MOVING PICTURES

Stephanie Cash

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Structurally complex and narratively engaging, Jon Kessler's new multimedia sculptures often deliver an emotional punch beyond their humble means.

Since the 1980s, Jon Kessler has made kinetic sculptures that whir, bellow, shake, spin and perform other actions. He was included in the 1984 Whitney Biennial, had numerous and regular museum and gallery shows in the '80s and early '90s, and currently serves as chair of the visual-arts department at Columbia University. "Global Village Idiot" at Deitch Projects in New York, his first solo show since 1994, brought the artist renewed and well-deserved attention. In Kessler's village, the promises of technology are often broken, and bump up against a means of delivery that is far from mechanically graceful. The ambitious sculptures on view (all 2004) are similar to Kessler's earlier, more refined works, which are gadgety and intriguing, but less complex in both structure and content. But with the addition of video, a new medium for the artist, Kessler takes the *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* esthetic to a new level. Here, he used sculptural tableaux employing all manner of materials--chains, C-clamps, metal armatures, motors, lamps, tripods, postcards, dolls--to knit together a wide range of narrative vignettes lasting from five seconds to six minutes. Interconnected elements of the works trigger a series of events that are captured by multiple small cameras positioned throughout the sculptures. Sometimes computers are discreetly used to animate the ensembles, but the artist prefers to rely on "the technology of a 1965 Dodge Dart." The live feed from the cameras is pieced together on one or more monitors; jump cuts from camera to camera mimic film-editing techniques and the resulting sequences are relatively seamless and coherent. The level of complexity is such that viewers have to puzzle out the relationship of the sculptural components to the video--which the artist refers to as "event" and "spectacle"--and tease apart the layers of reality and artifice. The resulting epiphany can engender astonishment at the artist's mechanical ingenuity and low-tech feats.

Kessler often touches on poignant, even disturbing, subject matter. In *One Hour Photo*, one of the smaller pieces, a monitor on a tripod stands in front of a vertical rotating rack with a motor-driven pulley system that contains some 35 different postcards of the World Trade Center. As the postcards reach the bottom of the rack and are about to begin their upward ascent, they each move toward a tiny camera mounted on the base of the armature. The recurring image that appears on the monitor is that of a headlong flight into the Twin Towers. The piece both evokes the hijackers' view from the cockpit and re-creates the tragic moment as it has been relentlessly aired on TV.

The video monitor for *The Geneva Mechanism* rests on an old office chair a number of feet from its related sculpture. At the center of the roughly circular, inward-facing

tabletop tableau, a camera rapidly jerks from one scene to the next (the title refers to the mechanical device used in watches and filmmaking to produce intermittent rotary motion). The camera, attached to the end of a long arm, spins from a picture of an airport control tower, to a suspended postcard of an inflight airplane that shakes as if the plane is out of control, to the interior of a cockpit with views of a cityscape beyond; at this point, the entire construction violently shakes, suggesting extreme turbulence and a crash landing. The most elaborate work in the show was *Maiden Voyage*, which repeatedly creates a short space adventure that plays on 13 video monitors ranging from a few inches to 2 feet wide. Sitting atop a metal frame supported by two sawhorses, the work also involves a rotating rack, this time presenting images of passengers cut from airplane safety-instruction cards. A trolley-mounted camera slides down a ramp away from an image of the earth, as seen from the photographed interior of a passenger vehicle whose windshield has been cut out; a CD slowly passes in front of a bright light and, on screen, resembles a planetary eclipse; and a close-up of a spotlit, rotating blown glass sphere suggests cosmic gas and dust. Shown via a tiny, bouncing, spring-mounted camera that again simulates turbulence, the images of passengers wearing oxygen masks and in crash-landing positions hint that the voyage is doomed.

Some of the works have a voyeuristic quality. In *Heaven's Gate*, a four- level "movie set" straddles the rungs of an aluminum ladder. On the first level, a camera seems to fly over Manhattan, threading its way through buildings and into a high-rise's window. On the next level, a camera passes through a miniature, well-appointed apartment before homing in on a computer monitor. The pornographic Web site on the doll-size screen is revealed on the next level via a zoom shot of a magazine photo of a naked woman and then, at the top, another camera approaches a rubber anatomical crotch and plunges through the vagina to reveal, humorously, if anticlimactically, a live shot of the gallery itself. The entire "film" plays on an Apple Cinema Display framed by its own box.

A few of the pieces on view are simple one-liners, and seem more akin to Kessler's earlier works. In *The Cheryl Pictures*, Kessler places a doll in a vertical orbit around a centrally positioned camera trained on her face. On the small, wall-mounted monitor, her eyes open and close and her ponytail seems to move around her head of its own accord. At the center of *Party Crasher*, the miniature head of a bearded old man bobbles on a spinning contraption as several cameras circle it; his greatly enlarged image appears on three overhead monitors. In *The Approach*, the camera seems to float over a mountainous landscape, twisting and turning. A psychedelic effect is achieved with a paint-smeared transparent disk that passes between the camera and postcard image. Compared to the jarring aerial-themed works elsewhere in the show, this one is beautiful and soothing, and a bit trippy.

Kessler's new works are more compelling than his earlier pieces because of their sense of purpose. In some fashion or another, they all have a story to tell; we marvel at their seemingly inelegant construction and ponder their sometimes frightening tales. With his distinct vocabulary, Kessler taps into our all-too-real modern-day anxieties, but, at the same time, spirits us away into an exciting wonderland that is ultimately uplifting.