

THE PALACE AT 4 AM

Kate Lowenstein

Time Out New York, December 15–28, 2005

Jon Kessler at P.S. 1, through Feb 6.

If Universal Studios ever decides to build a theme-park attraction based on cable-television news, they should consult Jon Kessler: The hundred-plus monitors in his current installation, "The Palace at 4am," conjure some lo-fi movie magic. Live-as-it-happened footage—of a plane crash, weapon-laden troops, bombings, scantily clad models, even President Bush watching TV—is "broadcast" from the third floor of P.S. 1, thanks to kinetic sculptures made from hardware-store supplies, postcards, magazines and dolls, captured by surveillance cameras.

Those who like their aesthetics visually seamless may find that the ambience created here by tangled wires, the smell of electrical equipment and clanking metal leaves something to be desired. But the bare-bones nature of the work is in keeping with Kessler's mission of total exposure, and tenacious viewers will find themselves rewarded with endless discoveries as they navigate the complex network, a cacophonous maze of odd machines and onscreen imagery that ranges from the innocuous to the macabre.

A bare red lightbulb behind a slowly rotating cylinder reappears as a sun sinking behind a glowing horizon on one screen. In disquieting contrast to this peaceful scene, closed-circuit monitors in One Hour Photo zoom toward a postcard of the Twin Towers, until the image dissolves into a gray blur.

As viewers bob in and out of the cameras' sight lines, their images appear on the monitors alongside soldiers, political figures and supermodels. Passive witnesses are suddenly enmeshed in war and destruction, symbolically complicit in the action. One can't help but wonder if Kessler was thinking of the American people, looking on as their government used informational sleight of hand to lead them into war.