

Jason Middlebrook
APL#1
Sara Meltzer Gallery

Jason Middlebrook has made a promising career out of large-scale sculptural installations like his transforming "Dig" (2001) at the New Museum that turned the downstairs library into an open pit. It comes as something of a surprise to encounter Middlebrook creating an installation that doesn't transform the gallery as much as traverse its walls with intelligent, beautiful drawings. This surprising, effortless turn elevates an already excellent show.

APL#1 has a simple conceit: a continuous series of twenty-one drawings on paper of the Alaskan Pipeline span the gallery at a scale of 2.5 miles to 1 foot. Each large, mixed media drawing on paper is linked by passages of pipeline painted on the gallery walls. The drawings wrap around corners, under the receptionist's booth, and the pipeline cleverly passes through three television monitors as video. The apparent simplicity masks a bold assertion that goes beyond the formal beauty of these lyrical drawings.

Middlebrook creates a metaphorical, non-linear timeline that engages the complex web of art, industry, and politics within capitalist society without simplifying the intricate structure. The drawings start right of the entrance with a colorful, illustrative drawing of Prudhoe Bay where the pipeline originates and the next five drawings are essentially muted, taxonomic studies of the environment it passes through. The drawings here are plainly beautiful, carefully detailed, and devoid of any explicit critique. Middlebrook is a wonderful draftsman who collides several styles throughout. It isn't until "APL#1BP," the sixth drawing, that a critical edge enters the narrative as a single, uneasy oil soaked owl is contrasted with British Petroleum, Sunoco, and Exxon logos. Still, Middlebrook treats the logos like parts of the environ-

ment, mixed in with animal forms and fossils, consciously confusing the two. There is a clear reference to the terrible Exxon Valdez spill that became synonymous with environmental pollution.

The ensuing drawings follow the pipeline through invented sociopolitical landscapes, including one drawing, "No Blood for Oil," with the titular words drawn in Arabic. The eleventh drawing is a casually brutal image of a bald eagle's brains being blown out in a style reminiscent of Francis Bacon. Middlebrook's concern for the natural comes through in his other drawings of animals as well; there is a drawing of a lone moose in watery, blue tundra, and a polar bear consuming a fish. The tone of the drawings abruptly shifts course, like the pipeline itself, into art history. By drawing the pipeline into the background of Nancy Holt's "Sun Tunnels" (1973-6), Middlebrook frames the pipeline in the same context, albeit a hugely expensive and artistically anonymous public sculpture. It's not really a conceptual or aesthetic leap to view the pipeline from this unique perspective, as its scale and minimalist form fit firmly into the genre.

As the installation progresses, the pipeline passes through a diagram of problems humanity will face for the next fifty years, implicating America's socioeconomic dependency on oil. The large, schematic drawing is a wonderful appropriation of systemic art that should be instructive to the conceptually suspect genre while further revealing the breadth of the artist's vision. Middlebrook is able to effectively maintain artistic control over several drawing styles, from naturalistic pencil drawings to lyrical abstraction, in order to carry through his multifaceted exploration.

"APL#1 Double Negative" may be the most conventionally beautiful drawing in the show. The pipeline disappears into a central image of Michael Heizer's "Double Negative," a monumental work etched into Nevada's rocky terrain, dripping lines of

color into the empty paper beneath. Conceptually, the drawing articulates Middlebrook's argument that perhaps the *APL#1* is after all an artistic gesture. It can be viewed as a critical representation of a culture's ideas, beliefs, and material traits. It is a strangely plausible argument for something vilified and simplified as a product of consumer greed. It is really a representation of a complex, difficult reality. *APL#1* will continue in an exhibition in Athens, Greece at Els Hannape Underground, representing the last leg of the pipeline's journey.

—William Powbida