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McKay Otto at the Jung Center - Houston, Texas - Reviews of Exhibitions - Brief Article

Catherine D. Ansporn

This Houston-based sculptor embarked on a new phase of his career with a solo exhibition at Houston's Barbara Davis Gallery last January. The period following that show witnessed Otto's rapid and final shedding of the overlay of Assemblage, Dada and Surrealism that had dominated the first decade of his work. A recent exhibition at the Jung Center signaled the emergence of Otto's mature and powerful voice.

Otto transmutes mundane objects such as chairs, globes and gym weights into elemental shapes and pure forms. He applies gesso or graphite to most of his components, veiling their identities; his surfaces lend an air of mystery to each work, establishing a tension between the known and the unknown. Also part of Otto's vocabulary is a very 20th-century material -- panty hose. Otto employs a stretched nylon membrane as a formal device to sculpt space and encapsulate the "air" within individual sculptures.

Many of the works in this exhibition (all untitled, but given numerical designations) are conceived in series. Several pieces explore the concept of equilibrium, featuring groupings of 19th-century English gymnast's balances, vertically poised on the wall and enshrouded by velvety black nylon. Another interrelated group utilizes early 20th-century wooden barbells, coated with graphite and wrapped in nylon. Arranged in sets of three or four barbells, these compact wall sculptures recall molecular structures and exude a sense of tightly bundled dynamic energy.

While the majority of the 20 sculptures presented were wall mounted, the artist's freestanding offerings were also beautifully realized. A spiraling column of twisting clothespins, Untitled, No. 0820, shows Otto working with the sparsest ingredients to achieve the maximum effect. This work conjures up associations from Brancusi's Endless Column to the translucency of a branch of leaves fluttering in the wind. Also incorporating multilayered references, Untitled, No. 0828 stood out for its amalgamation of traditional domestic objects (irons, spools of thread) into a figural sculpture. The artist transformed a variety of items into an abstracted "woman" by connecting iron-shaped "feet" to a stack of gessoed thread spools to make the "body" of the sculpture. Untitled, Nos. 0833 and 0834 feature facing bentwood chairs which cradle graphite-coated globes where the merged seats once were.

Another piece, the most metaphoric work in the show, presented an unforgettable poetic image as it hovered at the entrance of the gallery. Composed of buggy springs, a graphite-covered globe, black nylon and an elongated wooden stand, it resembled a giant eye with the planet Earth as its pupil. By distilling his sculptures into their simplest and purest forms, Otto achieves the spirituality and universalism that have long been his esthetic goal.

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