



Times Quotidian

...an infinite number of thing to speak of

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Inside the Artist's Studio – David DiMichele

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Inside the Artist's Studio is an ongoing series exploring issues on contemporary art through direct encounters with the artists themselves.



The Gallery In Ruins

In his 1986 book [Inside the White Cube](#) based on a [1976 series of Artforum essays](#), artist and writer [Brian O'Doherty](#) examined the pristine white gallery space as the required context and condition for appreciating contemporary art. He wrote of such spaces, "The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white... The purpose of such a setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings." [1] As with congregants in any religious space, once within the gallery a special group shares its solidarity with art world values. The gleaming White Cube frames the artwork and confers on it an aura of being an enduring masterpiece. It has been essential for the reception, success and enshrinement of Modernist and contemporary art. In photographs of gallery installations, anything other than art, including human viewers, had to be eliminated to maintain the sanctity of such a space and its devotion to pure aesthetics. Large scale Modernist painting was dependent upon these high temples where Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist canvases fulfilled the expectations for radical new visions. By the late 1970's, however, a variety of experimental practices such as earthworks, extreme body performances like Chris Burden's self-inflicted gunshot wounds, as well as hardcore Conceptualism with its dematerialization of the artisanal object, began to change the nature of gallery spectatorship, aligning the disembodied aesthetic eye more with the body and mind. Artists exited the White Cube for a myriad of alternative contexts from the streets to remote outdoor sites and relied on photo documentation as proxies for real time experiences.

Despite the implications for the traditional white gallery space engendered by those artists, the White Cube endured, morphing into a marketing tool and signifier for sophisticated branded commodities as much as the inner sanctum for contemplating contemporary art. Painting and sculpture, in addition to perennially facing challenges to outdo their predecessors in novel forms and aesthetic boundary breaking, have been dependent on gallery space to present the fullest appreciation of their qualities of scale, and subtleties in color, touch, and texture. Immaculate dedicated spaces, however are facing an existential threat, not by artists who question the elitist gallery system necessary for enforcing art world hegemonies, but by the economics of 21st century White Cube operations and the introduction of pervasive digital hegemonies. Radically altering the perception and reception of art objects, the computer screen is now the essential environment for viewing art; any art object—whether virtual or existing—has become instantly accessible and consumable. On-line galleries are proliferating along with journals, curatorial websites and cyber sales venues. As a result, direct tactile experience of art objects is decreasing. (Ironically, during the great Modernisms, the catalyst for new approaches to painting was art's internal fetishization of "progress".) In this situation, White Cubes have had to become ever more spectacular and impressive to attract viewers, as has the art contained in them. But the writing is on the spacious track lighted walls.



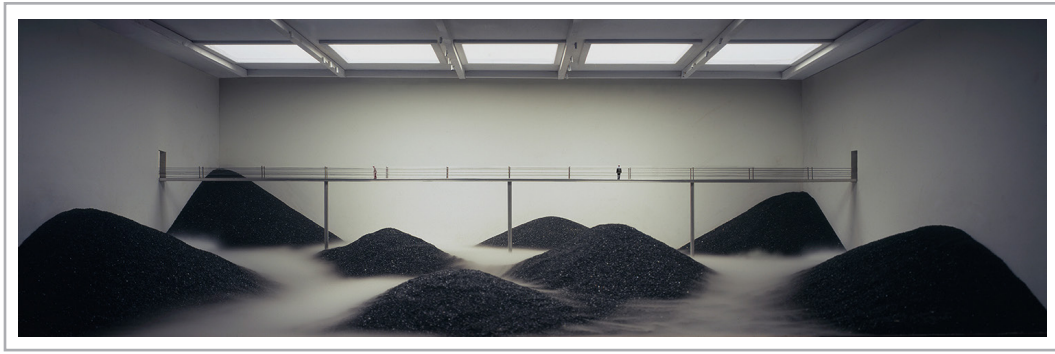
This is not to suggest that epic, entertaining installations such as [Kara Walker's warehouse sized Aunt Jemima sphinx](#), [Yayoi Kusama's infinity mirror installation at the Broad Museum](#), and Jeff Koons' future LACMA's \$25 million steam engine adornment, will not continue to draw throngs. For artists without the celebrity status/resources required to realize such projects, however, ambitious on-site projects are increasingly unattainable. Diminishing gallery and museum opportunities and viewers' increasing preferences for the convenience and ease of on-line imagery and the virtual have added further challenges. Rather than abstain from such sculptural explorations, however, multi-media artist [David DiMichele](#) has satisfied his penchant for expansive installations as well as handmade objects by creating what he calls "Pseudodocumentations" – illusionistic digital versions of small scale hand crafted sculptural dioramas mimicking current or historical largescale artworks. Built in a cramped cram packed garage at his Altadena residence and amusingly belying the grandeur he dreams of, the box constructions last only long enough to be photographed and digitally manipulated for large Digital Chromogenic prints. In these miniaturized stage like settings, he enacts his art fantasies, often reprising historical artworks and movements as believable evidence of existing full-scale exhibitions. He comments, "There a basic idea of deceit that's built into the entire enterprise." The theatrical device, which never gels as parody, promotes critical reflection on the nature of the unique or original art object and the many ways contemporary art is experienced.

Having come of age when Robert Irwin, Richard Serra, James Turrell, Gordon Matta Clark, and Robert Smithson were challenging the definitions, contexts, and means of art experience, DiMichele draws inspiration from a time when the possibilities for innovation in the visual arts were not compromised by million dollar budgets, art star obsessions, a crowded playing field, and post-modern ennui. Many of those artists haunt DiMichele's finished photographs. Their work has been re-staged and repackaged for a different milieu. He comments, "There a basic idea of deceit that's built into the entire enterprise." The theatrical device, which never gels as parody, promotes critical reflection on the nature of the unique or original art object and the many ways contemporary art is experienced. A replica of Smithson's famous Spiral Jetty winds its way through arched cutouts on a mirrored "floor". Mounds of asphalt "dirt" and salt crystals allude to Barry LeVa's renowned interior or scatter works from the 1970's. Miniature black or white "primary forms" referencing Minimalist masters Tony Smith, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Irwin and others hang on walls, are scattered across or overflow facsimiles of famous museum halls like the Getty Villa or the Whitney. A "room" filled with a Cubistic proliferation of pure white boxes and canvases illuminated with track lighting, renders the White Cube into an object or subject itself. Industrial materials like rubber and foam tubing and plastic light rods playfully capture the feel and aesthetics of sculptural pioneers Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, and Dan Flavin. Lending credibility to these reconstructions is the skillful illusion of their installations in voluminous galleries as sculptural tendrils and tentacles serpentine dramatically through skylights, ceilings, and doors; piles, pours, and accumulations of various materials lean against walls or are stacked shoulder high. Dwarfed by the spectacles, realistic walking and gesturing figures—surrogates for real time viewers—appear to observe and interact with the installations.

These productions require finesse as a painter and sculptor, albeit one whose miniscule brushy canvases or Surrealistic organic forms parading in tiny tableaux are made in the service of their photographic destinations. These are also rich in historical associations such as when he recalls Hans Hoffman, the iconic Abstract Expressionist who sought to represent deep pictorial space through pure form and color manipulation. By placing multi-colored mini paintings at different angles and in overlapping configurations and allowing for shadow play and perspective in his set ups, Di Michele can transform the elements in a flat painting into the illusion of a walk through space. As a result, the transcendence traditionally associated with abstraction has been somewhat mockingly dismissed. Hoffman might be horrified, but DiMichele digitally accomplishes what Hoffman was not always able to pull off. Likewise, DiMichele can fill the "walls" of a model with Pollock-esque drips that absorb and envelop viewers in ways the AbEx master could never have imagined. Lest art historical quotation be the only game, DiMichele creates more personal expressions as when he uses thick gnarly skeins of paint as a sculptural material within his fabrications. Likewise, black painted branches, jagged bark, and wire serve as gestural analogues, whipping balletically through space in a constant interplay between two and three dimensions in the finished photographs. There are certainly precedents and congruities in the work of James Casebere and Barbara Kasten, photographers who painstakingly fashion artful 3D constructions solely to be photographed. These artists probe the relationship between art, reality, and photographic reproduction, endlessly scrutinizing the truths and fictions of the photograph. Among the many questions these works raise are whether the masters themselves are now seen primarily in reproductions, and whether, as the Conceptualists argued several decades ago, an image derived from any artwork can present or deliver an idea as effectively as experiencing the actual art object. In their Baudrillardian world, viewers' perceptions have been thoroughly conditioned and colonized by images; an object exists to be reproduced, so any literal encounters with objects can be dispensed with. If so, is DiMichele offering a nostalgic simulacra? Has "the creative act replicat[ed] itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation"? [2] In a world offering infinitely consummable effects, is authorship, even ownership, important?



Along with such questions, is a great Oedipal struggle DiMichele wages with his heroic forebears and with the power structures that support and control an artist's production and desires. Artists must always unmake their history to create something "new". His photographs in essence abandon the objecthood of the original artworks, destroying their auras and by inference, the esteemed venues for creating and preserving those auras. Clearly DiMichele has ruination on his mind. "Pseudodocumentation: Destroy the Gallery" (2017) depicts giant rusty Richard Serra-like steel shards piercing and slashing the gallery space like so many giant knives. Chunks of ceiling and metal scrap litter the floor implying a kind of payback or death wish for the masters of old. Similarly, "Pseudodocumentation: Broken Plaster" (2011) portrays the interior of a gallery space covered with hundreds of crumbling plaster chunks, eerily reminiscent of scenes of recent Syrian devastation or the aftermath of a natural cataclysm. In an unfinished work seen in his studio, spectators stand at the foot of towering sculptures arising anew from this sort of rubble, perhaps to interject a small nod to creative destruction. In another the artist has scattered shattered and broken glass like sections of fractured arctic ice flows or the smashed remains of a thousand picture frames. Such images of collapse suggest the forces of entropy, acts of disruption, deconstruction, dystopian allegories, and the rebuking of progressive narratives. Tim Edensor writes of ruins long symbolizing "the inevitability of death and decay, the fragility of life, and of the material world.....the ruin itself embodies the events which led to its present state and conjures the processes which led to the demise of the building.....and all that occurred within" [3] While DiMichele does show his photographs in galleries, there's a tragi-comic sense of self sabotage or at least a heavy dose of irony in doing so. For as the display of art turns more and more to the digital realm, such ruinous images seem to portend the extinction or irrelevance of the White Cube. DiMichele may have broken the spell of the White Cube in order to critique monolithic forms of art presentation and reveal the usurpation of cultural authority over an artist's visibility via the internet. A ruin, though, always has the potential for yielding new possibilities. While the notion of seeing art non habeas corpus is troubling for many, at a time when thousands of artists want their fifteen minutes of fame, competition for gallery space is fierce, and resources more and more limited, artists like DiMichele might just be saving the idea of art.



[1] O'Doherty, Brian(1986), Inside the White Cube, Santa Monica, San Francisco: The Lapis Press, p. 7

[2] Baudrillard, Jean (2005), The Conspiracy of Art, New York: Semiotext(e), p. 91

[3] Edensor, Tim (2005), Industrial Ruins, Oxford, New York: Berg, p. 139