Three Artists Do It Themselves

Museums

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One corporate-style production-line aesthetics inaugurated by Andy Warhol (and celebrated by artists from Damien Hirst to Takashi Murakami and Jeff Koons) has been the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) reaction to it. Although the term is loosely defined, DIY artists emphasize the personal and the handmade; draw inspiration from the world of craftsmanship, and tend to rely on “weak” materials such as fabric and paper. “Personal Protocols and Other Preferences,” a challenging and innovative exhibition curated by Maria Lind at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, demonstrates the variety of approaches that have come to be called DIY.

Ms Lind invited three artists, all of whom live in Berlin, to participate. During an initial site visit, the artists decided to produce a collaborative exhibition, one where installation decisions would be made as a group and where the works on view would interact with each other.

Michael Beutler not only fashions the pieces that constitute his architectural interventions, he also builds the tools or machines that are used to create those pieces, ideally employing recycled materials. At Bard, he constructed a machine, largely from unfinished pine, that threads reeds into colored paper. With the strengthened paper, he has built 9-foot-high walls, which look like huge versions of a child’s building-block construction, except that here the red, orange, green, and blue blocks are soft and, in places, wrinkled or creased.

The walls thus alter the layout of the gallery’s white-cube design, providing spaces on which one can view Esra Ersen’s four videos. Using a handheld camera, Ms. Ersen, who was born in Istanbul, invests large amounts of time getting to know, and winning the confidence of, the people with whom she collaborates on her films. Ms. Ersen engages in what she calls “soft directing,” establishing a directorial framework in which her collaborator-subjects can improvise.
These seemingly straightforward, and often hypnotic, videos tend to be at least semidocumentary. In the 23-minute-long "Brothers & Sisters" (2003), she turns the camera on illegal African immigrants detained in Istanbul on their way to Eastern Europe. "Growing Older (Dis) gracefully" (2006) looks at the transformation of Liverpool, England, by following an elderly female resident as she charmingly undergoes a total makeover — clothes, cosmetics, etc.

Mr. Beutler has also constructed a large wooden platform from which one can view parts of the work of the third artist, Kirstine Roepstorff. Ms. Roepstorff, who was born in Copenhagen, is a collage artist — in the broadest sense of that term. Indeed, most of her pieces stretch the notion of collage well beyond its original definition of cut-and-pasted paper: Her complex, politically charged, and beautiful constructions tend to be larger than we expect collages to be, employing fabrics, colored gels and foils, sequins, photocopies, and other materials. Some — such as "The King Is Dead Series" (2008), in which tendrils of cutout paper vines hang from one of the 19 parts in this wall piece — burst free of the support to flirt with the three dimensions; others are entirely sculptural.

Approximately 10 feet high, "Stick of Small Gestures II" (2008), for instance, consists of a low metal box on the floor in which grass grows, supporting a thin metal spine arrayed with several metal frames of varying sizes, and which can turn on their axes. Magenta and red gels fill the longest frame, interrupted in places by veils of black fabric and, at the bottom, an abstract fabric-and-paper collage. A translucent collage of fabric seems to float in the center of another frame.

The two, screenlike "Stick of Small Gestures" sculptures stand before the large wall holding "The King Is Dead Series," framing sections of it, obscuring others — depending on where one stands. Ms. Roepstorff is, to my mind, one of the most compelling artists working in Europe today, and her expansive wall collage mixes together many of the elements from her private, though generally legible, catalog of imagery and symbols: A photograph of a Chinese man sits above a framed, black-and-white image of a pineapple; windows of newsprint cover images of rock formations; colorful banners or flags made from pieces of fabric affixed to larger swathes of fabric hang next to colored-paper constructions that remind one of stained glass.

Also on view at the CCS Bard Galleries is "I've Got Something in My Eye," curated by the Dutch duo Bik Van der Pol (the name is a conjunction of Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol). The two have brought together some 80 contemporary artworks from the magnificent Marieluise Hessel Collection, housed at Bard, with pieces from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Seminal pieces by Vito Acconci, Alighiero e Boetti, and Mona Hatoum share space with others by Tom Friedman, Zhang Huan, Sarah Lucas, and Vali Export. Bik Van der Pol's lighthearted yet thoughtful curatorial approach turns dour "institutional critique" on its head, seeking playful conjuctions and contrasts. Whatever the theory
behind it, the show they have put together is at once delightful and highly stimulating.

Rearranging a collection is, in a sense, another form of DIY art — one could even think of it as an extended form of collage. And this entire, multi-show tapestry is on view in a bucolic Hudson Valley setting: Sharp, at times difficult work might be the snake in this garden, but its enticements are well worth braving.

*Until September 7 (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 845-758-7598).*