

Responding to Location in DUMBO



Wade Kavanagh and Stephen Nguyen. Courtesy of Smack Mellon Gallery.

Smack Mellon recently moved into a new space in Dumbo and asked artists to respond to the new location in "Site 92." Artists were invited to make work specifically about the new digs but through the lens of their particular ideas on architecture, environment and space. Smack Mellon's 12,000 foot gallery has ceilings that are 35 ft high so work that plays with scale is perfect for the space. The gallery was once a boiler building, evident in its main architectural feature, which is a coal trough in the gallery. In the past fungi clung to the structure and pigeons nested inside.

One of the main strengths of Smack Mellon in the past was that their old space was not a traditional gallery space. It was raw and did not look conventional nor was it too immaculate. Because of this the work seemed to be truly site-specific and integral to the space. While the new space is very impressive and beautiful it lacks the character of the previous space and thus some of the work in "Site 92" can seem contrived in terms of it being site-specific. It does not have the quality of the previous space to save it. However, the best work in the show dissects the space in a playful or strait forward manner, uses simple materials and is somewhat modest in its approach. One of the nicest aspects of the space is its numerous nooks, crannies and columns that run the length of the space for artists to respond to.

Luisa Caldwell's circular, hanging sculpture of colorful candy wrappers transforms into butterflies cascading in a circle. Her work makes a strong contrast of color to the predominant grey cement that is the main color in the space and her work uses nondescript mass-made elements to create a work of pure joy and wonder.

Wade Kavanaugh and Stephen Nguyen use brown Kraft paper to create a large twisted and crumpled ceiling installation that wraps between the rafters. The work cleverly highlights the architecture of the space in a simple and impressive approach and again makes the viewer experience amazement and awe at the scope of the work.

Dannielle Tegeder and Lili Herrera turn part of the gallery walls inside out in a lovely and intricate wall painting. By doing so their wall painting exposes systems that are normally hidden from view. When viewing this work one senses that one could crawl into the piece and travel deeper into a secret part of the building structure only briefly revealed in the painting.

Amy Finkbeiner's wall drawings slowly creep into the mind. Finkbeiner creates wall drawings of religious apparitions over the toilets off the main space. Initially I did not respond to her work but I kept thinking about it. The drawings are modest and quiet and one could miss the work if one did not head to the bathroom, which makes it even subtler, and less obvious. The work is based on visions by medieval saints and the subjects are all nude, passive in stance and angelic. I found the work funny and haunting at once and Finkbeiner's work is the strongest conceptually in the show.

Beth Krebs video work fills the gallery with cooing and birdcalls. Krebs recorded pigeons, which were pervasive in the past incarnation of the building and set her monitor high in one of the rafters. The strongest part of Krebs's piece was the sound component that echoed through out the space. It seemed ghostly and captured the past history of the space without a specific location, which was a refreshing way to go about making a site-specific work. Her work did accomplish this but in an ephemeral way.

Using tape to draw on the wall Hesseop Yoon deconstructs the interior of the building off the main space in a back stairwell. Yoon utilizes black tape and yet her work is very expressive and does not have linear lines, which one would expect with the medium she uses. Yoon's work seems almost like an x-ray of the space and of the inner energy of materials used in the hidden construction of the space.

Overall "Site 92" is a very strong group show with a few "flat" works that are overly clever or poorly executed. The best work infuses the space with magic, ghostly wonder, is modest in some aspect of the work with materials or presentation and shows off the new space in a spectacular way.

-Leah Oates