Espace Sculpture


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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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It is impossible to aesthetically approach the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC) in Bowmanville as the neutral white cube most art galleries aspire to be. The architecture of the place — 19th century industrial — and its original function as a mill simply precludes that possibility; the notion of the art gallery as a space on which an aesthetic context can be easily draped is negated by the noisy presence of the historical, for this is a building that has been adapted from another, original purpose that still lingers. And so exhibitions in this place — successful exhibitions — must reflect or incorporate some level of cognition of the difficult and complex institutional ground that is the VAC to whatever aesthetic figure is imposed upon it.

Lyla Rye did just that with an exhibition that took over the entirety of the VAC, both inside and out. Cyclorama comprised a complex, multi-faceted installation that included a problematic video installation, and two very different but powerful sculptural elements that responded to the demands of the building interior and the gallery grounds.

It all started right at the door. Rye configured things so that entering the VAC is to be immediately confronted by, and physically enter into, theatrical space courtesy of her installation of a proscenium arch to frame our way. It is a textile structure and onto it she has projected matching images of architectural columns. Just beyond its signifying role and presence is the video work itself — Upstage, a two-minute looped piece projected onto the gallery floor — based on an old silent film by one of the true geniuses of early cinema, Buster Keaton. In Rye’s work, Keaton’s image within the filmic structure has been displaced by a circle of blank white light that moves about the floor in a manner somewhat visually akin to that of a theatrical spotlight.

Now, this is a far more complex, nuanced, multi-layered piece than I’m able to adequately describe, and involves, for example, two video monitors in another area showing works based on other Keaton films, and several digital prints.

The problem with the primary video component of Cyclorama is, alas, the gallery space itself. Rye’s projection just the other side of the critically important framing device of the proscenium arch is interrupted by the visually intrusive presence of a free-standing column in the gallery, as well as the corner of a wall. This is no blandly neutral, vacant white space we’re in; the uneven, even awkward, arrangement of the space, its subdivision into discrete areas, powerfully resists attempts at theatricality. The architecture is insistently intrusive and so denies us the ability to step past the signifier of the proscenium arch and into the magical suspension of disbelief necessary for successful theatre. The frame of the arch promises, but is denied delivering on that promise by the nagging intrusion of the physical premises. We are never able to forget ourselves and become lost in Rye’s work. Magic consequently never ensues.

Things, however, do get much better. It’s a long walk up to the VAC’s third floor loft, but the trip up its several flights of stairs and our encounter with the blank fire door on the third-floor landing does, in a way, comprise a kind of contextualizing framing device for what we are to encounter. Up here, in the gallery’s large, unfinished and airy two-storey windowed loft, Rye delivers big time. Textiles are the critically important factor, for Rye has wrought a series of interconnected sculptural variants on the idea of the proscenium arch to shape and frame our experience. They are tents, and this is Memory Palace.

Rye sculpturally reconfigured this large loft space, attuned enough to recognize that it is oddly permeated by a vaguely church- or cathedral-like suggestiveness when it’s empty, and created a series of interconnected but completely independent tented sub-spaces made from large tarpaulins. There’s a truly overt architectural sensibility at work in the spaces Rye has created, for each of the tents comprises a different, recognizable shape — a shed, a gazebo, etc. — and each is contextually cognizant of the larger, enveloping space within which it exists. One of the spaces done entirely in blue tarp, for example, cleverly creates false dormers for the windows, punctuating one of the loft walls, powerfully altering the space with the suggestiveness of a slanted roof that in fact doesn’t exist. Perhaps all of this could be likened to the cosmological notion of the multiverse, if you will, to the idea of a series of indepen-
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dent, unique “baby” universes,

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