

JASON MIDDLEBROOK

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Art Reviews

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

In Search of Subversion: You may have seen Jason Middlebrook's installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and not known it—a sign that it's either extremely coy or inconsequential.

Subversive, but not nearly enough, the installation is in the Project Room near the museum entrance, a space that's raw to begin with and that Middlebrook has made to look neglected as well. A ladder leans against the exposed concrete-block wall, near a paint bucket filled with trash. Wood scraps clutter the floor beneath a window that's been boarded shut. In the center of the room, a pallet of plywood sheets receives the steady drip of an overhead leak.

Calling his installation "Museum Storage," Middlebrook conjures not just the image of the insti-

tution's backroom but the concept of its history, its past. He includes old blueprints of a never-realized modification of the museum among the clutter here, along with a lot of dusty old notices indicating the museum's closure on a holiday or warning visitors of controversial content within.

Middlebrook, who is based in New York, gets a bit more theatrical with an old donations box, which he's turned into a scruffy terrarium, and with the cracked concrete floor, which he's planted with a few plastic weeds.

Wrapped objects on the storage racks sprout green stuff too, as if left there inordinately long. One large painting, however, is fresh and visible, presenting an image of a dilapidated shed with a façade just like the Santa Monica Museum's. It's rendered as a facility in decline but also, with debris flying around it, like the epicenter of a geologic convulsion.

Using a museum's public space to expose its private workings is certainly not a new strategy but one with great potential for provocation. Chris Burden's subterranean excavation at the Geffen Contemporary in the late '80s allowed glimpses of the institution's physical underbelly. More recently, Michael Asher enacted a radical exposure of another sort for a show at the Museum of Modern Art, printing a free-for-the-asking brochure listing works by major artists that the museum had deaccessioned over the years.

Middlebrook's installation extends the cynical notion of the museum as a place where things go to die, but the gesture is neither incisive nor terribly clever. As one visiting child commented upon entering the room, voicing, no doubt, many an adult visitor's impatient befuddlement, "Is something going to happen here?"

Santa Monica Museum of Art, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 586-6488, through Jan. 20. Closed Sundays and Mondays.