the walkway between the Salena Gallery and the Dance Studio, all that is visible of his piece are two 27" television monitors stacked on their sides behind the gallery's glass walls. The screens are a dynamic blue graded from dark to light. On the bottom screen a ball rests on a platform that in turn rests upon a spring. The image is still but suffused with enough potential energy and mayhem to make Tex Avery blush, even though the only things the artist appears to have left us with are the rubber doormat and the televisions tuned to a frozen cartoon program. By cursory examination or happy accident – the artist is content to leave things up to fate – passersby/viewers morph into viewers/sculptures when they discover that when they step on the pad they activate the image of the ball on the bottom monitor. By jumping with an athletic combination of care and enthusiasm on the pad, McKay's target participants, the video game-savvy students living in the nearby dorms, will learn they can regulate the flight of the ball from the lower monitor to the upper one. They further discover that the ball, after striking the top monitor's upper edge, splatters into dripping goo. Additional adroit jumping leads the viewer/jumper into higher and higher levels of difficulty and visual reward. McKay has made the highest level, the seventh, so difficult that whoever achieves it will become a campus legend. It is left to innocent bystanders, however, to discover the final twist in McKay's brilliant little conspiracy. The viewer has become the sculpture, and a highly kinetic one at that; a cartoon of a park sculpture so energetic that it has literally come to life.

David Henderson's "Skylark", a truly astonishing 21 foot high construction of colored fiberglass and aluminum, rests jauntily against the concrete buttress that supports a high glass walkway. "Skylark" possesses the remarkable capacity to inspire simultaneously both an utterly spontaneous and inarticulate exhalation of pleasure – an exhalation of larks – and a series of specific associations with artistic precedents such as the oversized pop art monuments of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, or the elegant precision of Martin Puryear. A giant elegant twig, a child's whirligig, it has fluttered to the ground and dwarfed us all – too impossibly beautiful and flawless to actually be a part of the real world.

The cartoon in art historical terms is a preparatory drawing for a large-scale painting. Following the precedent, it has come to describe a way of communicating graphically with a maximum of efficiency and wit. A cartoon contains all the information necessary to clarify a situation, and no more. These artists, first to last, have done just that. We cannot help but grasp their urgency, and because of that we may find ourselves better prepared for the next emergency, whatever it might be.

Matt Freedman