

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

July 15, 2013

ARTSEEN

JASON MIDDLEBROOK

My Landscape

by Jessica Holmes

THE MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
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Interconnections lie at the heart of artist Jason Middlebrook's work. The uneasy coexistence between natural phenomena and human-made objects, art's grappling with the places it inhabits, and the collisions of disparate facets of art history all surface in Middlebrook's paintings, sculpture, and installations. Laboring across a range of media, he applies paint to wood, incorporates trash into sculpture, and makes use of architecturally challenging spaces in a way that methodically explores these various interactions.

In his current exhibition, *My Landscape*, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), Middlebrook has been given the opportunity to examine these relationships on a grand scale. In a cavernous gallery just past the museum's entrance, 11 of the artist's signature, painted, planks of wood lean against the walls. The artist's reverence for his material is evident. The milled boards have been shaped into organic forms, and Middlebrook makes specific note of the type of wood used for each individual work. It's an inconspicuous, yet important detail. When we become aware that one plank is beech while another is English elm, an aspect of each piece's discrete character is illuminated.

In "Finding What's Left" (2013), for instance, Middlebrook has allowed the wood to remain in a roughly hewn shape, onto which he has applied chevrons in white acrylic paint. The board has been edged with black spray paint, giving the possible impression of wood salvaged from a slashed and burned forest. When we discover the work is fabricated from a hunk of old growth redwood, one of the most majestic—and most endangered—species of tree, "Finding What's Left" takes on another, more poignant dimension.

But the planks do not strictly critique human encroachment on nature so much as they examine the various interfaces between the two. Most of the planks convey a sense of optimism rather than dread. Middlebrook's obvious care with his process contributes. In "Negative Spaces Not So Negative" (2013) he has systematically painted jagged, multicolored lines down the center of a piece of maple, creating an optical illusion that makes the two-dimensional, flat surface appear to the eye in three dimensions. Yet the artist's rigorous brushwork never overpowers the wood upon which it is painted.

Though several of the planks reach a height of nearly 20 feet, they still sometimes feel dwarfed by the lofty gallery, but the centerpiece of the show tackles the vast room. "Falling Water" (2012-2013), created on-site for MASS MoCA,



Jason Middlebrook, "Falling Water," 2012-2013. Styrofoam, steel, water, PVC pipe, plastic, pump, water tank, rubber, chicken wire, insulation, paint. Approx. 30 feet high. Courtesy the artist and DODGE gallery, New York.

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gives a nod to Frank Lloyd Wright, another artist for whom the nexus of the man-made and nature was of primary concern. Reclamation of leftovers is an intrinsic part of Middlebrook's practice. Here, he has built with them a monumental fountain in the middle of the gallery. The fountain is largely comprised of massive slabs of Styrofoam that Middlebrook found on the MASS MoCA property, debris from an artwork no longer extant. The Styrofoam slabs are bunched into several cantilevered piles that hang from one of two massive steel rods. Each of these rods is in turn attached to one end of a horizontal hanging bar, so that the entire structure dangles, in the manner of a mobile, from the ceiling. A cascade of water spills from the top, hitting each pile of blocks before disappearing into a hole punctured into the gallery's floor. Standing at its foot in the cool, clear galleries of this former textile mill, one feels the immense scale of the work while gazing up towards the skylights. The mottled, gray-and-white, Styrofoam bricks seem almost made of stone, and it is possible to momentarily believe we are instead before the face of a mountain watching water cascade from its craggy surface.

Middlebrook's great strength is his ability to fluidly meld the manufactured with the organic, but these fusions have rarely seemed to impart a political bent. A large hanging drawing, however, indicates that perhaps there might be even more seething below the surface of Middlebrook's work. "A Fresh Start" (2009 – 2012) depicts a civilization that inhabits a dense archipelago of islands, a world that, as result of global warming, has suffered a devastating flood, and must begin anew. Begun after a recovery project that Middlebrook worked on in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and inspired by the archipelago city of Stockholm (where the drawing had its nascence), "A Fresh Start" demands that the viewer consider the repercussions of human actions upon the environment. After spending time with the meticulous, tightly packed drawing, one sees the rest of the exhibition with fresh eyes. What can Middlebrook's work illuminate about the fragile, but often forgotten pact humanity has with nature? Perhaps that by disregarding it, we run the risk of a future where remnants of wood are the only things left from the forests, and all of our waterfalls are made of plastic.