

## BUT ELSEWHERE IN SPIRIT

Jon Kessler's Bird's Eye View

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### **Modern Painters, 1999**

Early in '99, Jon Kessler returned to work in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn studio. For over a year previously he had been preoccupied with creating an apartment for his family in an old building in Manhattan's TriBeCa and turning the second floor of his studio into a rentable loft. Since Kessler also teaches at Columbia University, he had been up against the two facts of life facing all but the most successful New York City artists: real estate and earning a living. His construction labours finished and freed by a sabbatical from teaching, Kessler got to work on an idea he had been thinking about for five or six months.

Because his work is often, but not exclusively, free standing, Kessler is considered a sculptor. This label points to only the most obvious aspect of his art. Like Jean Tinguely, Kessler's creations often have moving parts driven by small motors. But Tinguely was a satirist who built self-annihilating machines. The motor in a Kessler is there to produce the special effects he is after. Such is the nature of these effects that he might be called an 'illusionist' - though what artist does not deal in illusion? His Columbia colleague, the painter Gregory Amenoff, sees Kessler as a sculptor *and* a painter. Kessler thinks of himself as an artist's artist. These approximations will have to be good enough.

The idea that came to Kessler in the fall of 1998 was of a bird looking at the rain forest. Casper David Friedrich's painting *The Wanderer Above the Mists*, in which a lone man looks out over a mist-filled landscape, inspired him. The wanderer's back is to the viewer, as the viewer's back is to anyone who sees him looking at Friedrich's painting. *The Wanderer Above the Mists* has a chill, northern look to it, perfect to conjure thoughts of estrangement and the shivers caused by the unknown. Kessler turned Friedrich's man into a bird, a cockatoo bought from a taxidermist in Germany, and the misty landscape became the rain forest in brilliant flower.

Bird, rain forest and the act of looking are the centre of the work Kessler came to call [\*The Outsider\*](#), but he contrived his illusion through sculptural and mechanical means. Out of an aluminium tube rises a pod-shaped structure with three openings the size of large television screens. The whole is a little less than six feet in height and the pod is roughly four feet square.

The openings are at the front and on either side. They allow the viewer to look through to the cockatoo and across, or at an angle, to what the cockatoo sees: a colour photograph of the rain forest. Both bird and photograph are in motion. The cockatoo rises up from the base as if on an elevator. As the bird comes up, the photograph goes from a blur of hot tropical colours to, when the bird reaches its zenith, a clear image of the rain forest in full

bloom. Bird and photograph hold that pose for a few moments before the bird descends as the picture again blurs.

To put the cockatoo on its elevator was easy; the photograph took more time. Kessler's first thought was to photograph the rain forest diorama at Manhattan's Museum of Natural History and find a detail in that for his purposes. Then he decided he wanted a rain forest built from scratch, and so he built his own diorama (since destroyed), photographed it and then separated that photograph into four panels matching CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, black), the four colours of the colour-printing process. As these panels slide slightly apart, the rain forest loses definition.

When I first saw [The Outsider](#) the cockatoo was in place and Kessler had begun the diorama. As he outlined his plan to me, I thought of those early nineteenth-century landscape paintings, some of them ten feet high and twenty-five feet wide, that were slowly unrolled for spectators in American cities who paid their nickel to sit, as if in a movie theatre, and look at the wilderness. Completed, the picture that bird and viewer see is the size of a modest television screen (a child of the '60s, Kessler watched an enormous amount of TV and is open about its influence on him). Wherever the viewer enters the cycle, it takes at least one complete up-and-down of the cockatoo to clearly grasp what the relationship between bird and image is. You find yourself looking as intently as Friedrich's man must be gazing at the landscape before him.

And what do we see? Since [The Outsider](#) is theatre, we see more than meets the eye. For ecologically-minded Americans the rain forest is loaded. Most viewers will have thoughts of its daily erasure and the dire future we have been warned this means for us. But Kessler goes further than 'Look upon the glories of nature and despair for we will destroy them'. [The Outsider](#), if the outsider is the viewer, suggests that the distant worlds we see are of our own creation.

We recognise the picture when it comes together to form the rain forest because then it shows nature's wild beauty as we want to believe it exists. But nature does not know it is wild and beautiful, nor does it, so far as we know, think this is the way things ought to be forever. Nature, Darwin teaches us, is indifferent. Last summer a drought in the Galapagos Islands dealt calamity to the sea lion while the purple finch thrived. The picture was, in that seeming imbalance, out of focus. This disquiets us. We have a need for order on our own terms, and so Kessler's work gives it to us only to subtly remind the viewer that it is 'precisely this desire which places him outside.

And what if the cockatoo is the outsider, cut off from its habitat, as much a fact of art as one of the cockatoos in a Joseph Cornell box? We can see what the bird sees but not as the bird sees it. We know nothing of what is going on in its brain, but then we can only speculate about what Friedrich's wanderer is thinking as he surveys the landscape in front of him. What is a bird's eye view? One from overhead that would allow us to take in more in terms of space, if not detail, than we can as humans. What does the little bird tell us? That which no one expects us to know. About all this we may well be of several

minds, like Wallace Stevens in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. And like Stevens's poem Kessler's work is both precise and mysterious.

What may be most intriguing about *The Outsider* is that Kessler invites the viewer in, as Friedrich never does. The nature of his illusion pleases; a bird on an elevator is as pleasurable to look at as the words 'bird on an elevator' are to say. Kessler, who credits such artists as Dali, Rauschenberg, M C Escher and Frank Zappa with having an influence on him, is not afraid of making his illusion seductive. Friedrich's wanderer interests us because we cannot see what he looks like, as if his facial expression would help us guess what is on his mind, and because we can only guess if he will go forward or head back the way he has come. He is forever closed to us. Kessler's *The Outsider* is open and embracing, a spectacle that draws the viewer into it. Sage Heraclitus said that man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar, himself. If this at all fits Kessler's design then it may be that art is the mediating factor, that which restores us to ourselves, closing the gap if only a little.