



THEATER/FINE ARTS

Friday, September 22, 2006

Shadows illuminate 'Into Black'

By REGINA HACKETT
P-I ART CRITIC

For more than 2,000 years, the fire in Plato's cave has cast distorted shadows against the wall, proving the durability of the metaphor. What we take for reality could be shadows, as the Greek philosopher suggested, but because the image has taken root in our collective intellectual history, each new generation, discovering it, sees it shine.

The 16 artists in "Into Black" at Western Bridge conjure the idea of seeing darkly, making art in the gap between the thing and the thing perceived.

In "Um," the artist team of Hadley + Maxwell invest the theme with droll wit.

Against a video of a bare light bulb is the same light bulb hanging in the gallery. As a pale hand reaches up to push the projected image, it swings through space, a shadow in rebellion. Plato derided our shadowed sight, but Hadley + Maxwell aren't interested in the clarity of his idealized forms. For them, only shadow's distortions keep reality from being unpardonably dull.

Neil Goldberg doesn't reply to Plato as much as ignore him.

Goldberg's video, "Three or Four Steps Through a Shadow," merges shadow and light into a blissful clarity. He recorded those who passed by his front stoop on a summer's day and slowed down the film.

This simple device created a radical redemption. Everybody's walking on clouds with a lovely, loping stride, the old and young, male and female, all calmly drifting from light to shadow and back to light.

Doug Aitken, a monster genius of video sculptures, is represented by two large photographs taken on a dark night. All the light comes from offshore drilling platforms off the Santa Barbara coast, brilliantly lucid clusters of red sparking against velvety black.

Olafur Eliasson measures mapped time through neon light. His wacked-out handyman style is endearing.

Euan Macdonald has dry-as-a-bone humor. Western Bridge founders Bill and Ruth True appreciate it, as they are collecting him in depth. I appreciate it less, his drab little drawings and bleak videos.

In "World Reversal," a suite of drawings trace a rusted hulk restored to cruise liner, and so what? If ifs and buts were candies and nuts, what a holiday we'd all have.

In "The Shadow's Path," Macdonald filmed the ground from a helicopter. The light is drained and dull to signal the sorry state of

ART REVIEW

INTO BLACK

WHERE: Western Bridge, 3412 Fourth Ave. S.

WHEN: Through Dec. 16. Hours: Thursdays-Saturdays, noon-6 p.m.

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things. I know he's kidding in a weird and nerdy way, but the joke leaves me cold.

Jason Dodge's "Into Black" gives the show its title. He asked eight friends to expose sheets of photographic film to sunrises around the world and framed the results.

Audience members prove their savvy by perceiving Dodge's nothing as something. Others may say his photographic sheets are blank, but we happy few know better.

Spencer Finch's multicolored, fluorescent light fixtures on a diagonal are a swell update of Dan Flavin mixed with "Broadway Boogie Woogie." Claude Zervas' thin light tubes dazzle a weighty theme (Napoleon's tomb) into ultracool fairy dust. Hiroshi Sugimoto's photograph of the sea at night has darks moving within its darks.

That leaves Sterling Ruby, who turns colored light into fetish; Linda Connor, whose big reputation rides on the hot air of boring grandeur; Morris Graves, who amply demonstrates that a little painting from 1943 ("Waning Light") can more than hold its own with all these new century hipsters, and Paul Morrison's temporary acrylic wall painting, "mesophyte," held over from the previous show and fitting nicely into the present one. With its soaring scale shifts and blunt, black beauty, it deserves the extended run.