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The Aldrich Fills Its Rooms With Expansive Sculptures

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

IN the late 1970's and early 1980's, installations were the thing. Essentially, they are an expansion of sculpture. But whereas sculpture shapes space, installations essentially fill it up, furnishing it with diverse objects. With this license, installations could become more daring than other art forms. When art became highly commodity oriented, they didn't fare well because of their unwieldiness. But everything comes around again, and installations are increasingly in evidence.

Lively proof is "Project: Installation" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, where seven newly minted installations occupy a gallery especially congenial to the mode. Since the museum used to be a private home, the various spaces retain the configuration of rooms, which means each installation keeps to itself. Yet there is a fun-house atmosphere to the essentially staid setup: as you deal with one artist's work you also anticipate what might be around the corner.

You get your bearings with "Metathesis" by the team of Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel. The redoubtable four elements — earth, air, fire and water — seem to be a play on the panoramic work, which essentially occupies one wall of a large room. Beakers of water drip a drop at a time onto hot steel plates, producing steam. A single candle burns. Various plumb weights make a fringe at the bottom, a pull toward earth. A huge gold disk rotates counterclockwise in the middle of the composition. The whole enterprise is slow and contemplative, reminding us of an ancient mystery or a high-minded fertility rite. The artists have put together many installations related to this, but this one comes across as a pure distillation of their concepts.

Dennis Oppenheim is a veteran maker of installations. In the late 1960's his installations focused on a marionette in a puppet theater that discoursed on the latest trends in art. Similar surrogates operate in "Slow Clap for Satie" in which plastic masks are tied around Norwegian spruce trees. The transparent faces almost make you miss the two pairs of large wooden hands that are motorized so that they open and shut; they are the slow clap of the title.

Elsewhere a trumpet acts as a bellows, inflating a female form taped to the floor. As is all of Mr. Oppenheim's work, the installation is incongruous, but he has an innate sense of theater that keeps you interested.

Oswaldo Romberg, who was born in Buenos Aires but lives and works in New York City and Israel, has produced an installation that, contrary to Mr. Oppenheim's, is extremely congruous. But the unity is realized only in stages. On one wall in Mr. Romberg's first room are what amount to colorful relief paintings on wood in various shapes. On the opposite wall is the spare outline of the shapes, as in a blueprint.

In the next room is a grouping of drawing tables and a plan of ancient Rome. When one inspects and ruminates on what's on the tables, one realizes it's a mysterious extrapolation of the information from the city plan. One surmises that the shape paintings in the first room are derived from the Roman buildings. The easy physical movement from Mr. Oppenheim to Mr. Romberg's work is a shift from affecting the viscera to affecting the intellect.

The relentless pace of the exhibition slows a bit when the visitor contemplates the first of three installations on the museum's second floor. "Untitled" as a title for Andrea Fisher's work does not help elucidate it, and we are left to wonder about the plane of field projecting outward from the wall and the maze of web-like imagery beamed from slide projectors. If this is a vision of order and disorder, hard reality versus transparency, it is overwhelmed by the artist, who is from England, holding everything in reserve.

Next comes the work of Michael Timpson, originally of Kildaire, Ireland, and now of New York City, with what is essentially a good, elaborate joke taking place in a fairy tale setup. One toys with the notion that its title, "It's a Far Cry" could be pronounced "It's a Fire Cry," because 24 fire buckets, each holding an alarm clock, are one of its major components. But the fire is metaphorical: the buckets, along with shovels, surround a pristinely made-up double bed in a room that is at the end of a corridor to a narrow passage. The floor is covered with coal and nails. A writer might well wonder if he should betray the scene at the end of the tunnel, but to hear it described is one thing and to see it is another.

Magdalena Abakanowicz from Poland is well known as a sculptor of headless burlap and resin figures that rivet our attention because we strangely identify with them. In the museum is a legion of 20 such standing figures and outside of their room is a single mounted fragment of a bronze head facing them. The head oddly completes the headless figures. Ms. Abakanowicz also furnishes us with eccentrically shaped blackballs mounted as if on catapults, and four black dolls that are flat figures with heads cut from metal. The difficulty with this particular presentation is that the elements are too diverse, thereby scattering our attention.

The final piece occupies only a corner but it is the most personal work in the exhibition. Peter Santino's daughter was born Feb. 22, so in colored sand he has listed some of the most popular names for children born in New York City in February and the number of times each name was taken. On the ceiling, written in concrete, are the symbols of major religions. It is like the ceiling of a nursery where harmony among all mankind is cradled. The tenderness displayed is a fitting finale for the eye-opening show. The once predictable Aldrich Museum has the potential to become an installation paradise. ■