

FORT GANSEVOORT

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ART; Sculpture Biennial at Purchase With Pizazz and Imagination

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THE Neuberger Museum at Purchase College here has produced its first public sculpture biennial. But visitors beware: Do not leave home without wheels, comfortable shoes and the promise of fine weather. What lies ahead is not just an exhibition of 27 pieces -- more if those drawn from the museum's collection are counted -- but also a tour of the college grounds where most are displayed, and it is quite a haul.

On the other hand, the trip does not cover all 500 acres of the campus, a map is provided and, it is a chance to see the woods and fields surrounding this exercise in architectural starkness.

Apropos, the small blue ladders on the vast, liver-colored flank of the Performing Arts Center are not belated attempts at ornamentation but, rather, functional structures having to do with building maintenance and, sad to say, temporary.

This exhibition, the first of its kind, required two panels, one to nominate the artists, the other to select the works and though collectors and museum professionals were on both, the second included a sculptor and one or two critics. But credit for the installation goes to Judy Collischan, the museum's associate director for curatorial affairs who also contributes an essay that covers the majority of the artists under the title "When Are You Going to Paint It?" -- a quip aimed at viewers who still do not get the point of contemporary sculpture, whatever that may be.

To mark the occasion, the resident sculptures beside the road leading into the campus have been augmented by imitation traffic signs, the most effective of which is Edgar Heap of Birds's "New York, Purchased? Stolen? Reclaimed?" lettered in white on a green background. For all practical purposes, the show begins in the museum with Petah Coyne's two pendants, which look like giant root vegetables except that they are a mixture of solidified black sand and chicken wire dusted with white powder. Suffused with theatrical pizazz as it is, the work might have been better housed in the Performance Arts Center, where it would have been company for Ming Fay's ceiling installation of berry-laden branches and for the staircase planted with trees by Vito Acconci, an item climbing one of the building's outer walls.

It seems that the show's main purpose is to confirm what has long been obvious: that sculpture is merely that which is produced by a sculptor. Demonstrating the truth of this Warholian observation are the structures following one another along the avenues between the buildings. One is a huge pyramid plastered with rows of books (a collective effort by Rick Lowe, D. A. McNulty and Dean Ruck); another is a lumpy metaphor for a torso in bronze ("Vishnu" by William Tucker); a third is a petrified tree partly en

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closed by a sheet of copper incised with indecipherable hieroglyphics (Jim Sanborn). Many have obviously been chosen with an eye to esthetic values agreed upon in a less chaotic age, particularly the cast aluminum work by Louise Bourgeois and the bronze by Carol Hepper.

Standing alone in the fairway, the Bourgeois gives new meaning to the term organic and could be a metaphor for some kind of surgical disaster. Essentially a hollow cube measuring roughly six feet in every dimension, this gleaming object is crowned with fleshy protuberances and buttressed by a cascade of ropey forms spilling over the edge of its pedestal. The interior, on the other hand, is all membranes and dangling globules, and whether regarded as a gaping mouth or a cavern to delight a speleologist, it is not a safe place to be. Having yet to see a Bourgeois sculpture that offers refuge, however metaphorical, I began to wonder if the artist's failure to mellow is not one of her many secrets of success.

Ms. Hepper's Celtic-looking arrangement of interlaced loops is a mystery, until its source, willow twigs, is revealed, when it becomes a rare example of wood successfully translated into bronze. This is not to say that Patrick Dougherty's similarly entwined maple saplings would profit from the same treatment, even though the twiggy ensemble, which is stationed outside the dance conservatory, is unlikely to live long in its present form.

Like rocks ejected from a volcano, the works beyond the buildings tend to be larger and more widely spaced and, coming upon Willie Cole's roughly 20-foot-long boat masquerading as an upended iron is not unlike discovering a Gothic ruin in a pasture. It stands near a glade in which reposes an authentic ruin, Renee Stout's rusty bedsprings threaded with branches and found metal objects. "Ogun's Bed," as it is called, pays circuitous homage to Melvin Edwards, whose own contribution, on the other side of the campus, is "Gate of Ogun," a basically post-and-lintel construction in stainless steel sheeting.

Works in the neighborhood of Mr. Cole's iron include Luis Jimenez's equally tall "Border Crossing," a rendering in multicolored fiberglass of one presumed illegal immigrant carrying another on his shoulders and from Maren Hassenger a scene reminiscent of Guatemalan efforts to discourage killer bees in that it consists simply of pink plastic bags hanging from the branches of selected trees.

For sheer weirdness, there is nothing to beat Ronald Gonzalez's phalanx of steel and asphalt personages, each a black zombie-like creature with a horizontal cylinder for a head or Donna Dennis's "Cataract Cabin." A house that calls for three-quarter life-size tenants, it comes with all the extras, including windows, but stands on a rock.

Because of the logistics involved, outdoor sculpture shows tend to be solemn affairs, but this one has a spontaneous, almost improvisational quality, specifically in the open areas where some works lurk as if waiting to take their observers by surprise -- Ms. Dennis's cabin, for example. In fact, it is the choreography that saves the biennial from becoming just another hurrah for diversity.

The closing date is Oct. 26 and the information number is 251-6100.