

ART REVIEW

Basic Instinct: Doing What Artists Do

Piles of Stuff, Transformed

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

THROUGHOUT history, art has surged forth in most all times and places, fulfilling, it would seem, some basic human will to create. To that extent, art remains the same animal it was centuries ago.

I was reminded of this not too long ago, in New Haven, while viewing several art projects in alternative spaces, mostly by younger local artists. None of these exhibitions has any commercial imperative, the artists motivated instead by the simple giddy pleasure of making.

My first stop was Grand Projects, an artist-run garage-cum-gallery in the suburbs where Nathan Lewis is exhibiting a 53-foot long wrap-around wall painting. The painting, which is really a kind of art installation, combines imagery of power transmission towers with pop cultural references. It is an absurd fantasy landscape.

Mr. Lewis, a New Haven resident, hit upon the idea of using industrial towers in his paintings a couple of years back after finding a plastic tower on the side of the road. He was teaching art history at the time, and made the association between industrial towers and famous towered structures, like mosques and the Milan Cathedral.

Mr. Lewis sees the towers in his work, he says, as "pedestals for figures of authority." But they are also, more broadly, symbols for institutions of power. Towers that lean or sway are often meant to symbolize unstable or fallen institutions, while towers that re-



Why transform industrial towers and lumber?
Because they are there.

main erect symbolize more forthright, stable or still-evolving ones.

Pop culture references and appropriated imagery surround the towers. Among them are images taken from the Internet, advertising and television, interspersed with those the artist made or took himself, including some photographs of actual industrial towers and mounds of industrial debris from the ongoing demolition of the New Haven Coliseum.

The dialogue between the industrial towers and cultural imagery pretty well defines the piece. It is about the relentless march of time, history and the rise and fall of civilizations. Just as the foundations of one civilization are laid on the left side of the mural, to the right-hand side the foundations of another begin to crumble, war and die. It is the order of things.

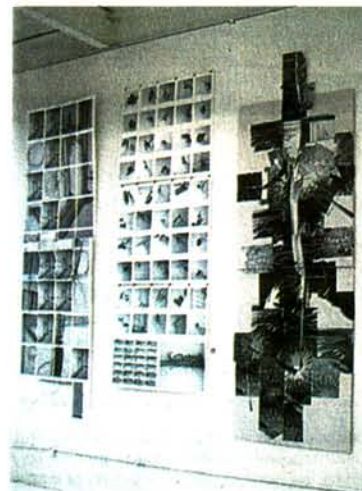
By and large, the questions Mr. Lewis seeks to address in this mural are those that have for millennia remained unanswered. These questions, which have long haunted artists, cluster about the nature of the human condition and our place in the universe. This is partly what keeps art fresh, but also what makes it the same.

Mr. Lewis has another work on display at Installation Project Space, a new, nearby project gallery established by the artist



Janet Van Horne. The piece is an untitled photographic collage, one of several works on display here made in response to an unusual curatorial experiment: Each artist was invited to make an artwork from a pile of lumber in the gallery, document it, and then dismantle whatever they made. The subsequent documentation of the works is displayed on the walls.

Mr. Lewis, curiously, chose to lay out the lumber on the floor of the gallery in a spiral, photograph it, and then cut and combine the photographs to make an elongated towerlike montage of his imagery. The result is a new



and independent work of art, although one that reminds you in some ways of his mural — the use of montage, for starters, along with the haunting symbolism of towers.

Other artists included in the exhibition pursued different tactics. Hanni Bresnick, collaborating with her mother, Anna Bresnick, decided to photograph clumps of scrap lumber thrown into the air, while Colleen Tully took images of lumber arrangements and manipulated them post-production to make more interesting, abstract imagery.

Ms. Van Horne, who also participated in the project, painted over her documentary

A pile of wood, far left, became the basis for photo collages by (from left to right in photo at left) Colleen Tully, Anna and Hanni Bresnick, and Nathan Lewis at Installation Project Space. Above, a mural by Mr. Lewis at Grand Projects.

imagery, which to my eyes adds little to the overall work. And yet it doesn't really matter what these works look like, for the project is more about plumbing one of the enduring mysteries of human life: the artistic impulse, the source and soul of creativity.

There is something weirdly primitive about the experiment that grabbed me. What I liked is how different are each of the artists' responses to the same set of materials, how each has produced a work that is alien to its neighbor. This points to something fiercely individual about the human spirit, and our immense capacity for creativity.

"Nathan Lewis" is at Grand Projects, 61 Lyon Street, New Haven, though Jan. 31. Information: (203) 415-4605 or www.grand-projects.com. "The Wood Pile Installation" is at Installation Project Space, Building No. 2 (entrance on Peck Street), Erector Square, Third Floor, Studio F, New Haven, through Feb. 5. Information: (203) 430-4512 or www.ipstudio.com.