

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Seeking Truth, Not Always Beauty



PERCEPTIONS Sprawl, at the Jersey City Museum, includes Tim Daly's acrylic on canvas on a wood panel.

By Benjamin Genocchio

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The exhibition “Sprawl” at the Jersey City Museum does not set out to prove that parts of the New Jersey landscape are ugly. But it is hard to escape that conclusion after seeing the show.

Still, the exhibition, curated by Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, the museum’s curator of contemporary art, is both pertinent and engrossing. It gathers together artworks by 41 artists, mostly young, all living and working in the state.

For viewers, the art can be tough. The artists present a humorous, at times melancholy, but always faithful vision of industrial landscapes, housing projects, roadside motels, interstates and abandoned buildings. Each has the honesty of journalistic photography.

Most of the places depicted in these works are impossible to pinpoint, and they are not labeled. But all of them resemble certain familiar landscapes; you get a curious sense all the time in this show of having your memory jogged and yet not quite being able to remember.



Lisa Dahl's acrylic and glitter on a photo.

Frequently, these works also reminded me of the early writings and art projects of Robert Smithson, an influential 1960s conceptual artist who was born in Passaic and was one of the first Americans to address urban sprawl and its effects. His 1967 essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic” argues that a disrupted, shabby New Jersey landscape embodies a certain postindustrial truth and beauty.

It is truth rather than beauty that dominates the current show. Tough to love, even to like, these artworks nevertheless have the documentary photographer’s gift of leading viewers into a deeper consideration of the world in which we live.

An immediate drawback is that the show is overstuffed, the artwork crammed into three upstairs rooms. Painting and drawing does fine in this sort of environment, but video and installation suffer. These media need room to breathe.

Predictably, photography dominates. There are two main approaches, each represented by numerous examples. First there are street scenes by Anna-Mária Vág, Roger Tucker, Jonathan Glick and Megan Maloy. Then there are urban landscapes by Bryony Romer, Roger Sayre, Gregory Maka, Owen Kanzler and Brendan Carroll.

There is an unexpected connection among the photographs here. A good many of them have a desultory casualness, even a snapshot quality, giving the appearance of having been shot on instinct rather than preplanned, as if the artist chanced upon the image one day. They are curbside mementos of daily life.



Patrick Grenier's gouache.

Like almost everyone else, artists have been affected by the prevailing fashion for environmentalism. An undercurrent of remorse at diminishing urban parkland can be detected in images here by Patrick Grenier, Susan Evans Grove and Jason Burch. Darker forces cloud other, related imagery, suggestive of environmental catastrophe.

Many of the exhibits were commissioned especially for this show. Immediacy and topicality are thus forcefully evident, notably in Debbie Reichard's "Pisces" (2008), a fountainlike installation made of plastic garden hoses, pumps and a bucket of water, and whose message is clear: Fresh water is a precious resource now idly wasted.

Nearby is Rebecca Feranec's "Pump Me Up #2" (2006), a partly tongue-in-cheek illustration of a gas pump nozzle that leaves you with an air of foreboding; rather than saying anything concrete, it captures a widespread feeling of gloom at ever-rising gas prices.

Ms. Feranec's drawing is so impressively executed that it seduces the viewer just a little. I could say the same for Ben Polksky's "Site 21.06" (2003), an intensely detailed illustration of a building, its side smashed, revealing a tangle of metal used to reinforce concrete. An eerie light brings drama to an image that might otherwise have been a bit dull.

A catalog provides basic caption information and images but little in the way of commentary on the artworks. There is not even a proper essay. This is regrettable, as I suspect many of the younger artists will not be familiar to visitors; I know several were new to me.

Not that it matters in the end. The lasting impression is of the many memorable, thought-provoking images in this show.