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ART

ART REVIEW: "6x6x2008"

By Rebecca Rafferty On Jun. 18th, 2008

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"6x6x2008"

Through July 6

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave

Wednesday-Sunday 1-5pm

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

Two crucial elements in the business of art are the struggles to make the public aware of its presence, and also to feel the value in supporting it. This may sound obvious, but art venues can have trouble competing with the more popular choices for a Friday night out. From the awesome little downtown gallery that organizes First Fridays comes "6x6x2008," a brilliant fundraiser carried out as a multi-leveled game that serves not only to raise money for the art center, but also to involve the public in creating, appreciating, and buying artwork.

The aggressive campaign for donated artwork from anyone and everyone included eye-catching billboards, postcards, flyers, e-mails, info on the website, and a very effective word-of-mouth network. And it worked: the final count of about 3500 works far surpassed the goal of 2008 donated pieces, each to be sold for just \$20. The simple guidelines for donating specified that the total size of the artwork (including any framing) must be 6"x6", and that it must be able to be supported by four thumbtacks. This resulted in mostly two-dimensional submissions, but the constraints were pushed by a few artists, such as the famous sculptor whose contributions would have fit in a 6"x6"x6" box. Art poured in from five countries and more than 30 states, and donors include established artists, casual artists, an entire class from RIT, a Girl Scout troop, Mayor Robert Duffy, and, likely, your great aunt Hilda. But the kicker was that all of the art was presented anonymously, playfully forcing the public to really look and think, and not take it on famed-name value.

During the two long days that the installation required, the interior of the gallery was shrouded from East Avenue's curious gaze, building public excitement. But the secret alchemy behind the "organized chaos" (as described by Rochester Contemporary director Bleu Cease) of the show can now be seen in an impressive time-lapse video installed in the window and pointed toward the street, and also on the gallery's website.

How does a writer describe the overwhelming effect of viewing more than 3500 artworks in one venue? How

could I fairly capture the scope, and do any justice, to the individual works? The art ranges from traditional styles to the super-modern, and materials include various types of paintings, mixed-media collage, photography, digital art, metal, ceramics, and found art. Admittedly overwhelmed by the task, I'll instead describe the event, and extend a warm thanks to all who contributed and worked to make this fantastically fun endeavor so successful.

Just pick a genre, a style, a subject, and you're sure to find it at the exhibition. "If the fundamental visual question of '6x6x2008' is 'What can you do with a square?', the number and diversity of answers should be encouraging to artists, gallery-goers, and all thoughtful humans," says Cease.

There truly is something to represent the interest and taste of everyone, with subject matter ranging from familiar celebrities to beautiful nobodies, to landscapes, animals, abstractions, the sacred, the vulgar, and the mundane. The tiny works run in a band of seven squares high around most of the space; they spill into the nook rooms of the gallery, and run up and down the pillars. For obvious reasons, art placed directly at eye level would seem to receive the most attention, but the anonymous nature of the show had viewers genuinely spending time looking, and many pieces on the lower rows sold quickly during the official sale on Saturday, June 7.

A competitive vein was present beneath the effervescent atmosphere during the preview party and registration on Friday, June 6, at which viewers purchased numbered red stickers for \$20 each, which would on Saturday be used to claim the art of their choosing. The crowd milled about, wondering aloud about the creators. On Saturday night, I maneuvered the maze of excited folks, and as go time drew close, people began to pose in front of their top choices with yogi-like focus. I watched one woman make her way toward a painting to guard it, only to find another woman with her numbered sticker on her thumb, just inches from the wall. The latter flashed the former a tight smile and, considering herself dismissed, woman No. 1 moved quickly toward choice No. 2.

Previously sold \$5 raffle tickets for Nos. 1-20 were called one at a time, allowing the lucky few to pick their favorite pieces first. At about 7:45 p.m., the rest of the crowd was given the signal to have at their favorites by ripping the artwork's number tag down and adhering their red-dot sticker to the wall. Most people happily chattered in the line to exchange the numbered tags for receipts, but I did overhear one woman complaining that another reached around her and nabbed a piece at the last second. All in all, considering that no blood was shed, the event was very well organized and coordinated. Between Friday and Saturday night roughly 1000 people saw the show, and about 620 items were purchased during the Saturday sale. Unsold artwork is still available for purchase through July 6.

"The Future Consequences of Neglect"

Bradley Butler

Through June 29

Rochester Contemporary LAB Space

Art does not occur in a vacuum. Artists are often sensitive to cultural concerns, and some of the best art has

served as a visual record of social and political climates. Bradley Butler's art forecasts the result of actual climate change, reflecting that the political scene is finally giving some acceptance to long-standing alarms from scientists. It's a heavy issue, and humans are faced with the duty to quickly turn around the damage that we've done. In acting as though we are higher organisms living on the planet, and not of the same stuff as everything else, we have largely estranged ourselves from our home, and the result of this horrifying concept is cropping up again and again in art these days. M. Night Shyamalan's mysterious new film, "The Happening," seems to be about nature rejecting humans, disposing of us like the destructive virus that we maybe are. In "The Future Consequences of Neglect," now on display in the Rochester Contemporary LAB Space, Butler's provocative paintings appear to be about nature reclaiming us, taking away our privilege to be human as we currently know it.

Many of Butler's canvases depict human-animal hybrid creatures, dubbed with likewise hybrid names (i.e. Homodus Vulgaris), all of whom seem bewildered by their strange existence and confront the viewer with intense eyes. The paintings that most interested me were the nearly abstracted, very timely apocalyptic seascapes, for which Butler employed a simple palette of white, red, brown, blue, black, and gray. Skillfully vague hints at ocean and land are absorbed by the kinetic sweep of black in the foreground, and the viewer is left with the sinking inkling of being caught in a crucial shift. The small show challenges our role as the inattentive and greedy keepers of this garden planet. At last, the audience is listening.