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# Gems Among the Ruins

## Governors Island Art Fair Fills Colonels' Row

By KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 11, 2014

The Governors Island Art Fair is not your average art fair. Now in its seventh year, it's a scrappy, low-budget event organized by a group of artists operating under the name 4 Heads. Works by 100 artists are displayed not in corporate white booths but in the rooms of four late-19th-century brick houses on Colonels' Row where Army officers used to live. Each artist was given a room to use.

Uninhabited since 1996, the buildings are structurally sound but dilapidated, with lots of flaking paint. You might think such an environment would be distracting, but it's not. A haunted-house ambience enhances the adventurous feeling visitors get in perusing the show. They can wander from first-floor living rooms to second-story bedrooms to attics with slanting ceilings.

The synergy between the funky old rooms and the artworks occupying them is fortunate, because most of the art on view isn't very exciting by itself. There's way too much indifferent, amateur- and student-level work, as well as semiprofessional kitsch. If 4 Heads wants to make its show a destination for discerning art lovers, it needs better quality control.

That said, there are good things to be discovered. The video artist Rachel Rampleman is certainly ready for prime time. One of her three pieces is a compilation of film clips of female bodybuilders posing and hefting live men instead of weights. Shown on an old, portable television in a darkened room, it exudes a funny weirdness.

Two projections in another room are equally intriguing. Her wonderfully bizarre "Bellmer Burlesque" features the legs and pelvises of female tap-dancers

in action. The film is split horizontally into mirroring upper and lower halves, which turns the dancers into monstrous figures with legs going both up and down. In “Busby Berkeley 2.0,” Ms. Rampleman has created abstract, psychedelic variations on a clip of a dance routine from a black-and-white Busby Berkeley movie to optically gripping effect.

Another accomplished video maker is Hwayong Jung, who creates computer-animated films of densely layered, symmetrically flowing organic and geological patterns. Presented in deep, laptop-size frames with mirrored inner sides, they are hypnotic and hallucinatory.

Also impressive is Sam Metcalf’s “(black box),” an eight-foot-tall enclosure with transparent walls. Top-to-bottom Venetian blinds controlled by motion detectors close when viewers approach, allowing only glimpses of a large, live fern inside. It’s a teasing metaphor about seeing and knowing.

Hao Ni is another exceptionally inventive sculptor. “Night II” has glittering drops of mineral oil slowly descending along myriad lengths of stretched monofilament to a pool of black liquid within a ramshackle wooden framework. A pile of smooth, black pebbles; a black severed hand; and a piece of yellow fabric frozen in a billowing state add to the surrealistic mystery. Alberto Giacometti’s early masterpiece “The Palace at 4 a.m.” comes to mind.

In a walk-in-closet-size space, Chaney Lane Trotter has created a magical forest glade with real birch tree trunks planted in a bed of moss. Speakers play the sounds of rain and thunder, and flashing electric lights mimic lightning.

An oddly ethereal series of staged photographs by Sinan Tuncay imagines the bittersweet aftermath of a “reverse circumcision” ceremony in a ballroom with pale blue walls, a confetti-strewn floor, white plastic chairs and the artist alone in a royal, white outfit like a sad clown. The series is pointedly titled “Whole.”

Jackie Mock produces faux-antique sculptural works resembling artifacts displayed in an old-fashioned history museum. Many are comically self-reflexive. “The Entire Life of This Pen” has a ballpoint pen surrounded by the dense scribbling that used up its ink. A framed flake of thick paint is titled “A Piece of the Wall You’re Looking At.”

A robotic sculpture by Aaron Taylor Kuffner updates the traditional genre of Indonesian gamelan music in which percussive instruments like gongs and xylophones are played in ensembles. Here, bronze Balinese gongs are hit by motorized mallets creating complex rhythms and subtle harmonies. It's fascinating to watch and absorbing to hear.

Among other notable works are Sui Park's large, luminous egg-shape sculptures made of interconnected, white plastic zip ties; Jessica Beckwith's mystical theater consisting of revolving light reflectors and a video projection of a whirling dervish; and, by Mikel Glass and Daniel Baltzer, steam-punk-style sculptures connected by translucent tubes through which scurrying live gerbils can be seen intermittently. In the kitchen of one house, Becky Brown has filled the refrigerator, dishwasher and other appliances with overflowing quantities of metal and plastic junk, all spray-painted white or almond. The machines seem to be vomiting as if in a bulimic's nightmare.

The Governors Island Art Fair continues Saturdays and Sundays through Sept. 28 on Colonels' Row, Governors Island; 212-673-9074, 4heads.org.

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