

Island as Inspiration and Canvas

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 25, 2009

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There are numerous reasons to visit "Plot/09: This World & Nearer Ones," the 19-artist exhibition of public site-specific artworks organized by Creative Time on Governors Island, and some of them are art. But foremost among them is the island itself, a longtime Army base that was taken over by the Coast Guard in 1966 and closed in 1996. Since opening to the public in 2005 its various buildings, parklike settings, harbor views, lack of cars, sense of history and isolation have made it one of the truly special places in New York; and a short, free ferry ride gets you there in style.

In an added plus, several works in the show are displayed in buildings usually off limits to the public: officers' houses (in "Our Town" yellow clapboard and sturdy Georgian brick), an officers' club, a theater, a chapel and Fort Jay, a compact structure more than 200 years old on the island's high ground.

The show itself is more hit and miss, as often happens when artists are invited to make works in response to specific settings. Some rise to the occasion; others coast, tweaking or embellishing sites already plenty atmospheric. And most bring work that would probably be as good or as weak just about anywhere.

The phrase "This World & Nearer Ones" suggests alternative realities, whether interior, close at hand, parallel or spiritual. The title is from Brian Wilson Aldiss's 1979 book, which is itself subtitled "Exploring the Familiar." This all sounds perfect for a place where the past is not obscured by much present, and benign neglect alternates with musty decay.

In his curatorial statement Mark Beasley of Creative Time, who assembled the show, strikes a moodier note. He calls it "an exhibition as dark mirror" that avoids "easy succor" and "seeks, through materially slight and ephemeral means, to present works that eschew the spectacular and the absolute" and that "often seem enveloped in a pall of darkness." Translation: No big-budget festival-style art here (too expensive); not much color either; expect video.

And in one of the entry rooms to Liggett Hall, the Dutch artist Guido van der Werve has made brilliant use of a haphazardly divided space to display two of his quietly bizarre videos. Starring the artist as performer, stuntman and pianist, they present loosely connected metaphorical gestures while conjuring memories of Northern painting (a Hobbema tree, a Vermeer checkered floor, Bruegel's Icarus, a barge in a canal). Mr. van der Werve exploits the fact that you can't see both videos at once, but you can hear them. The videos' music (Mozart and Chopin) lures you back and forth as you listen while trying not to miss the on-screen developments.

In one video Mr. van der Werve surveys a stretch of gray Dutch sky and sea while a small plane flies past, pulling a sign that reads, "It Was Not Enough." Artistic devices and mediums often reach that point. They are no longer enough and need to be given a rest until revived by new energy. Does site-specific art need a time out? The world has an endless supply of sites, but more and more the specifics look very much the same.