

ARTFORUM

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Jason Middlebrook

SARA MELTZER GALLERY

"Shoulds" are dangerous, especially in art. So it's risky to stipulate that a project concerned with human habits of exploiting and degrading flora and fauna should hit its viewers viscerally with exploitation and degradation, or that an exhibition worried about seductive consumerism should avoid seducing its consumers. Beauty, after all, is one of the great persuasive powers on earth. Sensually pleasing materials and precise compositions bespeak care and attention. Isn't it ugly carelessness that causes landfills, shantytowns, deforestation, extinction, and mile after mile of freeway traffic lighting up the night? But still, how do objects stylish and well crafted, things that exist in a realm where all is lovingly polished and perfectly sited, instruct us about a world where dreck and sprawl rule?

Thus went my inner debate while I walked through Jason Middlebrook's new show of sculptures, paintings, and works on paper. The twenty-seven pieces, all made last year, further Middlebrook's long-standing interest in decaying landscape and nature/culture clashes by mixing and matching key forms and motifs. There were arrays of plastic jugs and bottles cast in subtly earth-toned concrete; geometric paintings in acrylic on tall planks of rough-hewn wood; drawings in acrylic, ink, and pencil featuring weedy, trashed hillsides and glittering nightscapes reminiscent of Los Angeles; and deadpan paintings of birds. The show's central works, the wood planks, form a series, but vary markedly in style. A crystallographic Robert Smithson-esque



Jason Middlebrook,
Maggots on a Steak,
2008, acrylic, ink,
and pencil on paper.
41 1/2 x 30 1/2".

starburst decorates the walnut board; liquid, Morris Louis-y lines squiggle across cherry pieces; the cedar is tagged with spray paint. Propped against the wall like surfboards against a garage, or standing in sleek steel armatures with shelves (some displaying concrete bottles), the decorative works push toward design. One plank laid across a pair of concrete jugs makes a bench, though visitors are not invited to sit down. Elsewhere, bottles line a windowsill, pile in a corner, or fan out on the floor—a seemingly random scatter that in fact rhymes with both the angle of a stairway rising nearby and a shift in the direction of the floorboards.

Wavy, gnarled, and straight lines, exploding grids, and earth and sky tones—pinkish beige, forest green, ochre, lavender, pale blue, silver, black—show up again in the works on paper. Multiple perspectives collide on a single sheet, with geological cutaways tilting into aerially viewed grids and close-ups of spindly plants. Dwellings and labor are hinted at—the almost-eight-foot-tall drawing *Offshore Drilling* depicts a kind of oil rig of the mind, suspended in a matrix of colored lines, while the all-pencil *Inspired by the Countless Trips from My House to My Studio* shows a higgledy-piggledy pile of shanties and shacks. *The Green and White Warbler* and *American Goldfinch*, realistically painted yet set amid pulsating linear patterns like psychedelic wood grain, monitor the scene like tutelary gods.

All this is very un-garbagelike. No harm seems to come. Middlebrook calls the show "Vein," evoking coal lodes, oil reserves, blood spills, or toxin injections, as well as the wood grain that guides his seemingly free-form hard-edged designs. The homophone *vain* lurks nearby, suggesting that this might be a futile gesture preoccupied with its looks. Perhaps Middlebrook's point is just this uncomfortable closeness between mainlining eco-overload and courting commoditized surface, between digging into underlying gunk and buffing elegant shards. Entropy is not peaceful or pretty but a lukewarm steady state, a blanking out; it's the biogeological equivalent of Freud's death drive, desiring not violence, not pleasure, but flatline. In this recent work, however, environmental collapse has resolved into attractive equipose. If our trash can be reclaimed as handsome, handmade, and rational, why should we worry?

—Frances Richard