

ART

Reviews

“New Urban Sculpture” Metrotech Center, through Oct 1 (see Elsewhere).

This exhibition presents yet more evidence of the diminished goals sought by New York’s serious public art. No longer meant to inspire viewers, commemorate individuals or otherwise define a place, public art now plays hide-and-seek with the average nine-to-fiver’s attention span—going with the flow, and asking for nothing more in return than a passing glance at lunch hour. Like latchkey kids, artists are settling for less, hoping for just a moment of attention from busy grown-ups passing by.

The organizing principle operating here seems to be find-the-needle-in-the-haystack: Sharon Louden’s *Tangled Tips* (tiny glowing wires suspended in the trees) and James Angus’s *Basketball Dropped from 35,000 Feet at Moment of Impact* (a small, squat bronze hiding by a promenade corner) are easy to miss; other works hide in plain sight.

James Carl’s *Dupes*, for example, inside the Metrotech lobby, consists of a life-size ATM machine, a Federal Express drop box and an airport security X-ray machine—all made out of cardboard. While the material makes the

sculptures into strange abstractions (no one I saw mistook them for the actual machines, although that might be due to the DO NOT TOUCH THE SCULPTURE signs), the works also imply that the security provided by such machines in real life is pretty flimsy.

The magnum opus here is Jason Middlebrook’s *Grand Entrance at the Commons*: a large-scale country mansion gateway made entirely out of Styrofoam, with its faux stoneface pattern carved and painted in a somewhat cartoonish way. Lording over the Commons like a busboy’s version of the American Dream, the piece is squeezed into the courtyard lawn, which is much too small for it, conveying a wannabe desperation. This traditional sign of gracious living also seems sinister (I kept thinking of the forbidding mansion gates in Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*). After all, “Keep out” is the message usually communicated by these ornate structures, not “Welcome.”

—Robert Mahoney

**Jason Middlebrook,
Grand Entrance at the
Commons, 1999.**

