

ART

ART; Celebrating the Planet In Water, Air and Fire

By D. Dominick Lombardi

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SINCE the advent of Earth Art some three-plus decades ago, a plethora of expressions cultivating new ways of experiencing the planet have emerged. In the exhibition at the Hudson River Museum here, "Drip, Blow, Burn: Forces of Nature in Contemporary Art," three elements: water, air and fire, continue to inspire some of today's most visionary artists, focusing on contemporary forms of object-specific Conceptual Art.

The curators, Ellen Keiter, Andrea Lilienthal, Jean-Paul Maitinsky and Catherine Shiga-Gattullo, reveal in their selections a compelling and sometimes magical approach to making art. One piece that helps to enlighten the uninitiated is Meg Webster's "Rocky Stream Table" (1995). Emphasizing viewer participation, this Y-shaped, mixed-media construction urges visitors to change the flow patterns of a perpetual stream of water by altering various rock positions. Ms. Webster, who is well aware of the view of the majestic Hudson River from the museum, makes a very subtle reference to creation by way of authorship.

MiYoung Sohn's "Pool" (1998) intensifies a playful message by suggesting the dark side of an otherwise banal child's toy. Besides channeling early childhood memories through an inflatable pool, the artist suggests catastrophe with still waters and the pool's open casket look.

Bill Viola's video installation "The Reflecting Pool" (1977-79) connects the spiritual plane to the physical world by using time distortion. At 10, Mr. Viola had a unforgettable nearly drowning experience. The unexpected tranquillity he felt during the event profoundly affected him. The sense of peace felt back then has evolved into a series of ethereal visual sequences.

For example, in "The Reflecting Pool" the artist is seen at a pool's edge, leaping up and into a closed, ball-like position. At the apex of his jump, his image freezes. Time and motion continues irrespective of his suspended position. The rippling water and the changing sunlight and shadows animate the view, leaving the viewer with questions about parallels between one's spiritual existence and one's earthly vessels. As time passes, Mr. Viola slowly disappears from sight, reappearing later as a standing reflection in the water. The cycle is complete, when a figure emerges from the pool, quickly disappearing into the wooded surroundings from which the diver originated.

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A second video installation by Ray Beldner, "Running Cars/Driving Rain" (1999), contains another water reference. Projected onto a sheet of falling water are the familiar images of cars passing through a storm at night. The oncoming headlights, which change in clarity and color as the camera moves closer, then back again, appear to cut through the field of vision, an effect that is enhanced by the vertical rays of light from the headlights.

Robert Whitman's two 1994-95 installations, "Untitled (Red Wall Stream)" and "Untitled (Leaking Wall)," have the most profound spiritual overtones. "Red Wall Leaking" is made up of a small, wall-mounted tube, which rotates counter-clockwise as it spews blood-red water into an oversize bucket. The scarlet liquid, which splashes a curious pattern of stains, creates halos of white and red around the bucket. "Leaking Wall," which is made up of a series of sinuous slits cut directly into a nearby wall, seeps water uncontrollably, which seems to allude to the weeping Madonna.

The exhibition's most visually powerful piece is Dennis Oppenheim's "Digestion. Gypsum Gypsies" (1988). It includes six free-standing deer with flaming antlers. Cast in resin, wax and newspaper, each deer has a slightly different head angle, which adds a bit of life to its static pose. In one way, Mr. Oppenheim plays with our sense of perception by reintroducing the normally timid creature as a forbidding menace. On the other hand, he could be creating the ultimate in over-designed utilitarianism by fabricating the world's most absurd candelabra. Whatever the case, his work always questions perception with thought-provoking wit.

Ned Kahn's mixed-media sculpture "Fluttering Silk" (1991) sits adjacent to Mr. Oppenheim's flaming deer. In it, two barrel-shaped blowers produce high winds, which arch up and out from a gently curving scoop-like form. A long piece of deep blue silk, which is attached at the top of the blower's housing, flows in hypnotic rhythms that track the wind's waves. The end of the flowing fabric, which is slightly frayed, alludes to the corrosive or destructive powers of wind.

Andy Warhol's "Silver Clouds" (1966), which has many helium-filled, metallized plastic balloons, is an example of an intoxicating Pop-Conceptual hybrid. "Silver Clouds" utilizes mass-produced objects in the creation of what in 1966 would have been seen as the antithesis of fine art. The concept of the flying dream, as implied by the pillow shape of each of these lighter-than-air balloons, gives this work an undeniable sense of freedom-inspired joy -- an effect that is periodically disrupted by a balloon's inadvertent contact with one of the four ceiling fans. Occasionally, when a balloon descends almost to the museum's floor, a playful suggestion to dream oneself is briefly felt.

An important example of Body Art by Mr. Oppenheim, titled "Reading Position for Second Degree Burn" (1970), is represented by a pair of red and white photographs. One shows Mr. Oppenheim with the book "Tactics, Vol. II, Cavalry Artillery" resting on his bare middle torso. In the second

photograph, the book, or sun-blocker, is removed, revealing the contrast between the exposed sun-burned skin and the previously covered patch of white flesh.

"Drip, Blow, Burn: Forces of Nature in Contemporary Art," which began on Feb. 19, will continue to be on display through June 20. The number to call for information is 963-4550.