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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; A Seasonal Migration of Cultural Scope

By Michael Kimmelman

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IT is summer, when some of us will look for any flimsy excuse to be outside. There are people who can sit on a stoop, point their chins toward the sun and call it a day. I admire them. But there are also those of us, guilt-ridden, who need to feel we are going somewhere or doing something. The city, accommodating of most relatively harmless psychological maladies, fortunately satisfies a neurotic's need with endless options, some frivolous, others less so.

As an option, art can go either way. That art pops up outdoors around now is one of the civic rituals of the season, like Shakespeare in the Park, guys hawking beer from Hefty bags in shopping carts at pick-up baseball games and street vendors with flavored syrups dispensing shaved ices. (Tamarind is a popular choice.

A virtual industry of artists and arts organizations springs into action when the weather turns sultry. They are almost a community unto themselves. They move to the roofs and courtyards of museums. They take over leafy patches of city park and try to spruce up concrete plazas. They have their spots where devotees know to congregate. Lately they have also been venturing onto the Astrovision screen in Times Square, competing for attention with the underwear billboards by providing a minute's artistic stimulation each hour, a noble lost cause.

It seems grumpy and possibly beside the point to say that on the whole outdoor art is bad. So I won't mention it. Let me stress instead that this year, as in most years, some of it turns out to be fine or even very fine. You can manage to kill a sunny summer morning and afternoon happily outside looking at art and in the

process feel virtuous for being so productive. I did it. Here are some highlights of my day.

Sarah Sze

It began with peering into a pit. I don't know about you, but having been to the Whitney Museum innumerable times, I can still count on two hands how often I have ventured into the museum's dour sculpture court, below street level along Madison Avenue. Occasionally I have seen curious passers-by furtively glance down from the sidewalk wondering what may have fallen there. The court functions as a light well for the museum's restaurant. Otherwise it doesn't function at all.

During the cold war, when teachers trained schoolchildren to duck and cover under their desks and nervous suburbanites built bomb shelters in their backyards, architects came up with the idea that museums should put galleries, courtyards and sculpture gardens in what used to be the basement. Needing more room and congenitally reluctant to say no to architects, museums went along with the idea. Anyone who has been in even the most commodious underground gallery knows what happened. The Museum of Modern Art's former underground galleries were as spacious as any of the rooms upstairs, but they felt oppressive and low. People instinctively realize where they are in relation to street level, and everyone senses that it is unnatural to be below ground unless you are dead

But what do you know, the Whitney's courtyard has been temporarily salvaged by Sarah Sze, a modern master of bric-a-brac. The large sculpture she has installed is a kind of makeshift geological dig, cleverly exploiting its subterranean locale. From the street you peer down on an archipelago of blue plastic islands dotted with toy mountains and bottles of window cleaner. From the court looking up, you gaze more clearly at seven strata of miniature grassy platforms, aquariums and junk connected by an elaborate Rube Goldbergian armature of pipes. Water pours and burbles from a few of the pipes. Mostly the pipes are just for show.

Cement and gravel "rock puddles" (also just for show) pretend to support the

pipes, meanwhile alluding offhandedly to Japanese gardens and Robert Smithson's ''Spiral Jetty.'' The work's title, ''The Triple Point of Water,'' refers to a combination of temperature and pressure at which water can simultaneously be gas, liquid and solid. This may have something to do with the snowy mountains and the burbling water.

All of that hardly matters. The work is simply a hoot. It took an army of five people three weeks to build, using 33 small aquariums, some of them filled like mini-dioramas with Styrofoam animal skeletons; 60 square feet of fake grass; 7 bottles of Windex; 7 fans; 60 empty plastic water bottles; 2 bottles of honey; 300 toy mountain peaks; 5 earplugs; 3 empty containers of cream; 500 feet of orange string; 3 credit cards and 1 feather. Debra Singer, the curator, told me that a single bird occasionally roosts in a grassy nook.

Roy Lichtenstein

Roy Lichtenstein's sculptures are on the Met's roof this summer. To tell you the truth, I have never found them as compelling as his paintings, but up there they look as good as they ever have. They stand cheerfully against the skyline. The colors are mostly primaries, as usual. Picked out by the August sun, they gleam like flags. The effect is heraldic.

The tallest are like painted metal pillars, the height of flagpoles, suggesting blows women. Lichtenstein loved wry jokes. Here the humor, aside from the obvious point of evoking flesh with metal, entails riffing dryly on Picasso, de Kooning, Pollock and other modern art heavies whom Lichtenstein admired. A sculpture of a brush stroke becomes the flowing hair of a de Kooning-like woman attached to ''Girl Before a Mirror,'' Picasso's famously ripe, intricately patterned painted homage to his blond lover Marie-Thérèse Walther, which Lichtenstein adapts to sculpture.

Lichtenstein was also fascinated by how artists over many centuries represented shadows and planes of color, from medieval stained-glass artists and tapestry designers to comic book illustrators using Benday dots. This was the funny thing

about Lichtenstein: everyone took him to be a jokey Pop artist slumming in cartoon characters, but he immersed himself in the conventions of art history and visual perception and didn't care particularly about popular culture.

The showstopper on the Met roof is his big sculpture, almost like a folded origami imitating a child's drawing of a house, with a triangle for the roof and rectangles for the walls, squares cut into the rectangles for windows, through which you now see the tops of apartment buildings and office towers. The sculpture is one of those perceptual tricks: it seems to recede when looked at from either front or back. Nan Rosenthal, the show's curator, has installed it on a grassy podium, like a little mowed patch of suburbia, which hides the supporting steel beams.

Wim Delvoye

The problem outdoor sculptors in New York City must overcome is New York City. Wherever you are, there is almost always something to look at. Central Park is one of the world's great works of public art. Rarely do you feel a pressing need for a sculptor to come and liven up the view. (Christo and Jeanne-Claude are promising to do so.) Nor do many New Yorkers have so much free time that they will linger before a sculpture if it does not grab them by the lapels and compel them to stop.

Theatricality is therefore a virtue for outdoor sculpture in the city. Show me, we challenge an artist.

Meandering south from the Met, I landed at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, where Wim Delvoye has answered that challenge admirably. His sculptures there, at the southeast corner of Central Park, and in Madison Square Park are Gothic versions of modern machines and building equipment. Call it Gothic Revival revised. Mr. Delvoye is a provocateur. You may recall that he devised a machine for producing excrement that made tabloid headlines not long ago. His strategy is subtler this time and more entertaining. On the plaza he has put ''Caterpillar,'' a full-size sculpture of an excavator, its backhoe forming an arch at the entrance to the park

The material is Cor-Ten steel perforated with medieval filigree and coats of arms: fleurs-de-lis, lions and eagles, spires and columns. Imagine a metal doily nearly the size of a log cabin, and you roughly get both the scale and the mixed signals. The work looks simultaneously heavy, lumbering, intricate and airy. At the south end of Madison Square Park, near 23rd Street, are his cement mixer (evoking the choir of a church), a wheelbarrow, traffic cones, a shovel, a pile of sand, barricades and another excavator, which vaguely resembles Notre Dame in Paris All steel, all differently filigreed.

Mr. Delvoye, a Belgian, once painted gas canisters with blue Delft windmills and hired Indonesian woodcarvers to make a baroque-ornamented cement truck out of teak. He coined the word ''glocal'' for his blends of Old World motifs and modern industrial subjects. Now he's poking fun, I assume, at Richard Serra and other American sculptors who use steel and heavy equipment, with religion as the ironic subtext for modernism's spiritual undercurrents. He's also alluding to the city itself, and the familiar metaphor of skyscrapers as today's Gothic cathedrals. The best compliment a jaded New Yorker can give him is to say that after a stroll through glorious Central Park, his excavator is not a letdown

Jeremy Blake

I neglected to mention a stop after Central Park and before Madison Square Park, in Times Square, where Jeremy Blake is the latest artist to participate in ''The 59th Minute: Video Art on the Times Square Astrovision,'' a joint project of Creative Time and Panasonic. His work is called ''Cowboy Waltz'' and was inspired, I gather, by a haunted house in California. It consists of three one-minute videos.

As for appearing on the 59th minute, incidentally, that turns out to be either wishful thinking or an approximation. Within sight of the screen are half a dozen digital clocks disagreeing about the time. My watch said 12:56 when one episode of Mr. Blake's work suddenly appeared: florid ink drawings, abstract patterns and woozy designs in saturated colors, like Rorschach blots morphing into a final blaze of light. Some people, accustomed to advertisements and the subtitled sight

of Katie Couric, may have thought the screen's computer had contracted a virus

Mr. Blake is clearly hoping to insinuate his art into the sensory consciousness of the crowds passing through Times Square, if only subliminally. To an art critic, young artists' fascination with 1960's psychedelia came to mind. So did a work by Robert Gober from the 1980's, now at the Venice Biennale: a film of a painting changing.

Mr. Blake, who describes his works as moving paintings, would no doubt describe himself as a painter using digital equipment. He introduces the elements of time and narrative -- abstract narrative -- into the medium of painting, sacrificing the aura of the one-of-a-kind handmade object. I also prefer to think of him this way. Digital art still conjures up projects primarily about technology. Mr. Blake's work is more aesthetically arresting than most digital art

Whether passing tourists will register it on their way to Toys ''R'' Us or MTV doesn't really matter in the end. There are limits beyond which even the most theatrical outdoor artist can't be expected to go. To coincide with ''Cowboy Waltz,'' several of Mr. Blake's videos are being shown at the American Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, where there is no guitarist singing in his underwear or toy store with a life-size model of a Tyrannosaurus rex vying for attention

City Hall Park

Next, City Hall Park, lunch time, the benches full of smooching lovers and office workers picking at salads from plastic take-out containers. Passing families of out-of-towners identified themselves by grappling with folded city maps on the way to ground zero or Century 21. Not too many people seemed to register the sculptures discreetly tucked into the greenery. It even took me a minute to spot Walter Martin and Paloma Munoz's ''9 to 5'' (1996): elegant bronze faucets strapped to trees with bronze pears appearing to drip into bronze buckets

Nearby, less inconspicuous but still little noticed by the lunch crowd, Peter Rostovsky's ''Monument'' is an improbably steep and craggy mountain peak

about the height of a basketball hoop. On top of it stands a small man wearing a business suit. Unless he is Clark Kent, he is not going to get down from up there. I take that to be the comic message of the work, from 2000, but I also wonder whether it was selected for this site because it can bring to mind the people who died in the twin towers, or conversely, whether it was chosen despite that unpleasant association.

More conspicuous, ''Witch Catcher'' (1997) is Brian Tolle's sculpture of a chimney that twists into a spiral at the top. Mr. Tolle designed the Irish famine monument a few blocks away. He grasps the mordancy of ruins and memorials. I remember as a boy seeing a house burn down in the country. Only the chimney remained. ''Witch Catcher,'' notwithstanding its surreal punch line, reminded me of that house poetically.

Other Forays

From City Hall Park, which is to say Lower Manhattan, you can ride the Staten Island Ferry to see 86 manhole covers decorated with herons, ospreys and other local bird and plant life and trimmed with sea creatures. Elizabeth Turk designed them for a residential stretch of Seguine Avenue at the southern end of the island as part of the city's Percent for Art program

Alternatively, you can head to Brooklyn. I won't linger over my own foray to Brooklyn and then Queens. For serious followers of outdoor sculpture who must see everything each summer, all these stops are obligatory. For everyone else, the are not.

In brief, the plaza at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus on Flatbush Avenue, as usual, has a sculpture show. Peter Lundberg has concocted something resembling a huge Möbius strip made of cement and steel. In adjacent window bays of the university's humanities building, Lisa Mordhorst has hung slender panels with photographs of desert landscapes. The effect is slightly arresting and grimly decorative. Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua have built a shack from junk the intention seems to be to cross Red Grooms with Thomas Hirshhorn, to give it

the kindest interpretation. Suffice it to say that nothing here redeems this forlorn plaza and some of it makes the situation slightly worse.

Next to the Brooklyn Bridge, in Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park, the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition is presenting its 21st annual outdoor sculpture show. The park is a scruffy green stretch along the water with spectacular views. Not enough of the 31 artists make good use of the extraordinary location. Several roughly carved wood beams by Matthew Weber, evoking Donald Judd and Magdalena Abakanowicz, are plunked down as if arbitrarily. Anna Golici has made an uncomfortable bench from a tree, facing not the water but Nicolae Golici's grim one-liner: a small house wrapped in plastic and duct tape.

A few works allude not very subtly to the attack on the World Trade Center, which used to be what you saw across the bridge. Kasra Paydavousi has made an oversize wood sculpture of a praying man; Miggy Buck's sculpture consists of a crucifix dancing with a crescent and a Jewish star. On a sunny day at least the sight of waves crashing against the rocky embankment and tugboats lugging barges down the river partly compensated for what the show lacked in visual punch.

Finally I stopped into Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, a mecca for outdoor sculpture mavens. The annual summer show was ending its run, and a few other people had also come to see it or maybe they were just looking for a place to be outside. A woman lazily tossed a tennis ball to her dog. A couple of teenagers snuggled along the East River. A little girl played in a sandbox that had a circular ''No Children Allowed'' diagram on it, which was part of one of the artworks.

''Penumbra'' by Jean Shin, which will still be around this weekend, provided the best shade, as the title promises. Strung between trees, it is a canopy of broken brown, blue, red and black umbrellas that Ms. Shin found on the street.

A man was standing in the dappled light under it, and it took a few seconds for me to make out what he was doing. He held a fishing line with a live eel writhing on

the end. Did he catch the eel in the river? His young daughter was alternately laughing and screaming. His wife looked on impassively, as if she had seen this many times. He pulled a switchblade from his pocket, noticed me, smiled nervously, seized the eel and sliced it in two. I mention this because art is not always what's most memorable when you are wandering around New York on a hot summer afternoon.

Closing Dates, if Any

Where the outdoor sculptures in Michael Kimmelman's review are installed

SARAH SZE, ''Triple Point of Water,'' Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, Manhattan, (212) 570-3686. Through Oct. 9.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street, Manhattan, (212) 535-7710. Through Nov. 2.

WIM DELVOYE, ''Caterpillar,'' Doris C. Freedman Plaza, southeast corner of Central Park; ''Chantier,'' a series of sculptures, south end of Madison Square Park, near 23rd Street. Through Oct. 31. A project of the Public Art Fund and the Madison Square Park Conservancy. Information: Public Art Fund, (212) 980-4575.

JEREMY BLAKE, ''Cowboy Waltz,'' part of ''The 59th Minute: Video Art on the Times Square Astrovision.'' A project of Creative Time and Panasonic. Through Sept. 30. Information: Creative Time, (212) 206-6674.

CITY HALL PARK, bounded by Broadway, Park Row and Chambers Street, Lower Manhattan. A Public Art Fund project. Through Sept. 15. ''9 to 5'' by Walter Martin and Paloma Munoz; ''Monument'' by Peter Rostovsky; ''Witch Catcher'' by Brian Tolle. Information: Public Art Fund, (212) 980-4575.

ELIZABETH TURK, 86 manhole covers, Seguine Avenue, Staten Island. Permanent. A project of the New York City Percent for Art Program. Information: (212) 643-7770.

LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY, 1 University Plaza, Downtown Brooklyn. Through Oct. 31. Information: (718) 488-1198.

EMPIRE-FULTON FERRY STATE PARK, Water Street and East River, at the foo of the Brooklyn Bridge in Brooklyn. Brooklyn Working Artists Coalition Outdoor Sculpture Show. Through Sept. 14. Information: (718) 858-4708.

JEAN SHIN, ''Penumbra,'' Socrates Sculpture Park, Broadway at Vernor Boulevard, Long Island City, Queens. Information: (718) 956-1819. Through Sunday.