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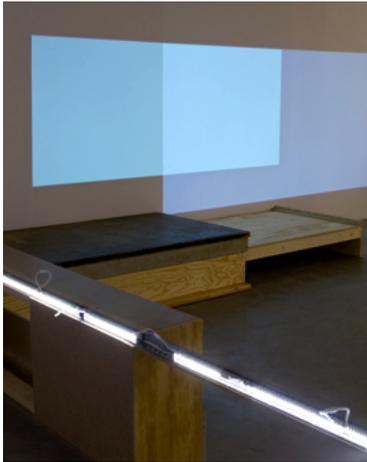
City Art: 'Freebuilding'

Woodfill improvises a home at work in 'Stations' at Bemis

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From 'Stations,' on view through May 8.

Through May 8, 2010
Bemis Center for
Contemporary Arts
724 S. 12th St.
bemiscenter.org

What are we to infer from the title of artist James Woodfill's new site-specific installation, "Stations," let alone the work itself, as it occupies Gallery I of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts?

Among the many "stations" in life are those of the Cross and one's social standing. With these "Stations," think instead of places of public service or private respite like a train depot, post office, chapel and coffee shop or on a radio dial. Now, imagine these stations of communication, comfort, meditation and entertainment in your own home, albeit in a more abstract mode.

"Stations" is visibly perplexing enough as this exhibit's blend of mixed media, found and created objects hasn't been experienced, say, since Thurman's Statom's installation, "Nascita" upstairs at Bemis and Rob Gilmer's group effort, "Dream House on Rye," in its Underground.

Yet, there are differences between their mythic and fantastic environments of glass (Statom) and nostalgia (Gilmer) and Woodfill's urban milieu of plywood, casters and electronics, which he, somewhat facetiously, describes in the show's curatorial statement, as work that "hovers between a constructivist painting and a fireworks stand." Bemis curator Hesse McGraw goes on to explain the artist's "cobbled structures" further.

"These works extend from Woodfill's history of working in galleries and public sites," he said, "and build upon an ongoing dialogue about reference points such as physical perception, architectural space, urbanism's fuzzy edges, materiality and abstraction."

The relationship of art to architecture and design, especially as to how it transforms urban sites and gallery spaces into "Places" has long been a concern of this Kansas City-based artist who has taught at the Kansas City Art Institute since 1998. His own public art has received numerous awards including those from the American Institute of Architects. But rather than transcend a space with "fussy decoration or glossy makeover," McGraw says Woodfill's works "amplify the conditions of their surroundings and heighten our interaction with the site."

Like all installations, "Stations" encourages audience interfacing; even if at first, the transformed gallery resembles the set of PBS's "New Yankee Workshop" or the backroom of an IKEA store, what with its seeming clutter of "half-finished" shelves, tables, platforms, carts and cabinets. Despite its suggestion of a work in progress and no apparent traffic patterns, on two recent visits, viewers had no trouble navigating in and around the various stations in the gallery including several with their walkers and canes.

The perceived organized chaos of this space is disconcerting initially until one adjusts to the ambient light and familiar shapes and forms and then gradually the installation becomes a place aided and abetted by one's imagination. It is similar to traveling I-80 to Lincoln and determining at 65 mph how all the construction sites with their mere shells of anything and everything, covered in tarp, mud and dust will eventually become new bridges, express lanes and culverts.

But while we may only complete that image in transition miles down the road safe behind our looking glass, "Stations" offers a comfort zone of its own. To appreciate this, as with all stations, one has to spend a little time with each one or even sit awhile on the platform on the east wall and take it all in holistically, connecting the dots to see how the installation is unified by its industrial and minimalist structure. In his artist talk Woodfill referred to his method of construction as "freebuilding" and it requires of the viewer, therefore, a certain amount of free thinking.

Its open floor plan is readily apparent, but second glances reveal the multiple purposed sculptural units: shelves serve as room dividers and entertainment centers, cabinets and side tables on casters sub as serving carts, and that raised surface you are sitting on would make a good platform bed. Form follows multi-function, but its utilitarian décor delivers a few surprises even to the most critical of viewers.

This urban domicile looks ripe for interior decorators and accessorizing. After all, it's odd to walk into a house or apartment and not see things on the wall, floors and ceilings and suddenly realize they're not bare at all. A third glance reveals that the walls are complete with panels leaning against them, window frames of pure color from video projectors and reflected light and shadow. Individual works are so carefully placed and lit that while they may cast shadows on walls and floors, none are cast upon them.

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The overall impact is that of a showroom or a stage where Woodfill says "none of the pieces are precious and drift in and out of function, where the empty spaces are as important as (those filled)." For example, nothing in "Stations" stands over six feet tall, making one acutely aware of the high gallery ceilings. It's a point of view that the artist admits is deliberately naïve in its innocence and imagination. "I don't want to sound too childish," Woodfill said, "but I wanted to let the ceiling be as a child who draws the sky at the top of the page and creates a non-space as well."

It's a unique perspective in the creative process when a child struggles to comprehend the third dimension let alone express it. It might explain why on that same recent visit a no-more-than five year old walked among the stations uncritically, full of curiosity if not quite wonder, and then sat reading comfortably on the same platform. He adapted quite well. So did Woodfill when he brought his "ever expanding kit of parts," mostly found objects over a three decade period, to Bemis to reconstruct.

"Though I saw the space, studied the floor plan," he said, "their (stations) relationship to the space surprised me." While some pieces stayed intact, made and remade, Woodfill retrofitted the installation to the venue. "Think of it ('Stations') as a singular space as opposed to singular pieces."

Think of it also as kid-created out of Legos, Lincoln Logs or Tinker Toys without a blueprint, or what McGraw says is a "sense of a predetermined outcome," regarding Woodfill's finished product. Yet it works and feels as right in its space as an improvised solo in a jazz composition.

In 2007, the *Kansas City Star* described Woodfill's exhibit, "Rehab" at Review Studios as "Organizing chaos. The discontinuity in 'Rehab' captures the incongruity of evolving urban areas." This time the artist journeys indoors and creates a continuity of "Stations" in a cosmic response to the chaos outside.

