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Art Review

Ridgefield's Own Given Free Rein

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO Published: May 14, 2006

AS if there aren't enough excellent exhibitions across Connecticut and Westchester right now, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum has recently opened three lush shows, each one stocked with experimental new work and carrying its own inspiration or theme.

Overseeing the program is Richard Klein, the director of exhibitions, who is a successful artist. He brings to the selection of works an eye for innovation and unplumbed talent, sometimes even risking precious museum space on artists whose work is evolving. But that is what makes the program here so chancy and yet so exciting.

Taking the three exhibitions as they are encountered, the paintings of Damian Loeb are the first things that come into view. This is just one component of a three-part exhibition titled "Homecoming," conceived to profile three artists who grew up in Ridgefield — where the museum is situated — on the Fairfield County-Westchester County border. The other artists in that show are Sarah Bostwick and Doug Wada.

While attending Ridgefield High School, Mr. Loeb got a part-time job as a guard at the Aldrich. Now he is back, with three of his pastiche photo-realist paintings, each of them accompanied by bits of preliminary photographic and video source material, revealing how he constructs his images. The source material helps the viewer appreciate that the works are composites, driven in part by his imagination. Mr. Loeb is what might be called an appropriation artist, and he has been sued for copyright infringement by artists who say he has appropriated their work.

But that is perhaps the least-interesting aspect of his paintings, which ultimately should be assessed on their own qualities. Probably the best of them in the exhibition is "Can't You Take a Joke" (2004), a painting of a young woman in a suburban driveway, her head turned away, that evokes memories of Gerhard Richter.

Upstairs in the main exhibition room is a line of Mr. Wada's large-scale head-on paintings of Cadillac S.U.V.'s, with the added touch of familiar Washington landmarks reflected in the windshields. (For this project, the artist parked an S.U.V. in places around Washington to catch the appropriate reflections.) The aim is to manipulate perception of a bureaucratic power zone, one, Mr. Wada suggests, that is increasingly crisscrossed by big-business interests.

Perception is also at issue in Ms. Bostwick's sculptures, which are installed in a nearby hallway and an adjacent room. She often works with Hydrocal, a hard plasterlike material that she cuts into clean, scrupulously impersonal minimalist reliefs that remind the viewer somewhat of architectural drawings. Some of them sit on the wall, while others are deeply embedded within it, like sections of restored mosaics.

Ms. Bostwick's fragmented architectural details are difficult to decipher, and even harder to summarize: the problem is that it is often unclear what they are or what they refer to. But they appear to have something to do with history and memory and the way that architecture can connect us to the past. This results in a revelation of the gritty intertwining of past and present.

Back downstairs, at the second show, Tom Burckhardt has installed a full-scale walk-through replica of a working artist's studio, made out of cardboard, cluttered with books, art supplies, tools and a potbellied stove, with mock windows that offer views of the New York skyline. In

addition to the show's obvious entertainment value, it is packed with subtle historical art references: the stove, for instance, is a copy of one in Edward

Hopper's studio, while the sink is copied from one in the studio of his artist friend Red Grooms.

This, then, is an idealized studio, one in which the artist has gathered together mementos of the artists he admires. It is thus an intensely private space, pointing up art's frequent kinship to other art, while also serving as a three-dimensional reckoning of the artist's personal pantheon of great artists. The show also offers social comment on the lack of space for artists living in New York.

Architecture, these days a hot topic for artists, also inspires Mary Temple's painted installations in the third show. She has created several subtle, mostly white trompe l'oeil paintings of spears of sunlight falling into and over the museum's white interior and exterior walls. Sometimes, the paintings are solid blocks of light, sometimes they are fringed with branches and leaves from trees outdoors. Viewers stare at them without focusing, marveling at the illusion. This is the joy of the craft of painting.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through Aug. 6.
Information: (203) 438-4519 or www.aldrichart.org.