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'Living with Less' turns trash into art at University Art Museum

By **TIM KANE**, Special to the Times Union
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Stacked 35 feet high at the University at Albany's Art Museum, Jason Middlebrook's cardboard tower seems about to collapse. Cut and flattened boxes weighing two tons have been wedged together at odd angles, creating an uneasy balance.

At the base, cardboard spills out like water gushing from an amusement park slide. The spiraling mass whirls like a cyclone, ready to chew up the floor.

The message from the site-specific installation and the accompanying exhibit "Living with Less" isn't difficult to grasp: We're wasteful, overwhelmingly so. To Middlebrook, we just may be buried by tons of cardboard.

On display until April 5, the exhibit is a midcareer survey of the nationally recognized artist who has gained notice by taking discarded objects and turning them into mixed-media pieces that challenge conventional notions about garbage, art, reclamation and redemption.

"As long as there are humans, I'll have a lot of art to do," the Columbia County resident says. His grim assessment fuels his ardent commentaries on our poor relations with nature despite an unprecedented awareness of environmental problems.

Yet his art, as a whole, is optimistic. It isn't just urging us to recycle, but to change our lifestyles to reduce consumption. There's a solution, but can society achieve it?

Collected from the campus over two months, the boxes represent roughly 15 percent of the estimated 12 tons of cardboard shipped to the 20,000-student school in a year. Focusing on university-related environmental projects recently, Middlebrook was challenged by the museum's design.

"This isn't your normal place," Middlebrook said of the museum's high ceiling, institutional windows and flowing staircase. "I just had to work here. Plus, there's a lot of material on campus. It's a pretty big place."

A team of students helped Middlebrook assemble the "Cardboard Stack," which is supported by a single pole fastened together with plastic ties. Despite the installation's wobbly nature and impromptu feel, Middlebrook sketched out every inch of it.

"We had start at the top and then do sections from the bottom," he said. "You would get half way up the frame and the weight would bog it down."

A drawer and painter, the California native gravitated toward installations about the same time he won a prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art scholarship. Middlebrook, 42, lived in New York City until he moved upstate a few years ago.

Encircling the bottom floor of the two-story gallery, older paintings include the acrylic "Maggots on a Steak." It has a multitude of tiny dots on a grid pattern that could be a map of anywhere in suburbia.

Across the way, seven planks of found wood shimmer with bright rhythms of acrylic paint that weave along with the grains. They're a lot like surfboards, or totem poles. So simple, yet they speak volumes about the possibilities of reuse. With such vibrant colors, they dance in their newfound roles and surroundings.

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A triptych dubbed "Stacked Night Sky" returns to the totem pole and sprawl motifs with abstract cityscapes illustrated on flattened sections of cardboard against a wall. As they rise, each panel provides a receding perspective on the planet. The theme is completed on the opposite side with metallic circles floating like orbiting planets, a reminder that the Earth is the only known ecosystem to sustain life.

Hidden away in a small, darkened gallery upstairs is "Pile of Buildings." Black spray-painted cardboard boxes arranged like high-rise apartments. Christmas tree lights flicker through cut-out windows.

One of the strongest pieces is "Twenty Five Shelves with Cast Concrete Bottles." Gathered from campus, hundreds of plastic bottles were filled with concrete. Once the concrete dried, the plastic was peeled off to reveal impressions of familiar designs for products like Tide and Gatorade.

With their hardened, stonelike finishes, the bottles resemble heavy sediments layered deep inside the ground. They point to the millions of these objects that have been thrown away. They're like little messages in bottle floating in a sea of debris reminding us of our wastefulness.

Tim Kane is a freelance writer from Albany and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

Jason Middlebrook: 'Living with Less'

When: Through April 5

Where: University Art Museum, University at Albany, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Cost: Free

Contact: 442-4035