

Arts

Review/Art; Making the Chaotic Manageable

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"Enclosures and Encounters: Architectural Aspects of Recent Sculpture," this year's show at the Storm King Art Center here, can seem chaotic at first. Not much immediately connects Dennis Adams's bus shelters with Donna Dennis's miniaturized buildings, which are a cross between the works of Red Grooms and Edward Hopper. Nor does Siah Armajani's abstract and plain-spoken "Elements No. 24," composed of objects like doors, windows and a chair, communicate in the same language as Lauren Ewing's "Bank," with its inscriptions and video displays wryly commenting on the public and private meanings of "value."

But the strength of this exhibition of works mostly from the 1980's is precisely in covering a gamut of approaches to the idea of architecture as sculpture, ranging from the pre industrial to the most intensely urban. On one end of this spectrum is the earliest work in the show, from the early 1970's, Alice Aycock's "Low Building With Dirt Roof," a primitive shelter hunkered down in the landscape. On the other end are the bus shelters of Mr. Adams, with their Constructivist-derived designs and politically charged photographs and text panels, conceptually wedded to the city streets.

Like Jenny Holzer and Krzysztof Wodiczko, Mr. Adams is among a number of contemporary artists whose works are inextricably woven into the urban fabric, where they open themselves up to a range of interpretations. Mr. Adams's shelters are among the strongest works in this show, although to encounter one of the bus shelters plopped onto the center's patio, surrounded by this bucolic landscape, is to sense an object irretrievably wrenched out of context.

The same feeling arises from Dan Graham's "Triangular Structure With Two-Way-Mirror Sliding Door," first installed at the World Financial Center in lower Manhattan, where its disorienting mirrors and reflections served as explicit social commentary on modernist architecture. Here in the rural context of the center's sprawling lawns, that meaning is obscured, and the work is reduced to a gimmicky kind of Minimalist sculpture.

Even in this capacity, Mr. Graham's sculpture underscores the show's premise that no space is neutral. Architecture creates enclosures that inevitably carry metaphorical and symbolic weight. As Maureen Megerian, an organizer of the exhibition, writes in the catalogue: "These artworks are not single-mindedly intended to be seen and understood as architecture, although the dialectical relationship they have with architecture -- the tension between physical or psychic envelopment and a distanced visual and intellectual appreciation -- is a crucial part of an experience of these works. These sculptures comment on, and encourage viewers to contemplate for themselves, the manifold aspects of the built environment and their impact on its inhabitants."

For many of these artists, enclosure means inhibition and constraint. The person who crawls into Ms. Aycock's hut will feel trapped by its low ceiling and cramped space. Mr. Armajani's "Gazebo for One Anarchist: Emma Goldman," an open-air reading room for one, resembles a prison cell. Mr. Graham's mirrored structure locks a viewer into an area just as tiny as the gazebo, and even more alarming. Ms. Dennis's tiny houses exude claustrophobia, and even Mr. Adams's works include tight and blocked spaces, as in "Bus Shelter No. 8." Architecture as an expression of psychological or political oppression seems to link many of these otherwise diverse artists.