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A Collection's Contest Of Objects

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Some exhibitions are almost too smart for their own good. Especially in these days of post-post-everything, relational aesthetics, institutional critique and endless "interventions," art shows can be so cerebral and self-conscious, so full of high-concept attitude, that the art is lost in the shuffle.

ROBERTA SMITH

ART REVIEW

"If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now," at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, is a case in point. Organized by a fairly heavy-hitting troika, consisting of Tom Eccles, the director of the Bard Center; Lynne Cooke, the longtime curator at the Dia Art Foundation; and the artist Josiah McElheny, the exhibition often teeters on the brink of extreme curatorial pretentiousness and occasionally tips over, reducing the art on view to mere illustrations of agendas, or even space

KELLY SHIMODA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now *A gallery at this Hessel Museum show displays one of Franz West's "Echolalia" sculptures.*

fillers. At the same time, its cross-fertilizing mixture of art and décor, form and function, and politics and aesthetics is too meaty and energetic not to succeed on some fronts.

Mr. McElheny comes across as the show's driving force. Its center of gravity is very much the conflation of the disciplines, and histories, of art, craft, design and display, subjects that he regularly attends to in his own sculptures and installations.

According to the museum's news release, the show is "about the life of the art object in domestic spaces," but this benign-sounding description is not the half of it. The exhibition

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displays American and European painting, sculpture, video, photography, drawing and installation from the last four decades, in galleries kitted out with furniture by various gold-plated names, including the Austrian Modernist architect R. M. Schindler; the sculptors Donald Judd, John Chamberlain, Frederick Kiesler and Franz West; and the French designers Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé.

Altogether, "If You Lived Here" circles uneasily, sometimes malevolently, around the idea of collecting, displaying, living with and looking at art and related objects.

A group of galleries rather oppressively evokes the living room, dining room, bedroom and study of a well-heeled collector, rooms where every object aspires to the status of art. Others feel more like an unusually hip and hospitable museum, where the furniture is a form of useable sculpture that complements the art.

In several places Mr. McElheny has made versions of Judd's boxy, commodious lounges, but from rough, semi-industrial plywood rather than from relatively refined solid pine. They accommodate what was Judd's preferred position for viewing art, which was lying down.

In one space, paintings by Eric Fischl, Robert Moskowitz, R. H. Quaytman and Philip Guston touch on several notions of blackness, including night, sleep, skin color and the Modernist monochrome. Four recently reissued versions of the amoeboid chairs that Kiesler designed in 1942 for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York, are available for sitting there, while also intimating dark, shape-shifting thoughts.

In another space, three wonderfully looming yet weightless new "Echolalia" sculptures by Mr. West (on wheels and thus movable) cohabit effectively with some of his spindly-legged seating, here shrouded in white, and four of Christopher Wool's casually chic paintings. The setting feels like a kind of garden court, with the sculptures as odd-shaped, vaguely Disney-esque topiaries.

"If You Lived Here" is in essence an elaborate attempt to finesse the inevitable limitations of the Hessel Museum's primary mission, which is to present works from the still-growing art collection of the New York collector Marieluise Hessel. Ms. Hessel placed most of her extensive holdings on long-term loan when the Bard Center opened in 1992, and then provided a roof over its head in 2006 in the form of a large new wing (the Hessel Museum) that more than doubled the gallery space. It was a generous act, even if the shows built around the collection can sometimes feel a little tired. Familiarity is a big problem here; too much of the show seems drawn from a limited pool of fashionably acceptable artists. (It may be time for a moratorium on Cindy Sherman's admittedly great and influential but overexposed film stills; they have become a reflexive curatorial tic.)

The curators have tried to freshen things up by delving into Ms. Hessel's private, still-at-home collection, and by stressing recent acquisitions like Rosemarie Trockel's 2006 "Pot," a crude but silvery bit of lidded ceramic the size of a large ottoman.

And they have brought out unfamiliar works from her first years as a collector, in West Germany in the late 1960s. One example is Imi Knoebel's 1968 "Projektion 1," a series of luminous, disorienting black-and-white photographs of light projections that bring to mind the architectural slicings that Gordon Matta-Clark was conducting at that time.

The German emphasis also echoes the retrospective of the German painter-provocateur Blinky Palermo that is on view across the lobby (with another portion at Dia:Beacon); in homage, Mr. McElheny has punctuated "If You Lived Here" with recreations of six Palermo painted-room installations, brilliantly expanding both exhibitions at once.

Each gallery of "If You Lived Here" is a kind of contest among objects, where the determining factors include familiarity, placement and that old formalist bugaboo, "presence." In the living room, despite Schindler's handsome furniture and works by Agnes Martin, Sigmar Polke and Louise Bourgeois, I really had eyes only for Adrian Piper's eerie "Multichrome Mom and Dad," a sly yet tenderly wrought and little-seen painting from 1966 based on a photograph of her light-skinned black parents. Rendered partly in color and partly in black-and-white, it slants Pop Art toward the questioning of racial categories for which she would become known, while also presaging appropriation art.

A gallery dominated by a luxurious chrome bedroom set by Paul Evans (lent by the dealer Amalia Dayan and her husband, Adam Lindemann) contains works by Mr. Knoebel, Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys and Mr. Wool. But these assorted artworks and artifacts mostly provide a beautifying frame for a radiantly simple wrap-around apron-dress by the artist Andrea Zittel, displayed on a mannequin. Made of green wool felt with a wobbly band of white up its center, it dominates the room like a vision seemingly fashioned from shimmering moonlight and seaweed, while also pointing up the haphazardness of the larger display.

In general, the mash-ups enhance by default an appreciation of the white cube gallery as a facilitator of visual concentration. But they can also emphasize, in interesting ways, how art implicates our physical selves.

One room features a projection of Chantal Ackerman's 1971 "Dans le Miroir," an early short film of a beautiful, scantily clad young woman turning this way and that before a full-length mirror, ruthlessly evaluating her physical attributes. It shares the space with one other object: "Thordis' Barge," a large carved-foam sculpture-cum-couch draped with white cotton that Mr. Chamberlain made in 1980-81. The combination is simplistic but effective: reclining on the couch to watch the film can become a test of your ease with your own body.

Three other videos in different galleries amplify the complex psychological overtones of disgust and infatuation hinted at in Ms. Ackerman's video. Jason Simon's haunting "Vera," from 2003, gives us a young woman, a recovering but still delusional shopaholic, discussing her addiction alternately as an illness, a form of collecting and a kind of art form. In the 2005-6 video (made with Jeff Preiss) "May I Help You," Andrea Fraser reprises her classic institutional-critique performance as an art dealer whose sales pitch slides seamlessly among reverence and hostility, privilege and deprivation, cataloging and skewering various stereotypical relationships to art.

And Michel Auder's "Chasing the Dragon" from 1971-87, starring Eric Bogosian, melds autobiographical documentary with a stagey tale of bohemian dissipation based on William Burroughs's "Junkie." Sloppy and pretentious, it nonetheless ends the show with a needed jolt, which is a glimpse of the strange, often desperate place that most art comes from.

KELLY SHIMODA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

At the Hessel Museum exhibition, a gallery includes a sculpture and a chair from Franz West's "Echolalia," and a Christopher Wool painting, "I Can't Stand Myself When You Touch Me."

Where Blinky Palermo replaces Martha Stewart.

"If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home By Now" runs through Dec. 16 at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; (845) 758-7598, bard.edu/ccs.