

jason middlebrook

tema celeste

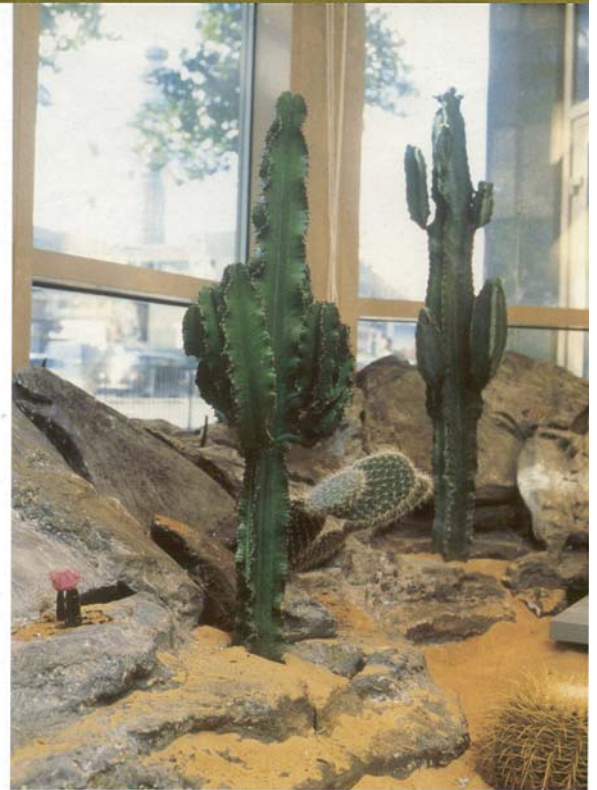
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david hunt

David Hunt: The architecture of recent art museums has started to look like the public sculpture of our times. Santiago Calatrava's new Quadracci Pavilion at the Milwaukee Art Museum, for instance, looks like an enormous bird, while Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao has been compared more than once to the gills of a fish. These structures seem to carry the same effect as a giant Joel Shapiro or David Smith sculpture. With their huge girders flying through space, complementing the corporate skyscrapers around them, their function seems to be to attract people to the location rather than serve functionally as places to house art. In turning museums into maquettes, that is to say exclusively art objects, can you explain how you tap into this idea?

Jason Middlebrook: The museum models are an attempt to alter the original sites and suggest a state of decay. You bring up a very good point, though. Recent museums take on a narrative that separates them from traditional architecture and forces the viewer to notice the form. Hence they seem out of context in the urban setting. In doing so, the museums become the sculpture, prompting the question, "Where does the art belong? Or where is there room for the art?" In my show at Sara Meltzer's, entitled *Visible Entropy* (based on Robert Smithson's idea of a chemical process, a breakdown of compounds), I'm suggesting a fall or a transformation of the new museums. Smithson talks about the tale of Humpty Dumpty, in which all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. I think this is a wonderful metaphor for the decline of architecture, the beginning of the ruin. In this show I created four museum models: Tate Modern in London, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Getty Center in Los Angeles, and the Guggenheim Bilbao. I wanted to examine museums that had been recently renovated or built in the last decade. Each building of the Getty Center model was covered in mud and the original Robert Irwin landscape garden was turned into a vegetable garden. I wanted to create a compound for a future civilization. The idea came from the last scene in *Planet of the Apes*, when Charlton Heston's character discovers the fallen Statue of Liberty on the beach. I love the idea of a billion-dollar museum becoming a village for a primitive society or a ruin of sorts.

DH: You give the idea of entropy a wide definition. On the one hand, it's the natural winnowing away of soil from a specific site; on the other, it references Smithson's notion of the decay of a physical ruin. Explain how this relates to your ideas about time, the future, and the decay on display in your maquettes.



JM: I'm interested in what will happen in a hundred years or five hundred years—the kind of time cycle that a baseball stadium is beholden to. The models not only suggest an end of the architecture but an altering of the design as well. In the case of Tate Modern in London I was drawn to the original function of the structure, a power plant. I chose to increase the size of the tower and turn it into a leaning core sample. The tower form becomes a symbol like that of the leaning tower of Pisa—erect yet falling. I chose to change the landscape of the museum from the bank of the Thames to a more mountainous, alpine setting. I wanted the core sample to appear to be busting through the earth's surface. The Tate itself is made of bricks of fired clay. I wanted to play on its strata as a sign of memory, like that of the power plant.

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▲ Jason Middlebrook *The Guggenheim, Bilbao*, 2001, mixed media, 118.8 x 125.7 x 76.2 cm.

◀ Jason Middlebrook *The Geology of Biology*, 2001, styrofoam, live plants, and paint.

▼ Jason Middlebrook *Dig*, 2001, styrofoam, paint, rocks, and silk plants.
Installation view at the New Museum, New York.

DH: How do the drawings relate to this body of work?

JM: Drawing has always been the starting point of my work.

In some ways I am a traditional artist, in the sense that I initially see things worked out in two-dimensional space. The *Visible Entropy* drawings, such as *What Lies Beneath*, play on the micro world of science and geology, the earth's compressed energy. I use a lot of negative space and pencil to arrange compositions revolving around architectural plans. The imagery is grounded in a Pop tradition, often very graphic. In *The New MoMA* I used architectural drawings selected from the proposal to renovate MoMA. I altered these original drawings and changed the scale of the approved renovation. I wanted to draw more attention to the construction facade on the street than to the new and improved MoMA within.

DH: Explain your notion of the landscape as skin, the idea of concrete as an epidermis. Where do we see this in the culture at large, and how does it apply specifically to your work?

JM: The whole notion of the urban as a construct is a layer put upon the earth. A layer that makes up our cities and our streets, a layer that increases the distance between man and nature, a layer that

reinforces our ultimate fear of nature. The skin of nature, unlike the skin of a city, is always changing, always eroding, and dead growth is present. The skin of a city is affected by these changes and, in turn, people are affected also. Spending time in urban centers such as New York, London, and LA, I'm always drawn to the subtle and radical relationship the earth has on the skin of the city—plants growing through cracks in the sidewalk, tree roots growing through streets, vacant lots that become a weed paradise. In a recent installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, I re-created a museum storage room in which plants have begun to take over the interior and a leak has developed in the museum. The leak drips on to a stack of plywood in which water collects in a basin and drains to circulate again. Silk plants are growing through the cracks of the museum floor. I wanted the museum to be reminded of the possibilities of loss within architecture, within the art world, and within fashion. The end of an era is always possible and nature is always waiting to take over.

DH: Like weeds, which can survive in the cracks with little or no water, human beings are also opportunists, following forms mapped out by nature. How does this idea play into *Dig*, the piece recently on view at the New Museum?

JM: *Dig* represents the ground cover before the architectural evasion. It represents the edge of the hole, a place that once existed and exists in every construction site. Without the concrete and the building, the weeds—like humans—take over. They survive on very few natural resources. The dirt of a construction site is full of enough nutrients to supply the weeds with life, not to mention the sun. In this piece I wanted to return a part of the museum back to its original state, pre-architecture, pre-New York City. The piece was also about the subterranean. Imagine what lies behind the subway's walls, the millions of little environments and systems cohabiting together in the walls of dirt. *Dig* is a reminder of the importance of dirt and how it supports life on this planet.

Jason Middlebrook was born in 1966 in Jackson, Michigan. He lives and works in New York.
Photo Credit: Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York.

