

## JASON MIDDLEBROOK

Artext

Spring 2002



### Jason Middlebrook at Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York By Rachel Kushner

Jason Middlebrook's art works seem to occupy shifting coordinates along a plexiform trajectory, whose threads include the dialectics of artifice and nature; geology, and the aesthetics of geological strata; excavation; critical views of architecture and art institutions; and the intersections between the remote future and the remote past. Like Robert Smithson, whose work is clearly a primordial nexus for this Brooklyn-based artist, Middlebrook has adopted a gesture of revelation as his notion of art.

Middlebrook's recent New York show "Visible Entropy" (October 13 - November 10, 2001) consists of five free-form, large-scale drawings and four tabletop architectural models: the Tate Modern, SF MoMA, Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim, and the Getty. Each of these works is put through a car wash of entropic disintegration, to varying degrees and effects. Middlebrook's Bilbao seems a perfect incarnation of museum fatigue, its silver canopies blighted by graffiti, impaled with unsightly screws, and dulled to a duct-tape gray. Meier's late-modernist acropolis, with its Euro-style tramway and scarlet cascades of bougainvillea, has disintegrated into a weather-softened, moss-covered ruin. The new Tate's renovated power plant chimney rests at an ignoble tilt, stratified like a geological core sample and sprouting wiry grass from its roof, its main building almost hidden under a mound of dirt. Bringing to mind both Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) and

Chris Burden's *Samson* (1985)—a 100-ton jack that incrementally pushed against bearing walls as visitors passed through a museum turnstile—Middlebrook's Tate piece seems to underscore the idea that geology (and gravity) will have the last word in the debate on the ontological differences (and superiority) of humanity over nature. For the SF MoMA, the building is a pallet of stacked cardboard. At its center, Middlebrook has replaced Mario Botta's soaring truncated cylinder with a desert succulent in a Lucite planter of layered rocks, sand, and dirt—perhaps a cheeky adumbration of modernism's emphasis on organic architectural forms.

There's a drawing of exploding (or imploding) shards amidst circumambient white that seems a re-dramatized Big Bang, with fragments of wall, tarmac, and tiny pieces of art works in lieu of dust and gasses. A triptych of the *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is cartoonishly rendered like a variegated jellyroll, and re-fabricated to withstand a risen watermark. In the press release for the show, Middlebrook's jetty is described as a caricature of "institutional one-upmanship and dumbing down." And although his drawing may be an insouciant response to the Dia's acquisition of the now-submerged earthwork, one gets the feeling it is also an homage of sorts, perhaps playfully referencing Smithson's statement that his jetty could be regarded in segments, "but only in the mind or on paper." In *What Lies*



*Beneath* (2001), small cryptic images are rendered on a large pristine surface, as if emerging through an infinite expanse of fog. Among the work's recognizable elements are clusters of geometrical ellipses, blue chromosomes, tiny crosses, a hand with long, curling fingernails, a small depiction of a building and trees, and below it a chunk of building facade with delicate roots descending from it, both in watercolor. As if bled right through the paper, a spleen-like shape with an intestinal tail hovers alone in the upper right corner.

Here Middlebrook's work moves beyond polemical prognostication to more convoluted possibilities, resulting from his engagement with Smithson, mortality, biology, and the hypostatization of geologic time. Like his SF MoMA—whose cactus planter vexes and subverts scale, dissolving any system of specific representation among the four dioramas—and the Tate's implied merger of interior and exterior strata, *What Lies Beneath* indicates that Middlebrook's theoretical conflation of stellar and cellular, architectural and earthen, and his repeated aesthetic forms (e.g., stratification and houseplants) can be taken beyond the edges of institutional critique to a richer expanse, where the laws of entropy serve not only didacticism, but the evolutionary and the kinetic.

Jason Middlebrook, The Guggenheim, Bilbao, 2001, mixed media. Courtesy Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York.