



Walking Is Still Honest

Will Hutchinson offers viewers a broad new visual terrain

MATT MORRIS // MAY 14, 2008

With *Walking Is Still Honest* at Phyllis Weston-Annie Bolling Gallery in O'Bryonville, Will Hutchinson has created an exhibition that encourages abstract thought through the use of theoretical diagrams and minimalist symbology. The artist seems to have cracked the codes of his own art-making systems and offers viewers a broad new visual terrain.

The work is based in drawing, and his departures into sculptures, photomontage and an installation of projected slides are all connected by faintly drawn marks and a keen attention to minutiae. Fields of marks made in either graphite or red pencil are scattered into invented, decisive constellations or else trace the edges of circles. While several of the drawings are presented traditionally in beautiful wood frames, about half of the exhibition employs sheets of paper as shelves on which minute tableaux play out. Tiny plastic people (like the kind used on model train sets) infest most of the work, operating as unsynchronized patterns. Other recurring motifs include plastic bio-domes, model trees, insect specimens and selected pieces of polished wood.

In the sculpture "An Object Without Aspiration," the Lilliputian figures embark around a mossy, ochre-colored planet perched atop a pedestal. Visually evoking Antoine de Saint Exupéry's "The Little Prince," this sculpture distorts the scale of person-to-planet, making the small herd of brassy people symbolic of much larger, exponentially increasing populations across the earth.

Many of the reflections in the exhibition refer back to the artist's trek up the Pacific Crest Trail.

The time period of this journey roughly overlapped with my own travels across Europe last year, and one of Hutchinson's shelf installations brought my experiences vividly to point. Titled "Anatomy of a Departure #1," a typical map of Europe, faintly tinted with pastel hues, is hung as a backdrop for a gaggle of gray figures beside a taped and tapered three-sided monolith. An easy read could suggest this symbolic erection represents the majestic Alps and mountain-climbing vacations that might directly contradict the honest, natural experience Hutchinson seemed to be seeking on his own hike.

But I am prone to see this architectonic spike as a manifestation of Barbara Tuchman's reference to pre-World War I Europe as a "Proud Tower," and as a mantle of Imperialism passed from European roots into the American spirit of expansion.

What I saw as I traveled through the areas Hutchinson's map depicts was layers of history built and toppling on one another (like his climbing monument set before the map). In contrast, the stark horizontality and blank paper that compose much of the exhibition visually mimics the dwindling frontier wilderness through which I imagine the artist traveled.

The most startling work is "Anatomy of a Departure #3," which features a crowd of the plastic folk, in this case colored a dangerous red, with each figure isolated inside a small red circle drawn like a target around them. The obvious action and motion of their various positions are paused or stopped. Hanging high above the scene is a devastating, Arte Povera-type mushroom cloud, with a molten glass stem and a cap made of wrapped masking tape.

The grace of the cloud is manifested in the glinting clear glass, effacingly paired with the restrained, musty cream hue of common art-studio materials. Ungrounded like a weather balloon released into the imaginary atmosphere above the small scene, the composition of different elements exhibits a deeply internalized reflection that renews typically overused, alarmist imagery.

Miniaturization in contemporary art carries with it a common cliché pointing towards man's insignificance in a larger universe, and if that were all that Hutchinson seemed to offer in this work, it would be dismissible. But its revelation is grafted into a brainstorm of separate, related concerns.

True to the show's claims, one feels like the artist's experience was opened up and his ideas investigated intimately during his time hiking and during the similar journey that proceeded through his studio practice when he returned.

WALKING IS STILL HONEST continues at the Phyllis Weston-Annie Bolling Gallery through May 24.

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