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The New York Times

Sunday, July 23, 2006

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ART IN REVIEW; 'Field' -- 'Science, Technology and Nature'

By KEN JOHNSON

Published: July 23, 2004

Socrates Sculpture Park

Broadway and Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, Queens

Through Aug. 1

A moratorium on art exhibitions about science and nature is long overdue. Although you could do worse on a nice summer day than take a trip to Socrates, the scruffy riverside sculpture park on the east bank of the East River, "Field: Science, Technology and Nature," an uneven group show, will not convince you that artists have anything very new or illuminating to say about the topic.

The more interesting pieces don't traffic in conventional environmentalist sentiments: John Stoney's 1/10-scale model of the Old Faithful geyser, for example. In the middle of the park's central field, it is a low, circular mound that looks like cooled geothermal mud, with steam coming out of a central small hole. Periodically, a geyser of water shoots up, triggered by a hidden mechanism connected to the Internet so that it coincides with actual eruptions of the real Old Faithful. Such a cannily simulated anomaly in Long Island City is delightfully surreal.

Ethan Long's "DDP (Digital Dirt Processor)" blends Minimalism and earthwork sculpture, adding a subtle cyberelectric dimension. Approaching an eight-foot cube of packed dirt, you notice that its flat surfaces are dotted by tiny fiber-optic lights glinting like stars. The conflation of the terrestrial and the astral in such an imposing object is compelling.

"Cool White or Daylight," by Pam Lins, is more about art and consumer culture. Cleverly parodying industrial park landscaping, it consists of a bed of white flowers planted to spell out "cool white" and a flagpole flying a flag bearing the words "or daylight." The words refer to types of artificial lighting and to an essay by Dan Flavin about the origins of his light sculptures.

More problematically complicated is Mark Dion's "East River Biological Field Station," an aluminum-clad shed on a flatbed truck trailer within which the artist has installed old office furniture and environmentalists' paraphernalia to simulate a functioning research facility. The office is also supposed to be used by local high school biology students for environmental studies. This is admirable, but Mr. Dion's work, though carefully constructed, contributes little to a more imaginative understanding of science and nature.

Too many other works are flatly illustrative: a 20-foot-tall representation of the Jolly Green Giant by Hope Ginsburg comments on agribusiness; Mitch Miller's black oil derrick constructed of wood and parts of toys criticizes the petroleum industry, as does Michael Joo's billboard-size photograph documenting his hike along the Alaskan Pipeline's entire 400-mile length.

Lisi Raskin's chain-link fence enclosing a fake chemical spill comments on industrial pollution; Catarina Leitão's slick signs representing catalog ads for outdoor equipment are about recreational consumerism; and Patrick Armacost's stack of transparent plastic boxes containing grungy terrariums is like a children's exhibit in a natural history museum.

In this context, Elaine Gan's scaffolding structures of bright aluminum rods connected by rubber cords built around three cherry trees has a nice formal and possibly metaphorical economy. KEN JOHNSON

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