

## Field: Science, Technology, and Nature

Socrates Sculpture Park

September 2004

Fields are supposed to be wide open spaces, but Field: Science, Technology and Nature at the Socrates Sculpture Park this summer was just too wide open for its own good. A show about fields should be an



*Pam Lins, "Cool White or Daylight."  
Photo © Chris Baker/Socrates Sculpture Park 2004.*

examination of the way things are defined and measured. That's what fields do. The professional field of accounting defines what it is to be an accountant and measures its members against this standard. A field of flowers allows flowers to really define what it is to be a flower, plenty of sun and no bushes in the way.

Did the show undertake this investigation? It tried, but got confused in the process. For instance, there seemed to be a premise that a show about fields would take place in a field. The sculpture park, however, isn't really a field; it is a park. A field is an empty space in which forces can reach their full extent, free from interference. Furthermore, before being filled up by these forces, accountants, flowers, or electro-magnetism, each point in a field is just as important as any other point. It has no narrative, just empty space. A park, by contrast, has already been filled and has been given a narrative that its visitors understand through the language of landscape design. Socrates Sculpture Park does this well. It has a nice path, planted areas and open areas, benches by the water, grass to sit on.

The artwork was well sited in relation to these elements. This was appropriate for the park, but it seemed to obscure any goal of examining fields. To examine the way fields are used would mean to examine the initial premise organizing something. In this context the initial premise, that of a park, seemed unexamined except to the extent that it had been mistaken for a field.

There were, however, some good things within the show and within individual pieces: the peculiar and slightly sexual illustrations for Catarina Leitaõ's catalogue entries; the homemade signs and security equipment of Lisi Raskin's hazardous waste site; the curiousness of Michael Joo's billboard over the entrance, fitting in so well and yet obviously so far away; Ethan Long's ten foot packed earth cube with imbedded fiber-optics that, from a distance, became stars from within a hard wall; and Patrick Armacost's "Stacked Fluvial System," a stack of Plexiglas terrariums baking in sun and horribly oozing from onto the next. Also in the show were Hope Ginsburg's "Jolly Green Giant," a twenty foot aluminum cutout figure of the giant himself standing on the grass, Elaine Gan's aluminum and rubber matrix penetrating through and around three cherry trees, John Stoney's scale working version of Old Faithful, seemingly stolen from some Long Island mini-golf, and Mitch Miller's oil well, made of blackened wood and plastic toys.

Mark Dion, probably the artist most acquainted with fields as efforts at defining and measuring, presented his "East River Biological Field Station," a functioning high school science lab mounted on a flat bed trailer. Dion's work functions more powerfully when, instead of simply being itself, it provides some critique of its context. In this case, because of the complete amenability of the context, it was just simply itself.

The best piece in the show, was "Cool White or Daylight," by Pam Lins. Borrowing her form from the raised plantings of corporate campuses, Lins spelled out the words "cool white" in white flowers. At the head of the planted area was a flagpole flying a blue flag that said "or daylight." "Cool white" and "daylight" are two names for the same type of artificial photographic light. One name connects to an idea of whiteness and the other name to an idea about day-ness. That one light can have two names indicates the degree to which naming is a response both to the thing named, but also to a preexisting concept in the language, in other words, a field (in this case two fields, one of whiteness, one of day-ness). To situate this insight within a corporate planting, an authoritative effort on the part of a corporation to define the terms of the field in which it finds itself, creates a subtle and humorous tale of the ubiquity of fields we don't even know we are standing in. After all, "daylight" really looks a lot like daylight to me.

—Tom Johnson