



Another Mis-en-scene

Country Club presents a witty installation of Michael Lowe's collection

MATT MORRIS // JAN 10, 2011

Country Club's Oakley gallery space has been given over through Feb. 5 to a playful exhibition that forgoes traditional presentation methods, instead re-creating a living space filled with conceptual art that often elicits a double-take.

Another Mis-en-scene is an exhibition curated by local art collector Michael Lowe and is comprised almost entirely of art, antiquities and innovative design objects from his own collection. Such an exhibition handled less gracefully could read as a business-minded jumbled lot at an auction house. But Lowe treats these selections from his collection as an installation and his savvy sense of humor connects all of the pieces.

He even pokes fun at the whole exercise by including a sticker by text-artist Jenny Holzer that pronounces, “Money creates taste.”

Another Mis-en-scene offers new ways of thinking about seminal contemporary art figures, as well as insight into the collector/curator’s trains of thought. In the press release, Lowe offers his intent with the exhibition: “Art and objects should give pleasure in the same way as a holy revelation or a cat of nine tails. I hope to whip or woo someone into an aesthetic froth.”

At the start of the installation is a coat rack by P. Labett with “Hat for Narrow Minded People,” a sculpture by Stefan Wewerka, sitting atop it. It is a black fedora that is only a few inches wide, like a comical prop from a cartoon or *Three Stooges* film. It asks us to check our preconceptions at the door.

Like Wewerka’s hat, the gathered works share an interest in physical comedy and performance art. “Three Polaroids” by Erwin Wurm show the artist using everyday objects and rooms to make his body into a site for sculpture. Understated and deadpan, Wurm’s art inspires chuckles while it rethinks the notion of “social sculpture” that Joseph Beuys (who is represented nearby with two photographic works lying on a table) introduced into the vocabulary of conceptual art.

It’s a joy to see contemporary art paired with works from centuries earlier; the combinations are variously profound and witty. Another performance artist, Chris Burden — who famously crucified himself on the roof of a Volkswagen in 1974 — is represented by “Can Not Do Nails,” an etching with images of his pierced hands. It hangs beside a 17th-century Flemish crucifix, cast in bronze.

The inclusion of remarkable furniture pieces that dialogue with the art on display helps to define the rooms. A crimson bean-bag chair by the Italian design company Zanotta slouches beside the late James Lee Byars’ equally red “Letter Drawing,” which is casually leaned against a wall in a white shadowbox. Byars, whose work considered Eastern philosophies through ephemeral performances and installations, is a favorite of mine and it is thrilling to see his work locally.

The second large space is set up as a dining room, with an Eames table at its center. On the table, laying like a morning newspaper one would read at breakfast, is a newsprint work headed by the title “Bear News — A Disposable Movement by Les

Levine.” This is one of several book-art pieces in the exhibition that allude to Lowe’s extensive collection of artist publications.

A number of video artworks on DVD might be viewed on an available television. It was well worth my time to sit, changing out the discs myself and watching works by Pipilotti Rist, Anri Sala and Francis Alys. One of my favorite works in the exhibition is a video titled “Waltz” by Joan Jonas. Outdoor scenes populated by ambiguous characters wearing masks, conversing with dogs and waving homemade flags and banners, are strung together with Jonas’ iconic mirror play, so that patches of sky, gravel and tree canopies appear in the actors’ hands or in front of their faces.

There are almost as many famous names in this small gallery show as in the expansive Jumex collection currently on view at the Contemporary Arts Center. There are many more titillating pieces in the exhibition than I’ve room to write about. The show is a Wunderkammer of art and design. Its greatest success is a reminder that conceptual art is not as heavy and sober as it is often characterized.

ANOTHER MIS-EN-SCENE continues through Feb. 5 at Country Club (3209 Madison Road, Oakley, 513-792-9744). Gallery hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

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