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ART REVIEW: Installations Worthy of the Name

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Chris Jones's mixed-media sculpture "Torgue Is the Dream of the Broken Thing" (2008).

Installation art is all about the manipulation of scale and sensibility. The size of the installation is crucial, either occupying most of a gallery to impress at first sight, or radically scaled down so as to invite inspection and enable viewers to focus on the artists' command of detail. Sensibility is a lot more complicated. The theme or subject of the installation must be sufficiently familiar to allow quick recognition, but also witty or intriguing enough to excite curiosity. The choice of materials helps, preferably something unusual that does not commonly belong in a gallery.

In the best of ways, two long-term installations at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art embody many of these principles. That is welcome news for an institution that has gone through a rough patch lately, with staff turnover and a resultant lack of vision and direction.

Both installations are by sculptors — if that designation has any specificity these days. Chris Jones is an English artist who makes intricate collages, while Folkert de Jong is a Dutch artist working with Styrofoam. Both are in their mid-30s.

Mr. Jones's exhibition is the outcome of his living in Peekskill as the Hudson Valley art center's artist in residence from February to May of this year. It is installed upstairs in the mezzanine gallery and consists of a small group of intricate, site-specific sculptural installations composed largely of collage imagery from magazines, calendars, encyclopedias and posters.

Especially enchanting is a life-size recreation of an antique stage coach pulled by the remains of a horse. It is at once beautiful and disgusting, exquisitely patterned, yet in a sticky, grotesque and semidecayed state. Both the horse and the carriage look as if they have been decomposing in water for decades.

No reproduction can convey the experience of encountering this work, since like all good installations, it creates its own environment. At the core of its appeal is a knack for crafty design,

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inspiring a sense of enchantment and awe — intense and engaging. And the feeling persists the longer you hang around.

Material transubstantiation — specifically, flimsy substances like posters, magazine pages and the like used to create an ambitious piece of monumental sculpture — is another alluring quality of this piece.

The work is titled “Repair Is the Dream of the Broken Thing.” Attributing human motivation and characteristics to an inanimate object suggests a Romantic strain to the artist’s temperament. And as far as technique goes, there is nothing broken about this sculpture. It is lovingly made to seem in disrepair.

Elements of Romanticism also underpin Mr. de Jong’s installation, “Mount Maslow” (2007), made on site and then given to the Hudson Valley art center to coincide with his first New York solo show at James Cohan Gallery last year.

Sensitively installed in a corner at the rear of the building, the installation is a painted Styrofoam structure, reaching floor to ceiling and resembling a mountain peak. Two life-size bearded climbers in mountaineering gear pause just below the peak, as if readying for a final push to the summit. Or maybe they are afraid to go farther, for above them, looking like a billboard sign, is a row of Romanesque letters spelling out the words “Hamburger Hill.”

The reference is to the site of a major United States ground assault in Vietnam. Though the hill was thought by many to be of little strategic value, the battle resulted in high casualties and became the basis of a 1987 movie. Here, the sign becomes a kind of Sisyphian metaphor for continuing to struggle in the face of adversity, even vacuity.

The title of the work also alludes to this interpretation. Abraham H. Maslow (1908-1970) was a developmental psychologist who pioneered the idea of a hierarchy of human needs, which he characterized in terms of a multilayered pyramid. Ascending layers lead to self-actualization, with creativity right at the top. Perhaps Mr. de Jong’s work is a sly statement on the process of making art.

Mr. de Jong is one of those artists whose work people either like or hate. His use of throwaway materials and sloppy techniques insult standard notions of quality, and while that is no doubt part of his significance for the contemporary art cognoscenti, it is also something that some viewers can’t forgive him for.

Mr. de Jong and Mr. Jones are part of a loose movement to make installation art groovy again. It is largely European and neo-conceptual, also romantic and a tad self-conscious. But it is generally a lot of fun.

“Chris Jones,” through Aug. 17, and “Folkert de Jong: Mount Maslow,” through Winter 2009. The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main Street, Peekskill. Information: (914) 788-0100 or www.hvcca.org.