

Two Artists With Time on Their Side

By **STEPHEN MAINE** | October 25, 2007

Both the weight and the capriciousness of time course through concurrent shows of new installations by Brooklyn-based artists Peter Dudek and Elana Herzog, now on view at stalwart DUMBO gallery Smack Mellon. In more than merely the self-evident "process" central to both artists' approach, time is deeply embedded in their imagery and profoundly informs the atmosphere of their work.

Contrary to the permanence and stability intrinsic to the idea of the monument, Mr. Dudek's rambling, shambling "New Monuments to My Lovelife" are provisional, seemingly ad hoc assemblages of cunningly variegated components that suggest transience and flux. Rectangular slabs of laminate in designer colors, medium-density fiberboard, and honeycomb cardboard in various thicknesses stake out territory in clusters across the floor of this open, column-studded space. Arranged in a few loose grids that suggest neighborhoods, these are augmented with the attributes of domestic design: stacks of cheap end tables and ottomans, carved-up hollow-core doors, nested bands of sheet metal and felt, and undersized parapets that give the whole thing the feel of an architectural model. The visitor peruses the piece like a goliath roaming an abandoned city.

The artist strikes a balance — much harder than it looks — between elements that are clearly found and others that are almost certainly fabricated. Mr. Dudek's nostalgia for the clean lines of utopian, mid-century design meshes playfully with a promiscuous use of materials: clouds of plaster, herds of glass marbles, taped-up tangles of armature wire, driftwood, and, here and there, photographs of this work or one very like it, presumably in progress in the artist's studio. In referring directly to the work's ontogeny, Mr. Dudek shows a sweet fondness for the adolescent stage of his creation, even while sharpening his focus on what happens in the metaphormaking part of the viewer's brain when confronted by a thing placed next to, or atop, or underneath some other thing.

The artist's method is fluid and improvisational, but not arbitrary; the nature of "New Monuments" is that of a grand container, and Mr. Dudek has a fine time testing the limits of what will fit. He even invited a half-dozen other artists to collaborate, and their contributions, while unannounced, can be guessed at, and

surely include a cluster of comical portrait busts nestled inside an upended desk. Gallery information discloses that the artist allows himself the option of tinkering with the installation during the show's run, making it, in effect, a work-in-progress.

As Mr. Dudek's monuments to metamorphosis suspend and expand time, Ms. Herzog's work compresses and stalls it in "Plaid," an installation occupying Smack Mellon's smaller space. Lengths of brown wool fabric are affixed to the wall by innumerable staples, attacked by some unknown means that has left only their shredded vestiges. The vagaries that result hint at natural processes such as erosion and evaporation. The staples roughly reiterate the plaid fabric's grid, and are so dense in places that they visually dominate the weave. In patches against the stark white wall, the skeletal remains of warp and woof seem to be dissolving into nothing, or perhaps seeping into the sheetrock. It's funny that the work seems to be in the process of changing, because with all those staples, it sure isn't going anywhere. Rather than fixing the material in view, the staples are the agent of its disintegration, a metaphor for impermanence.

Ms. Herzog experimented with minor adjustments to the gallery's existing architecture in "W(e)ave," a recent exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. (Related work can be seen through November 10 at LMAK Projects in Chelsea.) At Smack Mellon, her build-outs are bolder, and suggest the direction in which the artist is headed. A step-like platform runs along one wall; a waist-high barricade extends into the space about 12 feet; a square column rises to the ceiling. Glomming onto these clean, clearly delineated sculptural forms are patches of Ms. Herzog's signature tortured-textile-cum-postnuclear-wallpaper.

Both shows tug in two directions simultaneously. Even though it's fascinating and great fun to observe, there is something deeply melancholic, even Sisyphean, about Mr. Dudek's endless attempt to get his installation just right. And Ms. Herzog deals with the conundrum that her tattered, ragged material is far more beautiful than the unsullied original. In both shows, anecdote, accident, and vernacular idiom invade the orthodox purity of Modernism, reinvigorating it in highly personal and compelling terms.

Until November 11 (92 Plymouth St. at Washington Street, Brooklyn, 708-834-8761).

