

Entertainment

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*River celebration shakes up outdoor sculpture in South County*By Charles Bonenti
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If this year's "Housatonic River Summer" collaboration has done nothing else for outdoor sculpture art in South Berkshire, it has shaken things up.

For years, the contemporary sculpture shows mounted each summer at Chesterwood, the Berkshire Botanical Garden and other smaller South County venues have been fairly open-ended showcases for an array of regional artists — at times the same ones year after year. The Housatonic collaboration broke that mold by encouraging art that responds to the river's presence in site-specific ways.

This is hardly a pioneering vision. The annual Riverfest in North Berkshire has been doing much the same with the Hoosic River for years. But the narrower focus gives viewers a chance to see how outdoor sculpture can speak in very specific ways about the space it inhabits rather than simply occupying or decorating it.

The three shows I visited — at Chesterwood, at the Norman Rockwell Museum and on the grounds of the Berkshire Mountain Bakery in Housatonic — all pay homage to the river, but were organized by two different curators taking somewhat different approaches.

Of them, the display on the grounds at Norman Rockwell Museum, mounted by Sculpture Now, is the standout. It has the sharpest point of view, the most inventive artworks, the most site-specific installations.

The Chesterwood show, "Reflections of Nature," gives a nod to the river theme, but is actually the same show Chesterwood usually mounts — only this time more conventional (and conservative) looking.

The exhibition at the Berkshire Mountain Bakery site is also the work of Sculpture Now, but it lacks the sharpness and clarity of the Rockwell installation. And despite their closer proximity to the river, the handful of artworks here are less responsive to it both in concept and in the way they're positioned.

The fourth exhibition — at the Frelinghuysen/Morris House and Studio in Lenox — was closed the two times I visited, although the posted hours on my second try — a Thursday — indicated it should have been open. In any event, the artworks there were chosen from the Chesterwood overflow and undoubtedly mirror what can be seen at that Stockbridge site.

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forged especially to respond to the presence of the river — historical and environmentally.

I am thinking in particular of Jennifer Reis-Ewasuk's "Bringing Back Mohican Voices and Prayers," a two-part installation of physical and sound art. In the one, the prayers of the Mohicans, the indigenous people of the Stockbridge area, are written on long banners shaped like human arms that flutter from a cluster of tall poles. Stirred by the wind in their open, hillside setting, the banner/arms wave to the viewer, to the sky, to the river in what seem like silent, plaintive pleas or benedictions from a dispossessed people. (The tribe was removed years ago to a reservation in Wisconsin.) It was the most moving encounter I found in all the exhibitions.

The sound portion, which has the recorded prayers and testimonies of tribespeople emanating from a loudspeaker hung on a tree some distance from the flag poles, was, by comparison, a disappointment. It looked contrived and its relation to the prayer flags was disjointed.

"PCB Duck" by Stephanie Ashenfelder and Amos Scully is a comment on the contamination of the river and its wildlife by PCB wastes dumped by General Electric years ago. A pump-like device fastened to a rail of the Butler Road bridge at the edge of the Rockwell property, draws water up from the river and dribbles it through a glass duck whose insides are begrimed with noxious-looking stains, a comment on health risks of consuming the river's waterfowl.

Other similarly inventive works that establish clear relationships

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with the river are Robin Tost's "Alien Species," which has brightly colored, snaky wood shapes poking up conspicuously from the reeds along the riverbank; Helen Suter's "A Stitch in Time," which gives the viewer a vista of the river through a curtain of copper strips strung between trees on fine cable; and Marcella Anna Stasa's "Adapt" which similarly displays laminated photos of the river and its vegetation along with seed and leaf samples.

Lucy Hodgson's "River's Revenge," positions two serpent-like waves of shingled walls on a slope overlooking the river, a comment on the Housatonic's track record of destructive flooding; and Gary Orlinsky's "Dwelling" has a shelter of woven reeds drifting on a raft of PVC pipes moored in the river.

Less specific to the Housatonic, but equally inspired in their references to nature are Matthew Weber's "Growth Ring Eddies," in which a grove of tree stumps are displayed with their growth rings incised for clarity; Gunnar Theel's "Ampersand," an open steel structure in the shape of a house penetrated by a grove of vegetation; and Kirsten Campbell's "Forced," in which two upright tree branches morph into strands of steel cable.

Sculpture Now's exhibition of seven artworks at the Berkshire Mountain Bakery site is undercut by some befuddling decisions on placement.

Peter Busby's welded steel rod "Great Blue Heron," for example,

part, there is little here that speaks of fresh ideas or bold approaches.

Among those that do is Linsun Kim's "Couples," a complex, poetic and beautifully wrought steel, bronze and aluminum construction that houses six objects within six shadowboxes — three of them fruits bearing the names of women and three of them geometric solids bearing the names of men. Positioned under the table-like support of these boxes, a metal rose sheds its red petals on a nail-studded floor.

Jean Proux Dibner's "Contemplation" is a small — 25 inches high — but similarly arresting pedestal sculpture in bronze. It is just a head and an arm, the chin resting in the cup of the hand, the whole supported upright on the elbow. But the facial expression, the rightness of the gesture, the understated elegance of the execution make it a stunner.

Barbara Lekberg's "Dreaming the Future," a cast bronze pedestal piece that has a dozing figure tucked into the belly of a long flat curve and a cluster of tiny figures around a tree at the tip of that curve, also has a compelling and poetic ambiguity about it.

Finally Richard Rothschild's "Trojan Chicken," fashioned of old slate siding on a wheeled cart, is a comic comment on its ancient equine predecessor.

On the whole, we can only hope this experiment with site-specific sculpture will become a precedent for more exhibitions in the future.

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