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ART REVIEW

Mixed (Media) Messages

By **[BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)**

“Tremendous World” is the apt title of Lesley Dill’s exhibition now at the [Neuberger Museum of Art](#), where extremely large, dramatic works cover the walls of the gallery, some of them up to 60 feet long and 20 feet high. The show is not a retrospective, but it does chronicle ideas and themes that the Brooklyn-based, Bronxville-born artist has been working with throughout her career.

Ms. Dill, 57, has long been fascinated by the visual qualities and symbolic power of language. In this exhibition she premieres four new large-scale, site-specific installations based on what she describes in an interview in the catalog as “the archeology of language, image and surface.” The works reference texts by Kafka, Emily Dickinson and the Catalan poet Salvador Espriu.

Accompanying the show is a 52-minute documentary video about Ms. Dill. It is worth watching, for she speaks candidly about her core inspiration — her parents, both teachers, who instilled in her a love of words, literature and poetry, in particular the poems of Dickinson. Later she spent some time in India, where she became attuned to the colors, tactility and directness of South Asian temple sculpture. She also became engrossed in eastern mysticism, music, yoga and meditation.

You’ll find all of these influences and more in Ms. Dill’s installations at the Neuberger show, which go beyond a simple visual experience to become a kind of performance. In addition to making the artworks especially for the space, she has arranged them in such a way as to present

viewers with something similar to a cinematic experience. To enter this exhibition is to step into an imaginary, sometimes winsomely mad fantasy world.

“Rush” (2006-2007) is one of the most visually appealing and ambitious works. It is a 60-foot-long, 20-foot-high collage of hundreds of interconnected animal and human figures, culled from world spiritual traditions and representing meditation, death, love, transcendence and other themes. The figures were cut with a knife from filmy sheets of black foil, backed with organza, and then woven together with wire. They coalesce to create a giant thought cloud issuing from a six-inch seated, meditating figure.

The seated figure, a heroic, classical male nude in sober meditation, suggests Auguste Rodin’s sculpture “The Thinker.” But Ms. Dill’s piece has a darker, more sorrowful mental landscape to explore. Running across the top of the collage are letters spelling out a quotation translated from Kafka’s diaries that gave the exhibition its title: “The tremendous world I have inside my head. But how free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me.”

Visionary power, nuance and heartfelt sincerity are the currency in which Ms. Dill trades, which is no real surprise given her enthusiasm for poetry. Her art evokes an imaginative and emotional space, deftly balancing sure, concrete reference points with whimsical intimations of some other, larger, escapist universe. You either take it all on faith and give yourself over to the artist and her work, or back up and walk right out.

Language as a catalyst for ideas about life, death, and the afterlife underpins two other major works here, “Rise” (2005-2006) and “Shimmer” (2005-2006). “Rise” consists of a lacquered red fabric sculpture of a seated female figure with 11 banners of hand-dyed red silk rising up from her back and onto the wall. It seems to be a female version of “Rush,” though it takes its inspiration from accounts of visionary experiences that Ms. Dill collected in 2000 in Winston-Salem, N.C., while on an artist residency. The accounts are by members of a local Baptist Church.

The third wall is occupied by “Shimmer,” an immense curtain of fine, silvery metal wire, initially inspired by the play of light on the Atlantic Ocean. To this the artist has appended a line drawn from one of Mr. Espriu’s poems, spelled out in handmade wire letters along the top and bottom of the wire curtain. The quotation captures a kind of melancholic glee that accords with the artist’s existential bent: “You may laugh but I feel within me suddenly strange voices of God / and handles dog’s thirst and message of slow memories that disappear across a fragile bridge.”

The fourth and final part of the exhibition is a wall of foil-cutout allegorical figures in costumes. They evoke a human presence, possibly suggesting visitors to the show contemplating the artist’s work. But as always the exact meaning is unclear. Ms. Dill’s sculptures are less visual objects for detached aesthetic contemplation than knotty philosophical puzzles that use sculpture as a launching pad.

“Lesley Dill: Tremendous World,” Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, through June 3. Information: (914) 251-6100 or www.neuberger.org.