



Organizing Chaos

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The 'discontinuity' in "Rehab" captures the incongruity of evolving urban areas.

Departing from the quiet, minimalist installation of his one-person show last year, James Woodfill brings out the bells and whistles in his exhibit at Review Studios.

And it is good to see.

Woodfill raided the vast inventory of stuff in his studio and manned to plasma-cutter to produce this viewer-surround installation incorporating light, sound, motion, sculpture and video abstractions.

Found and crafted objects, including sliced and folded metal shelving units, are arranged on either side of two intersecting pathways that visitors can meander along, taking in the sights to the ever-present sound of an oscillation, vibrating hum.

The journey begins with an orange-and-yellow ladder mounted with a single lightbulb and continues past empty speaker cases, flashing pawn-shop television screens and numerous grid-styled structures composed from plastic storage boxes illuminated from within. The altered metal shelving appears in various scruffy colors and configurations, from tower-like volumes to low, zig-zagging "fences."

"I came up with a strategy where it's going to be difficult to find harmony," Woodfill said in a recent interview.

In past projects, including his slowly moving light work atop the Sulgrave Condominiums on the Plaza and a kinetic light and sound work for the George E. Wolf parking facility at 11th and Oak streets, Woodfill demonstrated his mastery of simplicity and repetition.

In contrast, complexity and heterogeneity are the hallmarks of this latest production, in keeping with his aim to convey an impression of chaos.

The results are more challenging. They also tender a new perspective on some familiar territory for this seasoned public artist: architecture. Woodfill correlates the "discontinuity of elements" in his artwork with the urban landscape where "you can have a gorgeous building next to an IHOP."

His abstracted urban scape, aptly titled "Rehab" captures the higgledy-piggledy appearance of evolving city neighborhoods, with their mix of old and new, tasteful and tawdry, and the ever present grid.

The piece was inspired, he said, "by how I try to find my way visually through the urban landscape" -- particularly the architectural landscape of the Crossroads, where he has done several commissioned light projects.

In those, he said, "my intervention is reductive, it's one gesture. In the gallery, I wanted to bring in the chaos."

Implicit in this motley array are questions about value and ownership: when it comes to remaking an area, whose taste should prevail and at what price? Order is agreeable and reassuring. But chaos is more exciting and perhaps more accommodating of character, history and ideosyncrasy.

Woodfill's pursuit of chaos applies to his creative process, which became more "painterly" and "instinctual" with this piece. The new installation also reflects a looser approach to technology. The flashing bars and circles on the television screens and the constant droning hum make their primary contribution as visual and aural elements, rather than as manifestations of manipulated information.

yet the most striking, departure here has to do with tenor and feeling.

in the past, going back to his very early installations of illuminated barrels, bouncing lightbulbs and rotating garbage can lids, Woodfill imbued his found and cast-off materials with a sense of playfulness.

In contrast, "Rehab," which rises amid the warehouse-like gallery space like an abandoned urban island (Green Zone, post Bush?) or a stage set waiting for actors that will never appear, conveys a sense of brooding suspension.

For these are difficult times, informed by sober thoughts about development and the environment, the impact of technology on the social fabric and the safety threats posed by urban density.

here, as the lights blink, the images move, and a bar of neon twists slowly at the end, it feels as if someone has left the controls and may not be back. There's a kind of critical unmasking about it all that amounts to a plea for action.