

Experiments in Collaboration: 6 Artists at North Dam Mill

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BIDDEFORD—Take six artists and give them 6,000 square feet of raw space in a historic Maine mill and six weeks to make an installation with a focus on materials they find on-site. To some, this sounds like an architectural project. To others, this has the trappings of a reality TV show.

Either way, we love to see what people do with a challenge.

This is the premise of “Point of Connection,” which opened at the North Dam Mill in Biddeford on Friday.

Rob Lieber, Ian Paige and Christopher Keister were selected from a call for proposals. Each then brought on a collaborator. The goal, they decided, was not a group show but a collaboration.

Together, Lieber and Brendan Ferri set to producing a large-scale sculpture mostly using old handrails from the mill. The other pairs were more divergent: Paige developed a nuanced sound installation while Tessa O’Brien worked on the walls with paint; Keister re-purposed mill materials with a distinctly architectural logic while Tom Baldwin produced a pair of figurative sculptures.

Every once in a while, the elephant in the room is actually an elephant in the room: Baldwin has two large figures in the show – an 8’ tall bright blue combination Venus de Milo/priggish school marm and also a huge elephant.

The success or failure of the installation might ultimately depend on the placement of these two sculptures. At the time of this writing, they were completed but not situated. Because the rest of the work is subtle and absolutely architectural, Baldwin’s pieces threaten to turn everything else into background – which would be a shame because the rest of the work is fantastic.

Lieber and Ferri’s yellow pyramid of handrails is a brilliant sculpture. It is symmetrical piece yet almost never feels symmetrical: Standing near any side will make you swear that side is the longest – even when you know better. The piece is strong yet understated. It is not complicated but slowly reveals an incredible depth: rhythms and their relation to the light that flows into the room; sets of linear elements that become planes at a certain proximity; regal references to ancient structures or maybe I.M. Pei’s glass pyramid at the Louvre; the modular logic of the Minimalists; and so on. Lieber and Ferri’s piece uses the architectural setting brilliantly while achieving both sense and sensibility.

Ian Paige noticed how water sounds outside the mill changed depending on where he was in the room. In response, he recorded a single sound (the artist striking a pipe) and varied it so that six stations around the room each present different parts of that sound in order to play up the acoustical and sonic permutations of the space. Sound as an architectural element can be so important – waves at the cottage or proximity to a highway for example – but is far too often overlooked.

Historic mills in Maine are being reclaimed as great architecture and

venues for art. Few, however, integrate the actual architectural space into the content of a show as does “Point of Connection.”

As a project, “Point of Connection” comprises a dizzying array of people and organizations – to great purpose. Mill owner Doug Sanford donated the space for the exhibition. Joshua Bodwell and Tammy Ackerman organized the show without pay but with the benefit of raising the profile of their nascent arts non-profit. The show coincides with The Heart of Biddeford’s annual “Chalk on the Walk” event. Bread and Puppet did a free event and performance. UNE art professors and students are also installing work in the building during the show (Professor Andy Rosen’s frost heave/new mountain coming through the mill floor is a riotous piece of wit).

The exhibition is funded by a Maine Arts Commission grant. Here, the Commission is not only supporting artists directly, but also supporting economic development in Maine beyond the usual notion of “Creative Economy.”

“Point of Connection” is a smart show in a great space. Some constraints appear as limitations, yet the artists never overreached or lost sight of the architecture. Most anyone would enjoy checking out the mill as well as the works by the artists. And if you have a taste for the subtle, so much the better.