ANN WEBER, DAVID MIDDLEBROOK AND ALI NASCHKE-MESSING SHOW ON THE MONTALVO GROUNDS

New Beginnings at Montalvo

Bronze sculpture by David Middlebrook defies gravity on Montalvo Grounds. In a spirited celebration of interactive arts in lovely summer weather, the grounds in front of Montalvo’s main facilities in the Phelan Mansion were the inauguration site of outdoor sculpture installations by Ann Weber, David Middlebrook and Ali Naschke-Messing on Friday, July 23, 2010. Music and poetry contributed to the events of the evening. Programs Director Kelly Sicat took visitors on a guided tour of the sculptural works, inviting the artists to talk about each piece with her. She explained that although some of the work is inherently impermanent she hopes this exhibition sows the seeds of an eventual sculpture garden. For the future, Montalvo wants more interface of the arts with the grounds.
Ann Weber’s woven sculpture sits near the discovery site of the small cones that were their inspiration.

Ann Weber, as a resident at Montalvo, wove her forms out of strips of corrugated cardboard and modeled their shapes after small nuts and seed pods she found on the grounds. Weber had asked staff to save as much discarded cardboard as they could get their hands on for her before her arrival. Coming from the Midwest, she says she is used to “making a silk purse from a sow’s ear.” Her background in ceramics drew her naturally to the organic spherical and cylindrical forms she found under the trees. A steel matrix beneath the surface maintains the structural integrity of each sculpture. During the residency, Weber began looking into the history of James Phelan (the Senator who bequeathed his estate to the arts) and learned of his status as an amateur poet. She named her sculptures after some of his favorite poems. While earlier public works were executed in weather resistant fiberglass and epoxy, these woven cardboard pieces are simply shellacked and exposed to the elements. Weber is ambivalent about eventually allowing this series to disintegrate and return to the earth.
Ann Weber stands beside Prince of Whims

The metal and stone sculpture of David Middlebrook tends to turn nature on its head. In *Haywire*, an upside-down packing crate with stones in it seems to levitate above the earth and drag its straps along behind it. The “wooden” crate itself is actually cast aluminum, the stones and straps are bronze. Middlebrook took his inspiration from a scuba diving experience where he saw giant bubbles rising to the surface. He noted that they looked like falling rocks going in the wrong direction and thought he could play with that concept in cast metals. Another work on the grounds plays with a floating cast canopy that appears to be a weathered blue canvas tarp draped over a giant egg when seen from the balcony of the Phelan Mansion. Inspection from beneath reveals there is nothing there. Straps that appear to have broken loose from binding the egg to the earth also support this tarp. Visions of the egg floating off on its own or hatching to unleash a prehistoric flying creature are conjured.

David Middlebrook explains Haywire

Middlebrook’s Head of Man, placed in the lower garden near the pavilion, continues the theme of the cracking egg, this time serving as the head of an abstracted human bust. Loaded with potential puns and also referencing the artist’s meditations on plate tectonics and a fractured world, the bronze egghead is balanced precariously on top of shoulders formed from polished volcanic basalt. Middlebrook notes that basalt and granite are the only rocks that are impervious to acid rain. One can follow the cautionary tale that Middlebrook is weaving. The sculpture is elegant and fits superbly
One last charming and slightly different bronze work by David Middlebrook sits in the Succulent Garden. It is *Broken Wing*, modeled after a broken wing nut the artist found in his toolbox. He immediately saw it as a wounded angel and an extension of our topsy-turvy contemporary world where up is down and all our old assumptions are challenged. Again, the contemporary sculpture and the historic garden harmonize wonderfully.

In the Gallery, Ali Naschke-Messing’s meditative installation employed sparkling lines of both taught and slumped threads, hung in parallel groupings to mitigate many of the inanimate and geometric characteristics of the room’s architecture. Naschke-Messing is also a former resident at Montalvo, and this work recalls her morning meditations at that time as well as an impression she carried away from the Gallery space that it was somewhat cold and unreceptive. The sparks of light are warming and soften its physical form. The artist continued her love of light and surprising subtle reflections onto the grounds with an installation of mirrors in a monkey pod tree.
Ali Naschke-Messing stands in the center of her transformative installation.

This Friday night event was part of the new direction of the Montalvo Arts Center, formerly known as Villa Montalvo. Sicat also spoke of more contemporary art for Montalvo, a small series of dance programs and performances by new musicians. In the Carriage House and Garden Theatre there will be many of the types of music and theatre that patrons have come to enjoy and expect at Montalvo over time: jazz, piano masters, chamber music, and world music. The first lawn concert since 2006 will feature George Cleve leading Symphony Silicon Valley. “We are working on a speakers series with the Commonwealth Club. We are committed to a holistic approach”, Sicat says.

The Center has launched a number of promising initiatives in recent years but has suffered problems in executing them for the long haul. In conversation, Sicat acknowledged issues that have troubled Montalvo in the past, but speaks confidently of an integrated and balanced series of programs that allow the visual and performing arts to all flourish with some of their most successful features from past years. She sounded like she had done her homework when she spoke of plans to involve local talent with regional and international stars. “For the last three years I have been looking at our local artists and asking, ‘how can we pull them in?’ Our two biggest commissions of the year have gone to Ann Weber and David Middlebrook for the new works shown here on the grounds tonight. The last Fridays of every month, the Center will be open free to the public.”
Sustainability and a breadth in programming seem to be bywords of Montalvo’s new profile. Rotating series of programs for the public are complemented by the Sally and Don Lucas Artists Residency Program, that gives literary, visual and performing artists time and space in which to be creative. Applied Materials and Arts Council Silicon Valley have come on board as sponsors. A newly unified vision between Board and staff may be at the root of current energy and magic at Montalvo. Development Director Liz Waldo, echoed Sicat’s excitement with “I have never seen the Board and staff as optimistic as they are today.” Standing amidst the sculpture, Anne Sconberg, artist and patron of the arts enthused over the evening, “It feels like a recreation of the Garden of Eden, like creating your own universe.”

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