

Dialogue art in harmony

By JILL POLLACK

We talk of exhibitions, art contained within four usually white walls. We speak of installation, essay, context. We cite the dialogue between space and object, viewer and artist. We either call this reviewing or critiquing, overlaying judgments and making art historical references. We search, sometimes obsessively, for originality. We are experience and research. We, making a verb from a noun, dialogue.

On view recently at the OR Gallery was the exhibition Dialogue, which offered both strong art and a provocative context. Guest-curated by Todd Davis, the show contained two works, White Pile, Stripe Tarp and Tires (1987) by Julie Duschenes and Museum Work (1987) by Mark Grady.

The Or Gallery is a long, narrow room with a brick wall, unfinished ceiling and old-style water radiators. Far from being pristine, the space appears as an afterthought. It is to the curator's credit that he was able to transform it as well as he did. Davis put up two false walls and painted them a subtle grey. He then positioned the works opposite each other, one at the front of the gallery, the other towards the back. In doing so, Davis filled the space without crowding it and was able to create an exhibition from two pieces of art.

Given the narrowness of the space (only eight-plus feet wide), the large works could only be fully seen from an angle. In other instances, this may be awkward viewing, not so here. The immensity of the work within a confined space enhanced the arts' power and the show's thesis.

Both works deal with and represent the landscape, although not in the traditional sense. Duschenes renders an industrial site as an abstracted composition which alludes at the same time to an aerial view of a cultivated acreage. She employs techniques evident in previous works, such as visible, meticulously applied brushstrokes; vibrant colours; and the inclusion of text.

Yet while this painting is characteristically marked by her sensibility, the artist has included new elements. Where before her art was typified by highly stylized objects that retained a strong connection to their "real" counterparts, she is now stretching that relationship. The tires, alluded to in the work's title, exist as criss-crossing, swirling black lines, placed at regular intervals. They move away from singularly representing tires and become undefined shapes. She has broken away from former compositional arrangements, and allowed new, still strong, original vision to emerge.

Grady's Museum Work does not exhibit the same strength as Duschenes' painting, but it is an interesting piece. Playing off of the institutionalization of art, Grady has carefully composed references to a battle site from 1944 and an advertisement for a Fascist art exhibition from 1943.

Set up as a triptych, the middle shows Grady's monochromatic version of Cherkassy, seen here as a barren landscape dotted with buildings along the horizon. Each of the three parts is encased within impressive dark green wooden frames, which lend a tone of authority and

importance. The work is quieter and more cerebral than Duschenes'; however, in the context of the show, it works well despite the painting technique being less developed.

Grady has enhanced the desolation of the landscape where Duschenes denies it. While her painting focusses more on an interpretation of the landforms, Grady makes overt connections to political systems and pervasive bureaucracies. He ties the structures of institutional art and war to a cause-and-effect relationship. Then he further couches that analysis within questions of originality versus reproduction.

This exhibition is capped by a poster/catalogue containing an insightful essay by Todd Davis. It is an open-ended dialogue, marked by perception and skill. And it stands as an excellent example of a strong curatorial thesis where art and context are not in conflict, but in harmony.

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