Minimalist, Really

Beyond Martin Creed’s Childish Concept

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

Experienced museumgoers know all too well what it is like to wander through a provocative contemporary art show wondering what the point of it all is. I had something of that reaction at “Martin Creed: Feelings,” the summer show at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

Born in 1968, Mr. Creed belongs to the generation of Young British Artists, or Y.B.A.’s, who came to prominence in the 1990s. In addition to doing conceptual art, sculpture and paintings (paper sheets covered with fluorescent highlighter or marker pens), he has a rock band, Owada, formed in 1994, which performed at the opening of the Bard exhibition earlier this month. Among their songs is “1-2-3-4,” in which the full lyrics are spelled out in the title.

If art prizes are any measure of success, Mr. Creed is at the top of his game — in 2001, he won the Tate’s Turner Prize for an installation of museum lights intermittently going on and off in a gallery. That same installation is just inside the entrance to the Hessel Museum of Art, a newly opened building at Bard where the artist has installed some of his own works alongside the permanent collection. The rest of Mr. Creed’s art is showing next door in the C.C.S. Galleries.

To get to the light installation you must first wade through a room half-filled with bright blue balloons titled “Work No. 628: Half the Air in a Given Space,” the idea being that half the air space in the gallery is contained in the balloons. It is an interesting concept, and is also one of the better, more thoughtful efforts in this show.

But many of the other works — stacks of plywood and lumber, a sheet of paper crumpled into a ball, neon lights spelling out simple words and phrases, a mound of bean bags, a display of different kinds of balls, a cross-hatched wall painting recalling the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt — are tired reruns of Dada and conceptual art stunts from the 1960s and ‘70s. They were once amusing but now so old and shorn of irony they are simply boring — like a joke told over and over again to a point where it is no longer funny.

Of course, these installations are intended
Repetitive, Sometimes Effective

Concepts Are a Few Thoughtful Works Examining Sound and Space

VARIOUS DIMENSIONS
Some of Martin Creed’s works include a display of balls, a row of 39 ticking metronomes and a room half-filled with balloons.

to be provocative, forcing us to confront expectations of what an artwork is or looks like. That’s fair enough. But there is also a limit to this kind of historical envelope-pushing. In subsequent rooms of the show are two videos of women, one vomiting on a pristine gallery floor, the other urinating and defecating on the floor. Aside from being tasteless, they are not original. The history of art, film and performance is checkered with similar antics, most memorably the violent vomiting scene in Monty Python’s film “The Meaning of Life” and Andy Warhol’s famous series of urine paintings.

But all is not lost. Strip away the gratuitous shock value and childish conceits, and there are some works of genuine, commendable thought and feeling. Two videos showing the same ferry docking at a pier has a certain poetry and poignancy, the separate, balletlike maneuverings of the boats coming together at the end as they seemingly dock at the same time.

Sound is a component to many pieces, the artist using bells, a piano, recorded music, and even metronomes. A favorite is a grand piano whose key cover and lid have been rigged electronically to rise and fall with a bang. Repetition is the basic theme, consistent with Mr. Creed’s minimalist aesthetic, though the sounds are often intriguing enough to make you stop, listen and think.