

WHAT HAS 300 EYES, 40 WHIZZING, WHIRRING ARMS, AND OPPOSES THE WAR?

Steven Henry Madoff

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The Palace at 4am at P.S.1, on view October 23, 2005 - Feb 06, 2006

IT was all going according to plan for Jon Kessler, which is to say, without any final plan at all. Just weeks before his deadline, the artist was working frantically, searching his imagination with "exuberance and terror," as he put it, to prepare the enormous show of his work that opens on Oct. 30 at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, titled "The Palace at 4 A.M."

That title, chosen by the artist, originally belonged to a 1932 sculpture by Alberto Giacometti: a miniature Surrealist stage set of ghostly stillness and preternaturally slender proportions. Mr. Kessler's "Palace" couldn't be farther from that. His hurly-burly of a show features an installation of nearly 40 bolted and welded kinetic sculptures, a factory of clanking and gyrating machines fitted with motors and surveillance cameras that can capture live scenes of the audience mixed with news clips and other media imagery. This bounty is displayed on more than 300 monitors.

So what does his work have to do with Giacometti's? "It's the title that struck me, with its sense of quiet and dream," said Mr. Kessler, 48, chatting in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio a few weeks before the exhibition. He is at once earnest and relaxed, dressed for work in jeans and a black T-shirt. "But it was also the idea of the wildness of dreams. The whole show, and the work I've done since 9/11, really start with the sense of the pure - or maybe I should say impure - insanity of the world in the past four years."

The war in Iraq was under way when he began working on the pieces, he said. "I was looking at all these pictures of the ruins of Saddam's palaces, and that's the dream gone violently crazy that Giacometti's title first tapped for me," he said. "It sent me spinning off into the rage of the work."

On a recent visit to Mr. Kessler's long, narrow studio, a former industrial space that he has worked in since he first rented it in 1980, the sources for his rage were apparent everywhere.

His part-time assistant, Isabelle Woodley, was at a computer manipulating news images downloaded from the Internet or taken from the videos of the Iraq war that will occupy the various monitors throughout the show. Pictures of President Bush, soldiers and the destruction in Iraq competed for a viewer's gaze with cutouts of glamorous models, a billboard-size pornographic shot of a woman with her legs spread (the crotch to be replaced in the exhibition space by a yawning doorway), and images of a glorious, acid-

orange sunset and a gas-slurping Hummer - each evoking for the artist beauty, terror and decadent consumerism.

It was early May when Alanna Heiss, director of P.S. 1 and the curator of Mr. Kessler's show, offered him an exhibition. He first considered what he called a "termite mound," a sprawling heap of a hundred monitors rising up in the gallery, but he decided it might look too much like a nightclub in Berlin - or Niketown. Then he thought of the chaotic war in Iraq and the fragmentation of America's media-driven culture, and settled on a way to capture this contemporary bedlam. He imagined rooms populated by his kinetic sculptures and monitors firing off continual rounds of images, many of them from surveillance cameras that he likened to snipers picking off the spectators as they moved from gallery to gallery.

Mr. Kessler worked on the show through the spring and summer. He flew in Martin Basher, a former assistant, from Wellington, New Zealand. Mr. Basher stayed for a month, cutting scores of aluminum sheets and drilling hundreds of holes for Mr. Kessler's contraptions while the artist welded and used his favorite tool, purchased on eBay - a South Bend-brand lathe with a date on it: April 14, 1943.

"It was probably made for making small-bore gun barrels during World War II," the artist said. "I love the irony of making this show, of all shows, on it. But beyond the irony, the roughness of the industrial process - the welds and milling and all the bolts and wires left exposed - feels right."

The art that brought Mr. Kessler his initial success in the 1980's was far more refined in appearance. The sculptures incorporated moving parts, but they were elegant and formal, without anything akin to the charged political content of his new creations.

"You spend all your time polishing metal," he said of his earlier work. "That refinement is like a trap, and it sends the viewers' eyes to the wrong place and breaks trust with them, with a sense of authenticity. This new show is about exposing mechanisms - of the sculptures, and of our culture now. I wanted this taped-together quality."

Some weeks before the opening, Ms. Heiss stopped by the studio one day to go over details. She had visited on and off throughout the summer, making the trip by car service from P.S. 1 in Long Island City, Queens, and now she could see the work begin to approach its final form. They walked through the lingering warmth of late September to a cafe across the street, where they talked about the art's emotional heat.

"The importance of doing the show isn't about its anger, though that anger is there," Ms. Heiss said. "It's that people can enter into the turmoil of the work and make something meaningful for themselves - because these media images are so charged, so much about all of our recent histories. And so the show is about the way that history is made for us by the media, but also about what we each make for ourselves of that history."

Mr. Kessler agreed. "I'm asking people to investigate the source of the work, and that could be about something else, about looking at the sources of where we get our information from," he said.

He added, "It's about taking back these media images, getting away from the suspension of disbelief - that you know you're being fooled, but you agree to be part of that process."

He said his ideas were informed by the French intellectual Paul Virilio's fiercely polemical books on modern conflict: "Pure War," "Speed & Politics" and "Ground Zero."

Yet conflict is not the lasting impression he wants to make on his audience, Mr. Kessler remarked recently in his studio. "I don't think these pieces are finally about the terror of violence," he said. "They get transformed by motion, by the pumped-up colors, by the quick mix of images constantly in play. I don't know if the work is redemptive, but transformation is the word that's important."

Transformation is a concept with powerful resonance for the artist. Having achieved critical and financial success in the 1980's, he found his career stalled in the 90's. He struggled to find new ways to move his art forward. In 2000, he left his New York gallery of 16 years, Luhring Augustine; his work with galleries in Germany and France subsequently fell away as well.

He set out in a variety of directions. He helped found a now-defunct toy company called Bozart. He began teaching at Columbia University's School of the Arts and became the chairman of its visual arts program. But his art flagged.

It wasn't until 2004, after more than half a dozen fruitless visits from other art dealers, that Jeffrey Deitch offered him a show - the well-reviewed "Global Village Idiot." It brought him back from what he saw as the eclipse of his career into what he called, with a mix of amusement and trepidation, his second act, a reference to F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous remark, "There are no second acts in American lives."

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Kessler stood in his studio in front of "Modern Vision," a central piece in the P.S. 1 show that is all about the second act. It was conceived originally as a repeating eight-second simulation of a smart bomb that flies in through the facade of the freshly reopened Museum of Modern Art, finds a Lilliputian copy of this very same piece, "Modern Vision," and detonates.

He and Douglas Repetto, an artist and Columbia colleague who has programmed the timing of the sculpture's six motors and two surveillance cameras, had just paused for a break after three hours of tiny calibrations.

"When I first showed this to Alanna," Mr. Kessler said, "she said that flying a smart bomb into MoMA isn't exactly an image that made the museum happy. And I said that wasn't what it's really about. It's about a kind of solipsism - about my work finally

making it into MoMA and then getting destroyed. It's a totally self-conscious sculpture trying to affirm its own existence."

Glenn D. Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, sees Mr. Kessler's new work as part of a well-established continuum of kinetic art. "Duchamp fits into this tradition early on - or Yves Tinguely," Mr. Lowry said. "It's a fascination with machines that extends across the century, but Jon uses the latest technology to critique its ability to be all that meaningful."

"By and large this works," he said. "You see the trick, you understand the game, yet the images are seductive."

Mr. Kessler is taking no chances with his second go at success. Rather than waiting for a gallery to court him, he invited curators, collectors and critics to visit his studio during the run-up to the show. Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, the curators for the next Whitney Biennial, paid a call. So did Kerry Brougher, chief curator of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington. Wandering amid the carnival of whirring sculptures, Mr. Brougher said the scene was "like a film turned inside out, blurring reality and fiction."

Two weeks before the opening, as his work was arriving from the studio, Mr. Kessler stood in the big third-floor gallery at P.S. 1, contemplating the 20-foot ceiling, as if an answer were hanging there. "I'm just starting to play, adding a camera here, taking out a monitor there," he said. "I'm finding the final rhythm. I think it's fair to say that I'll be inventing until the night before the show."

Installers were placing mirrors along the top and sides of a towering stack of 49 monitors that are part of a work called "Theater of Ideas." Gazing into the mirrors, the viewer takes in what seems to be an infinite recession of kaleidoscopic images - splattered blood, a doll with a dunce cap evoking an Abu Ghraib captive, stylized Kabuki figures. Everything seems to be spinning in Mr. Kessler's world.