

WEST VIRGINIA

Iain Machell

Stifel Fine Arts Center
Oglebay Institute
Wheeling, 304/242-7700

Iain Machell's recent installation confronted observers with a painful examination of loss, frustration, and helplessness in the face of sickness and death. In the fifth of a series of related installations at different sites, he transformed the hominess of the Stifel Center, a converted mansion, into a grim reminder that families are destroyed by epidemics such as AIDS.

In the three-room installation, the artist used white paper coverings over useless, non-functional furniture to evoke the sterile hopelessness of hospital wards for the dying. In the first room, chairs and tables covered with semi-translucent paper created the distinct impression of an anthropomorphized space, the interiority of an emptied-out body. Porous and skin-like, the paper coverings were embedded with thousands of rusted nails. These left a bloodied, stained surface, contaminated and irreversibly marked. Their numbers suggested the effects of pandemic disease. A TV monitor showed a hammer driving more nails into a piece of wood. On another table, a machine labeled "humour meter" showed a dial permanently stuck on "O." In the second room, Machell critiqued scientific, religious, and institutional belief systems through a merciless (though not humorless) deconstruction. Science was represented by outdated electronic instruments, including a machine on a hospital bed frame, which slowly spewed graph paper covered in text from the works of Daniel Defoe, the Moral Majority, and the American Family Association. A plastic glow-in-the-dark Jesus figurine watched benevolently, looking out as well over a second bed, covered in paper. On this bed frame was an electronic paint shaker and a can full of rusty nails, which erupted into violent motion at timed intervals. The third room contained a single bed in a nearly empty white room. On the bed was an electronic counting machine, slowly but steadily tallying victims. The mournful wail of Gaelic hymns endlessly repeated from a tape loop hidden in the closet, the voices crying out with grief and pain.

Machell seemed here to aim at forcing the viewer into an active role in interpreting his work. The distinction between audience and participant was blurred in some sections of the installation, as viewers were given instruction on how to activate machinery. He not only physically involved the viewer in his work, but also conspired to push the viewer into actively supplying personal significations to the installation, refusing to demystify his work through straightforward, facile analysis. Because Machell intentionally hoped to subvert unthinking interpretations of the installation, the viewer was occasionally frustrated, left with the question of whether the artist is extremely subtle in intent, or merely unwilling to risk direct statements on the subject of his artistic production. Thus, this installation could be read as a haunting lament over the AIDS epidemic, but Machell never explicitly said that this was the case. The word "AIDS" was not present in the installation, although the reference seemed clear.

Perhaps this unwillingness to supply the viewer with easy answers cuts to the heart of Machell's artistic projects, and serves as a partial explanation of the power of this installation. Machell understands how to create complexity and meaning through absence and understatement. What better way to understand the familial, social, and emotional cost of AIDS than from an examination of what it forever removes from us?

Michael Slaven