

Two outdoor juried sculpture shows emphasize physicality over narrative

By Charles Bonenti
Berkshire Eagle Staff

STOCKBRIDGE — Is it rethinking, recommitment or re-trenchment?

The work in this year's two major juried sculpture shows in South Berkshire is more about objects than stage sets; more about materials than storytelling.

That vastly oversimplified generalization about the 39 pieces in Contemporary Sculpture @ Chesterwood and the 15 in Sculpture Now's exhibit at the Berkshire Botanical Garden is meant only to suggest that artists working in stone, steel, woods and combinations thereof — or at least those in these two shows — seem to be focusing more on the physicality of the object — its look, feel and construction — than on its narrative or cinematic possibilities.

There are fewer installations that put the viewer within an altered space, that mock traditional cultural values, that satirize character types or that are just playful. There are more pieces now that seem high-minded, exquisitely wrought and basically about themselves.

Sobriety and a desire for permanence seem to have displaced the festive, transitory quests these shows exhibited pre-9/11 and pre-Iraq war.

Does that mean they're better now? Less ironic? Less frivolous?

I wouldn't be so black and white.

Let's just say more thoughtful than entertaining; more about workmanship than showmanship — less quirky — and also less fun.

At Chesterwood, curated by Janis Keane Dorgan, curator of the Rice Gallery at the Albany Institute of History and Art, exhibits

Art Review

range from traditional bronze human figures to constructions with space-age materials

And while whimsy creeps in through pieces like Madeline Lord's life-size "Umbrella People," sheet-steel silhouettes struggling with umbrellas across a field, many are more about shape (Ann Morris's handsome bronze, bone-like trio "Withered Winter Spring Summer"); color (Leon Smith's brightly painted curved-wood "Online") or movement (Pedro de Movellan's elegant gleaming, multimetal, pivoting arcs called "Whimbrel").

Carol Kreeger Davidson's "Inca Nazca" is an inventive construction of aluminum tuffak which allowed the viewer to enter a translucent, skylit booth, take a seat within the claustrophobic space, and glimpse the outside world through transparent bands in the structure's skin.

Roger Bisbing has a trio of sheet-metal sheds called "Three Opposites" — flat black, flat white and reflective silver.

Ray Martin activates a grove of trees with a network of recycled cans, ropes and steel clamps called "Online" and Kathleen McGowan does the same with a forest floor through a series of stoneware ovals that suggested pools or fungal growths.

Several pieces are about violence — at heightening levels. Gordon Chandler's "Jack" is an 8-foot steel image of the child's toy, but with arms that resemble missiles. Eric Legacy's "Spray Bomb" is an 8 1/2-foot painted spray canister, emblazoned with "Caution" and pointed at the viewer.

And Wendy Klemperer's "Encounter at the Overlook" has two

savage-looking steel and resin wolves menacing a stag at the edge of an overlook.

The show is not without a comic gesture. Nick Edmonds' "Mountain Stealers" has two wood figures piloting a wood vehicle piled high with acrylic mountain peaks.

At the Sculpture Now show, curated by sculptor Ann Jon of Richmond, the same kind of spirit prevails, but in a more condensed way.

Here for sheer elegance of workmanship and materials is Robert Perless' "Golden Mean" — movable, triangular, polymer prisms balanced on a stainless steel pylon to catch the light; and Brett Hunter's "With the Wind" — a totem

layered with gray and red granite, finished in alternating textures and deeply scored.

Antoinette Pren Schultz manages to work veins of glass — no easy feat — into her circular big granite piece, "Keepsake." And Zac Ward has fashioned an immense, movable, steel-plated "Longboard," a skiff-like shape that nods heavily on a fulcrum.

Matthew Weber's "Cedar Shingle Cluster" pays homage to wood in the only work not made with metal or stone. It is cedar shingles, gathered and cinched into barrel-like shapes that scent the woods with their indelible, heady fragrance.

Charles Bonenti can be reached at cbonenti@berkshireeagle.com.