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The Kranzberg Exhibition Series: John Watson/ Andrea Green

By David Bonetti POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC 07/16/2006



Kranzberg Exhibition Series at Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri, June 9 - September 3, 2006 .

She Said All It Needed Was A Little Baby Blue -- By John Watson

Sculptors John Watson and Andrea Green have shown in local galleries in recent seasons, but the fact that Laumeier has given them the best opportunity yet to realize their ideas underscores the value of the 4-year-old Kranzberg Exhibition Series.

Both are smart young artists (he was born in 1975, she in 1977) who still are developing their ideas. Watson, who teaches at Webster University, is further along, producing mature work that couldn't be confused with anyone else's.

Watson is a maker. His material is wood, his process additive. He works with castoffs he finds in dumps and abandoned industrial sites. He starts with hammering together forms suggested by the wood, adding on to what he's made until the room is filled, the supply runs out or he decides that the sculpture is completed.

His metaphor is architectural. Although his works offer no shelter or practical use, they refer to shelters, specifically shacks. There is a joyful quality to Watson's work - you can imagine the fun he has cobbling it all together - but it suggests the fragility of survival and the lengths people go to create safe places in an indifferent world.



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Watson's most ambitious piece, "She Said All It Needed Was a Little Baby Blue," ranges through three galleries. A constellation of structures made from - or suggested by - drawers, the small-face but deep boxes are formally similar to shotgun-style houses. Arranged on stilts that seem to rise and fall with an imagined hillside, they bring to mind the slums on the outskirts of Third World cities.

Another work, "One Piece At A Time," this one built close to the floor, pursues another architectural reference: the utopian brand of metabolic architecture created by visionaries in the '50s and '60s. Single structures that spread over the landscape, wings added when needed, they paralleled with more permanent materials the shacks built on crowded hillsides.

Watson's work is allusive, but his titles focus on process rather than image. The piece that brings to mind an endless hillside slum, primarily raw wood with a few red, white and dark blue panels, is titled after a pair of panels painted baby blue. "One Piece At A Time" refers to his additive process, not the image created.

If you look up, you will be rewarded with a surprise. Tucked under the eaves is "Got No Reason (to Quit)," which is like a miniature wasp nest. It suggests that when the space allotted ran out, Watson stuck a small piece where no one would expect: He had no reason to quit.

Too close for comfort

Green also is interested in shelter, the kind the body provides, and much of the work in the show is about what happens when that which is interior becomes exterior.

One of the pieces that most clearly references bodily secretion is on the wall in Gallery 1

(none of her work is titled). A section of puckered paint suggests blistered skin. In its center, a cracked egg suggests a pustule that has broken, a drop of petroleum jelly leaking out like pus.

Petroleum jelly is one of Green's favored materials. At the center of Gallery 1 is a rectangular bed of thick, viscous, yellowy petroleum jelly that is simultaneously repulsive and attractive.

The body has long been a subject of art, but the body's functions - and its secretions and excretions - have been a legitimate subject for art-making only in recent years. Still, a significant amount of work has been produced about bodily function, and a number of artists have emerged who are articulate in the matter.

Green references that work in a manner that is often too close for comfort. Petroleum jelly, for instance, is the medium of choice of Matthew Barney; using it is dangerous for any young artist seeking an individual identity. That blistered wall is too close to work by Jill Downen, who memorably installed work at the Contemporary Art Museum, where Green is assistant curator.

Other works are too close to well-known precedents. A large piece of silk filled with water derives from Ernesto Neto, and a bunch of latex ropes emerging from the wall derives from Eva Hesse.

Of course, Green could be explicitly referencing her influences here. But Green has to let us share the joke.

It's not enough to make a series of homages. You must make it clear that they are not undigested influences.

The Kranzberg Exhibition Series: John Watson/Andrea Green

Where: Laumeier Sculpture Park, 12580 Rott Road, Sunset Hills

When: Through Sept. 3

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

How much: Free

More info: 314-821-1209 or www.laumeier.org

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