

JASON MIDDLEBROOK
Beautiful Decay
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Right: Installation View, Lisa Dent Gallery. Photograph by Wilfred J. Jones.
Left: *TKO*, 2007. Acrylic ink on paper. 49 3/4" x 38". Photograph by Wilfred J. Jones.



For over a decade, Jason Middlebrook has been exploring environmental and political topics, delivering biting criticism through a diverse body of work. In his new installation, drawings, and sculptures, recently on view at Lisa Dent Gallery in San Francisco, he continues his diligent pursuit to expose the detrimental effect humanity has had on its surroundings—and consequently on itself. Ranging from straightforward to conceptual, the works communicate the current distressing relationship between nature and its human inhabitants, focusing primarily on man's practice of hyper-consumerism, physical oppression of freedom, and continuous abuse of the environment.

Middlebrook stated that he derived much of the imagery for the *Disturbed Series*' large drawings from recent front-page images in *The New York Times*. Horrific events such as Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Indonesia, the war in Iraq, and the latest violent conflict between Lebanon and Israel have found their way into his drawings as demonstrations of humanity's crude disruption of nature. Yet, amid the chaos of rubble and devastation, Middlebrook depicts images of plants and flowers—emphasizing the perseverance and triumph of nature over the ravages humans have inflicted upon it, either directly or indirectly.

Counter-balancing the stern tone of the drawings, Middlebrook positioned sculptures composed of various tile mosaic-clad car parts throughout the exhibition space. He gathered grills, spare tires, mufflers, rims, and steering wheels from his town's salvage yard, specifically selecting parts from vehicle makes—Ford, VW, Chevy—that he and his friends have owned in the past. By covering parts with decorative tiles that trace the original pattern of the object, Middlebrook appears to follow the ancient mosaic tradition of embellishing stark materials, consequently redefining their natural character. Although the juxtaposition of the drawings and sculptures appears initially

as somewhat arbitrary, these objects can be perceived as yet another poignant critique of mankind, highlighting our wasteful habits and tendency to fetishize consumer goods, such as cars. It further calls to mind the manner in which man blankets the environment with "beautifying" projects, in turn overriding its original character and forcefully asserting our dominance over nature. Supporting this interpretation are the artificial plants that spring up from the floor, alluding once again to the endurance of nature to man's aggressive habits.

The human need for control over our surroundings is also apparent in the notable site-specific installation in the gallery's side room. The visitor walks within a sprawling urban nightscape, its walls painted entirely black. In separate corners, Middlebrook traced the image of two satellites whose rays extend far and beyond the city. This all-encompassing image reiterates man's absolute prevalence and supremacy over the environment, evoking a distinct Orwellian sense of unease.

A walk through this exhibition raises a disconcerting understanding of the urgent need for personal accountability for our surroundings from each and every one of us. In accepting Middlebrook's message, we acknowledge that in our reality, we are in complete control, and therefore there is no such thing as a "natural disaster."

Written by Dale Amir
Images courtesy of Lisa Dent Gallery