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**On exhibit: 'Jason Middlebrook: My Landscape' at Mass MoCA****Hudson Valley artist pays tribute to nature, partly with man-made materials**

By Tim Kane

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Rising nearly 60 feet, the installation "Falling Water" climbs through Mass MoCA's old factory space as if it's trying to escape. Twisting and turning, the installation finally reaches the ceiling, only to tumble back. White, jagged slabs (connected by steel) guide rivulets of water that seek ground. From above, a piping system fuses the outside with the inside, the industrial with nature. Cascading through the irregularly stacked rectangles, the water carves a path as if sculpting rock, yet it's all Styrofoam. The duplicity between nature and the human-made is the crux of Jason Middlebrook's art in the exhibit "My Landscape" at Mass MoCA. His installations mimic nature's ability to create abstractions, and illustrate how the built environment is an extension of nature. Middlebrook mines what could be called art's genome — the basic elements underlying all things.

Using discarded Styrofoam from a previous installation, Middlebrook creates an edifice on the edge of collapse. It isn't really hung, but suspended in time. It both fits perfectly within the cavernous space and is an odd intrusion into a formerly decaying building. From California, Middlebrook moved to New York, then relocated near Hudson about a decade ago. "Falling Water" is encircled by vibrantly painted planks that are totemic and evoke a sense of the sacred. Recently, he answered a few questions about giant pine cones, the nature of nature and living upstate.

Q: In "Falling Water" you manage to convey stone through Styrofoam while playing with ideas of weight, gravity and manufactured nature. How did it all come about?

A: I had this idea sometime ago; it's an idea I wrote down in my drawing book and hoped that someday I would use it. When we started planning, I didn't know about the old blocks of Styrofoam. The foam took on a concrete look and I really responded to its state of decay. It was the perfect material to convey my idea to replicate nature through man's eyes. Nature is always pressing on and around our manmade structures. I really wanted to emphasize this paradox we have; nature always wins this fight.

Q: What, if any, were the special challenges you faced?

A: The challenge was controlling the water. The water has to be under a certain amount of pressure to have it flow and not spray, which could damage the floor of the museum.

Q: Your colorful wood planks encircle "Falling Water," which are signature pieces, but how have they changed over the years and, in this case, what is their relation to the larger centerpiece in this exhibit?

A: I discovered them through years of exploration, trying to find the space between sculpture and painting. At first, the grain of the planks dictated the painting and now the form of the plank inspires me more. The shapes I select start the process and sometimes I live with these shapes for sometime until an idea develops. I wanted the planks to enhance the vertical space of that museum, just like "Falling Water" does. That space is all about cubic vertical volume and the planks draw attention to the vertical space above.

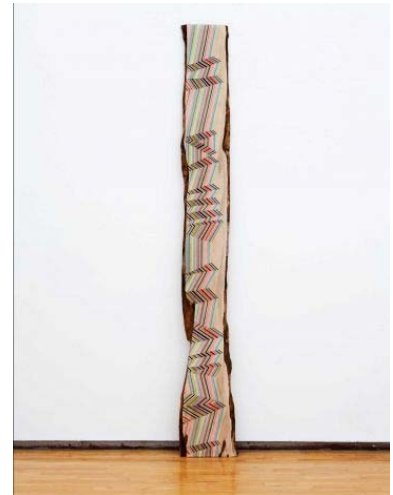
Q: How has upstate New York influenced your work during the past decade?

A: Upstate New York reminds me so much of Northern California before the computer arrived. I graduated from U.C. Santa Cruz in 1990, and organic farms, the Grateful Dead and the start of Apple computer was the counterculture I grew up in. When my wife and I discovered the Hudson Valley, we slowly fell in love with it. With the organic farms, the dated rock radio stations that still play the Dead and Dylan, it was like Northern California all over again — with harsh winters. After 12 years in Brooklyn I didn't realize how much I needed to work closely with nature. What I love about the Hudson Valley is how truly wild it still is; the development has been very slow and we hope it remains this way.

Q: You recently returned from Thailand, where you were involved in making a giant pinecone. Could you share specifics about the project?

A: I'm making a giant pinecone for collectors in Santa Fe who have a very special relationship to their land. They are avid hikers and they commission artists to make art on their property. I spent some time with them hiking and experiencing the landscape. Because Santa Fe is at about 7,000 feet, the Pinyon pine is a dwarf pine of sorts; the pine cones are beautiful, and they are abundant on their land. I wanted to draw attention to their significance and remind the viewer of how important nature is.

Tim Kane is a freelance writer in Albany.



Jason Middlebrook *Negative Space is Not So Negative*, 2013 Acrylic on maple  
147.75 x 20 x 1.5 inches Courtesy the artist and DODGEgallery, New York  
(Karen Pearson)