

JASON MIDDLEBROOK
Time Out New York
November 13-20, 2003



Art | Reviews

Jason Middlebrook, “APL#1”
Sara Meltzer Gallery,
through Sat 15 (see Chelsea).

On more than one occasion, Jason Middlebrook has created work that imaginatively charts the transformation of physical objects by the forces of entropy and decay, proving himself an apt excavator of unwritten futures. Here, the artist turns again to the natural landscape, but transformation plays a different, less productive role in Middlebrook’s latest show: Obscuring the reality of his subject (the Alaskan pipeline) as an ecological disaster, he seeks to endow it with new life as an earthwork.

The exhibition opens with an image of a refinery in Prudhoe Bay, where oil was first struck in Alaska. The 20 drawings that follow wrap around the gallery walls, cleverly joined by the recurring motif of the pipeline. The drawings lead back to the door and, one imagines, to the port of Valdez, where Alaskan oil begins its journey to the U.S. mainland.

In some of the drawings, the ground cleaves open to reveal the strata of nutri-



Jason Middlebrook, *APL#1 Alaskan Plants and Flowers*, detail, 2003.

ents that feed a staggering display of flora. Other images feature 1960s-era earthworks by artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. Here, the message starts to become murky. One is uncertain whether Middlebrook’s interests are ecological, art historical or some vague combination of the two. In one picture, he depicts a sullen owl, its wings heavy with the oil raining down upon it.

Yet the inclusion of Heizer’s *Double Negative* and Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* attempts to establish an affinity between the Alaskan pipeline and these radical artistic interventions. Middlebrook shifts awkwardly between Earth First! and earthwork, the hippy-ish convictions of the former confounded and possibly even neutered by the high-art strivings of the latter.—*Noah Chasin*