

edward_ winkleman

art | politics | gossip | tough love

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2009

A Show You Should See : #1

NOTE: I've always refrained from responding to exhibitions at other commercial galleries on this blog, because to do so honestly would sometimes require being, well, critical, and it seems unseemly and unwise for one dealer to do so to another (karma and payback being what they are), but it's dawned on me recently that such concerns are not as applicable when the exhibition is in a not-for-profit space and that not-for-profit spaces can use as much press as they can get, especially now, so I'm bending my own rule (just ever so slightly and limited, again, to non-commercial spaces) to permit me to offer a few responses to exhibitions of note (and limiting those to shows I like). We'll see how far I get with this...



Even if you mentally draw a line from Robert Smithson up through Richard Serra, you may still not be physically or spiritually ready to encounter Blane de St. Croix's latest installation, *Mountain Strip*, at [Black and White Project Space](#) in Williamsburg. Entering the sculpture courtyard behind the gallery was, for me, comparable to exiting the train station in Cologne, where its huge glass windows permit the German city's colossal, brooding Gothic cathedral to visibly crash down upon you, making you feel tiny and naughty and scared. Indeed, *Mountain Strip* so dwarfs the viewer that at first you may not be able to take it all in and realize that what you're looking at is a sculpture of an entire mountain ridge that's been violently ripped from the earth and suspended, upside down, in the outdoor space (it continues from the courtyard, through the wall, into the gallery space).

The green foliage running along the top (make that the bottom) of the work provided me the first clue that this was a geological representation, and then the

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earthly brown subterranean section (now at the top) with its tangles of torn roots and massive rock formations helped orient me further. But, even upside down, what kind of mountain has such oddly rhythmical and barren sides? It's not a hospitable place, obviously, I thought. And that section doesn't look natural.

It dawned on me eventually...

From the gallery [press release](#):

For the exhibition, De St. Croix quite literally builds a mountain upside down, referring to the strip mining process of mountain top removal and filling of the valleys, definitively flattening the land and stripping it of all its resources and sustainability. The massive sculpture, a monumental miniaturized landscape, dynamically cuts through the exterior exhibition space spilling into the interior gallery, while painstakingly reconstructing the topography of a selected section of the Kayford Mountain Ridge top in West Virginia as both a monument and memorial to the land. The installation runs over forty feet in length and towers above the exterior walls as it climbs up twenty-two feet high. Additionally, in the interior space numerous detailed ink drawings will be on view as well as extensive research documentation in support of the project.

Blane was in the gallery when we visited last Sunday and told us that this piece is based on a specific ridge, the top of which belongs to a man he has met who has stubbornly and heroically refused to let the mining companies complete devastate every last inch of this part West Virginia. As Blane writes on [his website](#):

Larry [Gibson's] last stand against the strip mining companies has won him a recent [CNN hero's award](#). His mountaintop has been in his family for over 200 years and is being stripped away leaving a small green patch topping the mountain in an otherwise barren and leveled landscape. He has fought this type of land devastation for 20 years. The Mountain Strip project specifically reconstructs a selected section of the Kayford Mountain Ridge top in West Virginia as both a monument and memorial to the land.

Learning that the geometrical grooves in the mountainside are man made makes the installation all the more overwhelming and makes the fact that some visitors have suggested the work would be a good backdrop for sitting and meditating seem somewhat strange to me, but there is a horrible beauty in not only the scale of the work, but also how light floods over the top (bottom) and bleeds through the bottom (top) of the mountain. I hear it's particularly spectacular at dusk.

We talked a fair bit with Blane about his process and he shared that during one visit to the location he and his wife, the equally talented artist [Diana Shpungin](#) witnessed a bit of the local politics that complicate the situation. During a peaceful assembly to protest the removal of the mountain top where Larry Gibson's family has lived for over 200 years, a group of local miners, hurting because of unemployment, show up. Diana captured the remarkable scene on video:

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Current Favorite Quote:

"Life should NOT be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways – Chardonnay in one hand - chocolate in the other - body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming 'WOO HOO, What a Ride' "—Fake Chinese Doctor.

In the Gallery

[May 6 - June 11, 2011](#)

[Idée Fixe : Drawings of an Obsessive Nature](#)

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Just to give you a sense of scale, here's a photo of Bambino and the installation:



With so many Americans out of work at the moment, it's understandable that tempers flare and confusion abounds as to who's to blame for the hardship. Blane noted that the mining companies, looking for scapegoats when their workers complain about the lack of jobs, point fingers at the "treehuggers" when the situation is obviously much less simple than that. I found it somewhat heartening that the miners seemed to begin enjoying themselves once it became clear they weren't going to find the fight they came looking for. You can learn more about Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining on [this site](#).

Blane's exhibition continues until January 10, 2010. It's definitely a show you should see.

Photo at top: Etienne Frossard.

Labels: [a show you should see](#)

POSTED BY EDWARD_ AT 7:44 AM