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At Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Conversation Between Works and Over Decades

By SUSAN HODARA | DEC. 19, 2014

Richard Serra's "Bent Pipe Roll," from 1968, is a free-standing lead pipe that lies along the floor, angles upward through a cylindrical lead roll, then leans against the wall. It rests serenely, gracefully, alone in a gallery at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield.

Nearby, Kate Gilmore's new, site-specific installation, "A Roll in the Way," consists of more than 500 painted logs stacked upright on a raised white platform. In her accompanying video, which documents the work's evolution, Ms. Gilmore lifts one log at a time and dips it into a trough of red, black or white paint. She then hoists the log onto the platform, which she had hand-stenciled with the word "way" in repeating rows that are eventually concealed by logs.

Although it is unlike "Bent Pipe Roll," "A Roll in the Way" was created with Mr. Serra in mind. Visually, the size and shape of Ms. Gilmore's logs mirror Mr. Serra's lead roll. Conceptually, the physicality involved in making "A Roll in the Way" evokes the infinitives Mr. Serra used to describe his own process, among them "to lift," "to roll," "to drop," "to arrange" and "to hide."

"A Roll in the Way" (2014), by Kate Gilmore

Artworks are conversing with one another like this throughout the Aldrich, from gallery to gallery and across the decades. The second installment of "Fifty Years," the museum's yearlong 50th anniversary celebration, features seven concurrent exhibitions.

There are new projects by contemporary artists, including Ms. Gilmore. There are solo shows of Mary Beth Edelson and Jackie Winsor, established artists whose early careers were nurtured by the museum's founder, Larry Aldrich. Interspersed are historical pieces by artists who played integral roles in the Aldrich's first decade: Richard Artschwager, Eva Hesse, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin and Mr. Serra. Each of the exhibitions is individually compelling; together they highlight the impact of one generation upon another and underscore the idea that art is created within a broader aesthetic context.
"We're showing our audience that art doesn't happen in a vacuum," said Amy Smith-Stewart, the museum's curator. "There is always a dialogue with the past."

A different dialogue — this one about gravity — is taking place between Mr. Serra's piece and Ernesto Neto's 2006 "The Body That Gravitates on Me." Mr. Neto's pendulous sculpture, a construction of pink polyamide fabric and nylon stockings filled with sand and Styrofoam beads, is suspended from the ceiling of the museum's two-story atrium. Just as gravity holds Mr. Serra's pipe in place, it tugs at Mr. Neto's sagging appendages.

"You might not think of Serra when you see Neto's piece," said Richard Klein, the Aldrich's exhibitions director. "But when you consider that both forms are determined by gravity, it's an interesting way to look at them."

There are others ways to look at the connections among the artworks on view. One is through color. Entering the museum, visitors encounter Mr. Kelly's "Yellow Piece," from 1966, a large canvas painted a radiant monochromatic yellow. Contrast that with the subtlety of Ms. Martin's similarly large "The Rose," completed two years earlier. Ms. Martin's painstakingly hand-drawn grid of delicate graphite and red pencil lines diffuses when seen from afar to emanate a rosy glow.
"Kelly will hit you over the head with color," Mr. Klein said. "With Martin, it's more meditative. It's a visual field that hums."

Sometimes the colors in Cary Smith's work hit you over the head; sometimes they hum. Always, even with tones of gray, they are deliberately chosen and meticulously applied. Forty-four of Mr. Smith's geometric abstractions are on display in the exhibition "Your Eyes They Turn Me" (which takes its name from a Radiohead song). It presents paintings and drawings from six series, including his multihued "Wonder Wheel" grids and a selection of "Splat" images, where bold splotches vibrate between figure and ground.

"When you look at Cary's paintings, the color is so overwhelming that you forget about the craft," Mr. Klein said. "It's in the drawings that you can see his incredible precision."

Mr. Klein compared that precision to the obsessive work behind Ms. Martin's "The Rose." "People have described it as a kind of compulsion," he said, "but it goes beyond that. Both are using the compulsion to get to something more."

Distinctive color, grid-related motifs and touches of compulsion appear elsewhere in the museum. David Scanavino transformed one gallery into an explosion of color with his site-specific "Imperial Texture," which covers areas of the floor and walls with vibrant linoleum tiles, obscuring the room's edges with its pixel-like designs. Adding to the intensity, "Peacock" is a sprawling relief made with bright paper pulp that Mr. Scanavino hand-pressed onto a wall.

Ms. Winsor's exhibition, "With and Within," is a mini-retrospective. It combines documentation of 1970s performative works with her more recent "Inset Wall Pieces," concentric square structures that blur the line between painting and sculpture. Some are concrete, others wood or plaster; some have bits of color, or are etched with diamond patterns or grids. Five inches deep, they are inserted into the walls at chest level, each with a receding center that invites guests to peer inside.
Guests are invited to contribute to Ms. Edelson's "Six Story Gathering Boxes (1972-2014)." Two of the four-chambered poplar boxes, which she designed to resemble ancient Egyptian canopic chests, hold wooden tablets adorned with mixed-media imagery; the others have paper tablets where visitors can write their responses to prompts. Each box is assigned a theme. To commemorate its 50th, the Aldrich commissioned one titled "Family Immigration Stories," with prompts like: "The worst stories/most inspiring stories you have heard about immigration."

Ms. Edelson's boxes have been exhibited internationally; her "Great Mother" box returns to the Aldrich after 40 years. "They are archives of other times and other parts of the world, mixed with real-time responses from our visitors," Ms. Smith-Stewart said. "They are early examples of what we now consider social practice art."

Since its founding, the Aldrich's mission has been to exhibit groundbreaking contemporary art. With its current shows, Ms. Smith-Stewart said, "We are expanding the conversation to include more well-known historic figures."

"But remember," Mr. Klein added, "those historic artists were once new. How many people knew of Richard Serra in 1968?"