

Exhibition Review

Palimpsests

Project 18: Outdoor Sculptural Installations by Local Emerging Artists

August 16 – September 28, 2002

SPACE (Sand Point Arts and Culture Project)

7400 Sandpoint Way NE Building 18

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On some late afternoon or early evening, make your way to Sandpoint to enjoy the current group installation “Palimpsest” outside Building 18, just inside the main entrance to the former Puget Sound Naval Station.

The pieces are easy to see and easy to understand, but that doesn’t make them any less sophisticated: they are among the edgiest art on view in Seattle at the moment.

A palimpsest in the Middle Ages was a parchment with old texts that remained visible as it was reused for later purposes. But it can also be a place that still bears a record of its own history. This decommissioned naval station is a huge palimpsest. At Sand Point Magnuson Park (SPMG), the non-profit group SPACE has commissioned works from five artists to respond to that idea. They are writing on top of the history of the place with contemporary comments and ideas, often using materials that they found on the site.

As you approach the building, you see words like FUTILITY, UTILITY, FRAGILITY written in the windows. This is the playful and clever work of Katy Stone (look for more words in other windows). Stone did several actions inside the building such as putting red white and blue sequins in derelict sinks in the waterless bathrooms. The lush shiny sequins contradict the desolation, and they are a metaphor, perhaps, for the condition of America at the moment, full of glitz, but about to go down the drain. We only get to see photographs of the sinks, but on one outside wall, the blue sequins flow down the wall forming a shiny little puddle at the bottom, right next to a non-functioning drain. Stone also put a tiny flag in the midst of an old carpet that was growing grass because of a leak in the ceiling, visible on the outside in a Polaroid in one of the windows. Indeed this building seems like an artists’ paradise just as it is, full of formerly functional floors and ceilings that are now molding and returning to the earth. It used to be a firehouse and Stone made reference to that on the opening night with a performance piece in collaboration with a fireman that burned several matchbooks attached to a wall, leaving a delicate pattern behind.

Angelina McQuarter took an entirely different aspect of the site, its personal history for her own family. Her aunt was one of the first female blacksmiths to work at the Naval Air Station, and her mother was the first black Sea Fair princess. She has created a huge plastic covered book which contains photographs from her family albums. These photos also appear framed in industrial steel fragments on the roof line, in a window, and behind a wax icon figure. The wax has melted from the icon, and fallen to the ground, revealing the photographs behind it; at the same time that the photographs in the windows are fading away from exposure to the sun. Her poetic work suggests the ways that as memory changes, it still is a constantly changing part of the present. The experiences of her aunt and her mother, as well as the rest of her family, are all part of her art, not only literally, but also more abstractly, as palimpsests or texts on which she is still writing.

Eddie Hill has made a type of contemporary Stonehenge installation with four panels that turn on bases, positioned on a slight rise with a path going up to it. The panels are painted red, yellow, black and white. They are covered with words (the artists keeps on adding more) thus making them palimpsests as one set of words or type of writing overlays another. The words suggest associations with the colors (which are referring to the four races), but Hill is looking for shared meanings, rather than separations. He sees the words as “more ghostly resonances than real barriers to any evolution.” Hill’s piece is interactive, children or anyone else can turn the panels

and the meanings constantly change according to the way the light strikes them. He suggests the subjectivity of experience and the unities of the human race.

Romson Regarde Bustillo's piece consists of an inside part that you look at through a gridded window and an outside installation that creates a meandering path. Inside the window are three paintings which he identifies as pages from a book of days, they suggest a personal diary of faces, patterns and colors. Outside there are clusters of offbeat forms arranged on a nearby hill, made from various found industrial materials. They are part sculpture, part drawings- a long transparent plastic "all right now fence" about two feet high is covered with informal, playful line drawings. They are a perfect height for children to enjoy. Bustillo describes the other structures as creating a ritual walk, "six figures for accepting offerings, one structure for accepting whispers, one structure for accepting messages, one water grouping." Bustillo's outside passage is the most personal and abstract experience of the pieces installed in the exhibition. They allow us to wander through an open space with just the barest intervention by the artist. As he explains "The viewer activates the spell by interpreting the work."

The last artist in the group, Hahn Rossman takes a more detached, modernist approach to the history of Sandpoint Naval Base. His chain link and orange construction fencing creates a mazelike passage from one side of the building to the other, recalling Robert Irwin's nine squares downtown on Fourth Avenue. The fencing is meant to recall the industrial history of the space as a source for cargo shipping (indeed it has something in common with the anti-humanist chain link barriers created in our current enormous cargo port near West Seattle) . His work is a foil to the rest of the work in the show, it is closed, and fixed, while theirs is open and changing. In a way his arbitrary barriers are closely linked to an earlier stage of this palimpsest naval base, the military culture which it supported. It is also invoking our contemporary world, a place of arbitrary barriers and mazes, illogical incarceration and arbitrary declarations.

The SPACE is raising funds to convert Building 18 into studios for local and international artists, along with public programming, exhibition spaces and classes. The building is currently owned by the City of Seattle and managed by the Department of Parks and Recreation. SPACE will gain a ten year lease once the basic renovations necessary to occupy the building are complete. Naturally, the incredible poetry of a decaying industrial facility will have to be replaced by functioning plumbing, fire escapes and electricity. Something will be lost in the process, but much will be gained. The palimpsests will remain, both those of the navy and those of these artists, but they will become another chapter of an ongoing narrative

<http://www.sandpointarts.org/Project18.html>

"Collective Consciousness," a forum with Project 18 artists and curator
Wednesday, September 18, 7:30PM Community Activity