

# JON KESSLER

## Holland Cotter

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### Luhring, Augustine & Hodes

Before seeing this show, my most recent encounters with Jon Kessler's kinetic sculpture were at MoMA's 1984 "International Survey of Painting and Sculpture" and the 1985 Whitney Biennial. In the context of those rather distracted curatorial episodes, Kessler's jerrybuilt son-et-lumière kitsch technology was remarkable for its combination of formal theatrics and conceptual focus: its irradiated throwaway materials suggested how powerful the rejected could become.

Two of the five pieces in his recent one-person show share all the self-amused reconstructive poetry of that earlier work. Both of them draw from the Pan-Asian image pool that produced his Visions of China at the Whitney. Indeed, Kessler's Internationalist affections seem at this point to be the source of his strongest work. [\*The Invention of Solitude\*](#) combines, within a superstructure of bamboo and steel looking something like a Shinto guillotine, a souvenir shop Buddha, a single fake bonsai shrub spotlighted behind a translucent screen, and the very rocks (or so it seems) of Kyoto's famous Ryoan-ji Zen garden suspended off the ground by industrial chains. It is an astutely balanced metaphor, in which the refined and the maladroit together suggest the overbearing stage machinery required to keep a spiritualized culture afloat. I can't imagine anyone but Kessler, these days, making just this sculptural statement just this way Wonderful.

If three other large pieces in the show are less successful, it is because they point up some of the liabilities inherent in the romantic technological formalism Kessler is practicing. His brand of sculptural assemblage is an especially tricky one: based on the omnivorous appropriation that pervades so much current practice, it sometimes seems to steal rather than borrow and is often inclined to jam its components together chockablock rather than develop subtleties of meaning. So in a single piece we find suburban lawn statuary, scrap metal, computer technology and tiny Mark di Suveros all locked up together in a boxy, wall-hung miniature theater. Whether any cohesive dramatic sense can be coaxed out of this—as opposed to a series of componential star turns—is of course the question.

Kessler used to take the titles of his pieces from soap operas, and now he seems to be turning to the real thing. [\*Blues and the Abstract Truth\*](#) looks like nothing so much as a mock-up version of the Metropolitan Opera House, revolving stage and all, while [\*S.W.A.M.P.\*](#), a Star Trek quest narrative set in a junk version Teatro Olimpico, may offer (at last) a style of Wagnerian scenic design appropriate to our time. Both pieces, item by item, are a delight, but what we look for in vain is a firm dialectical line—a motivation—to translate these diverting gestures into something more substantial than a sculptural vaudeville. Opera has music to bind up its absurdities; Kessler seems to rely on a vague "scientific" look to get things to cohere, though it remains too cosmetic to really work.

While much, for example, is made of the computerized aspect of Kessler's work, such an emphasis can only be viewed as naive. The lighting system on which the pieces depend for visibility is indeed programmed into a small digital CPU, but this is so simplistic an application of available technology as to deserve only the most modest attention. Certainly positing science as yet another shadow play flickering on the cave wall makes sense, and if any of our younger artists have the requisite formal brilliance and imaginative gumption to pull it off, Kessler does, as he showed so clearly in this flawed but ambitious exhibition.