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'Nothing' is happening: Minimalist works help provoke a meditative state

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Abstract (summary)

In her catalog essay, Dumont quotes Sweibel saying that the viewing experience of her scrawny wire works "pushes the point of paying attention." The roughly straight strand with a tiny circle curling at its head made me laugh; I saw a little stick figure, upon which I projected a host of characteristics: scruffy, humble, noble in the face of adversity, lonely but soldiering on.

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VISUAL ARTS

Review

Many Kinds of Nothing

At: Montserrat Gallery, Montserrat College of Art, 23 Essex St., Beverly, through Oct. 26. 978-921-4242, www.montserrat.edu/galleries

BEVERLY - Any good work of art should wake you up. Some art objects do it more seductively than others. A gorgeous Titian such as "Europa" at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, for instance, pulls viewers in with a spectacle of story, tone, and technique.

But what about a scraggly piece of wire sticking out of a white wall? That's a tougher sell, and it's what artist Liz Sweibel gives us. Sweibel's wiry twists are on view, along with work by three other artists, in "Many Kinds of Nothing," a provocative exhibit about meditation at Montserrat College of Art curated by Shana Dumont. Meditation aims to awaken the mind, and Dumont aims to explore how minimalist art embodies meditation.

Unlike "Europa," the works in this show don't carry you away with color and drama. Indeed, they're spare, oblique, and lacking in narrative. They don't expect the viewer to make sense of them; rather, they invite you to engage and discover what the art provokes within you. Intrinsically, they're less about themselves than they are about you and your response to them. They work to open an empty space, in which your assumptions fall away or are elucidated, and your perceptive powers quicken.

Some will run from this exhibit as quickly as they'd run from a meditation cushion; it isn't always easy spending time with oneself.

In her catalog essay, Dumont quotes Sweibel saying that the viewing experience of her scrawny wire works "pushes the point of paying attention." It's true. Her untitled pieces are tiny on the vast white wall, but they demand scrutiny. They look like scraps of trash (another Sweibel series here sports tiny scraps of fabric), and in a sense they are; the artist recycles wire from previous sculptures.

One of the simplest ones drew me right in. The roughly straight strand with a tiny circle curling at its head made me laugh; I saw a little stick figure, upon which I projected a host of characteristics: scruffy, humble, noble in the face of adversity, lonely but soldiering on. The piece cast a pale shadow downward; Sweibel had carved another "shadow" into the wall above it. It looks like a drawing, not a cut in the wall, but knowing it's a cut changes the game; perhaps the little wire figure has wrenched its way out of the wall and into the open.

You may think it's easy to make up stories like this, but it isn't when an artist is intent on pushing his or her own agenda. The artists in "Many Kinds of Nothing" deliberately make open-ended work.

Dan Senn's "Many Pairs Sounding" operates, in part, beyond human perception, leaving us to fill in the blanks.

Step into the gallery and you smell the hay that covers the floor of his installation. Sixteen white plastic tubes stand upright in the scattered hay. A sheet of paper, folded in half, sits atop each tube, occasionally flapping or shuddering. Every now and then, a sonorous voice moans; another trills operatically.

I assumed that the piece was interactive, that my motion was setting off the sounds and flaps. I started waving my hands, attempting to trigger a response. I was wrong. It's good to have one's expectations foiled.

Senn has composed subsonic music that plays on CDs installed in the tubes. The paper shudders in response to the music's silent vibrations; the audible music is a garnish. If you stay with the piece long enough, you may recognize a pattern in the drumming paper, but it's more fun when you can't quite make sense of it; you're more alert and open to possibility.

I was disappointed that Nancy Murphy Spicer's "Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn)" is not interactive; she had a similar piece in the Boston Drawing Show last year that was. She suspends a rope on several pins on the wall; the resulting drawing is ad hoc, mutable.

Dumont chose not to make this one interactive, I'm guessing, because the potential for change keeps the mind in a state of heightened engagement; to actually step in and rehang the piece would be, in this show, easy on, easy off. Dumont's take would work for those who haven't seen one of Murphy Spicer's hanging drawings before; having already passed through the door of interactivity, I couldn't go back to mere imagining.

Murphy Spicer has also posted instructions around Montserrat for anyone to take, a technique that recalls the tactics of the mid-20th century conceptual art group Fluxus, only less witty and more ponderous. These involve finding a body of water and watching the water's edge; they come across as pedantic. Following instructions is not necessarily the most effective route to awakening.

Roni Horn's multilayered photographs "Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)" are the least minimalist works in "Many Kinds of Nothing," and so they work against Dumont's premise. Horn's lovely, swirling shots were extracted from a video of the river; she has us looking right down onto the water's surface.

Look carefully, and you'll note tiny numbers, which correspond to footnoted text beneath each of three images. This is where meaning rushes in, before you can begin to make your own. The notes vary: They're scientific, literary, newsy, self-reflective, chatty. They capture much of what a river signifies to the people who live near it. Granted, Horn offers such texture in her notes that a viewer can find space in the interstices to make his or her own associations, but in this work, much more than the others in "Many Kinds of Nothing," the artist takes the viewer firmly by the hand.

Given the opportunity in this show, I prefer to find my way on my own.

Credit: Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent. Boston Globe

Illustration

Caption: Dan Senn's "Many Pairs Sounding" features subsonic music that plays on CDs installed in plastic tubes topped by folded paper.

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Indexing (details)

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