

'The Minded Swarm' at LACE

Entering *The Minded Swarm*, a collaborative installation at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions by artists Andy Alexander, Kathleen Johnson, Jennifer Lane and Halsey Rodman, is a little like walking into someone else's dream. It is intriguing and beautiful, but something is missing—you are, after all, in someone else's head. The installation is a bookmark in an ongoing dialogue between the four artists who have been meeting as a science-fiction reading group for four years. The book lists and meeting notes can be found on the LACE Web site, and the June meeting was held at the gallery and was open to the public. Written material about the exhibition is riddled with science-fiction (SF) references. It is the artists' utopic hope that the head you enter is none of their own, but that of a communal consciousness, formed by the merging of their four minds.

It can happen in collaborative art that the dialogue supersedes the work, and yet in this case, the opposite seems true. Despite the multiplicity of ideas behind the installation—that SF provides a model to explore the human condition, the formation of a hive mind, the utility fog (projections of people and objects that look, sound, and feel real), a sociopolitical expression of the built environment—what is most apparent, and indeed most enchanting, is the work itself. The enthusiasm, artistic impulse and inventiveness of the artists, in all their individual and obsessive quirkiness is the strongest aspect of the piece.

The trip into the "mind" begins through a doorway painted in mauves and browns and golds where tentacles spiral in layers of pattern. It is luminous and fresh. Glimpsed from around the corner are two shelves cut out of the wall, each filled with geometric paper sculptures, green and orange and blue, an elegant version of someone's math homework. Passing through this corridor to enter the space, it is cool and relaxing—a fragment of a child's dream, a playground, a memory that is not your own.

The room has the unfinished quality

of an abandoned sand castle, and the construction sense of a movie set. It is incomplete and fragmented, pieced neatly together of simple, light, materials, foam and plaster, glue and plywood. Grecian pillars, neatly cut across the tops, surround a lifted structure with a hole in the center. Something is landing, or has just left, or, possibly, is about to take off. Faux crystals bloom, or maybe crush, cardboard blocks scattered carefully around the main structure. The color, like the construction, is fast and bright, stripes of neon paint, glowing lights, and carefully placed remnants and glue. For all its funkiness, it is especially orderly.

Above the hole is suspended a giant foam sand dollar (or maybe a starfish) through which is projected a series of underwater scenes at the base of the

Andy Alexander, Kathleen Johnson, Jennifer Lane and Halsey Rodman, *The Minded Swarm*, 2005, mixed-media installation, at LACE, Los Angeles.



hole. I didn't see it at first, but a woman visiting the gallery found steps at the back, and I climbed them with her. It was surprisingly delightful to stand and peer in at the projected sea. As we came to the top of three steps, she stopped and said, "I don't want to go further, it looks too pristine." We descended; the plywood plateau did exhibit a sense of hierarchy. In the calm, lovely and subterranean space of *The Minded Swarm*, the gracious attention to aesthetic concerns subversively—or maybe not so subversively—overtakes reference and theory and background. The artistic impulse eases through playfully, like tentacles through a solid wall, but there remains something stubbornly obtuse beneath the surface, a creature lurking in the dark.

—Annie Buckley

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