2008/2009 Working Artists Project

MARIA ARTEMIS

Events that Rhyme

Installation View, Events that Rhyme

Events that Rhyme
Essay by Dr. Jerry Cullum

“Consciousness is a cause for wonder,” Maria Artemis writes in her description of Events That Rhyme. (This title of her exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCA GA) is taken from Italo Calvino’s Six Memos for the Next Millennium.)
Taken together, the title and the resonant epigram sum up a significant part of Artemis’ lifetime artistic commitment: her work has always been an exploration of consciousness and its relationship to the physical world, including the body that informs it; her work has always been also an exploration of the subtle web of connections that link the structurally parallel events of seemingly independent systems. The chemical bonds and molecular underpinnings of the mineral world are not unlike the invisible relations that maintain the complex ecological networks of living organisms and the mutual comprehensions that form a human society.

Hence three of the four works in Events That Rhyme are given resonant Greek titles, words such as kairos, the word for time that implies decision as well as duration, and aporia, a term for the not yet discovered or (occasionally) the undiscoverable. The final term is hermeion, a gift from the divine that is named after Hermes, the trickster god of communications and linkages. (One might note that Lewis Hyde’s Trickster Makes This World is the title of another book whose ideas went into the hypotheses behind this exhibition.)

The fragrant gifts of Hermeion’s figwood and beeswax sit atop a vessel form that will recur often throughout the exhibition. Though this is clearly a boat, a hull with a keel, it is also the prototype for a shape that is a metaphorical vessel of passage rather than a literal one: it is, in the Events That Rhyme video, a boat-shaped window into another world or a more intimately distant part of the present one. My paradoxical language here is deliberate: the aporias of this ambitious video are considerable, as large in concept as their neighbor sculpture Aporias is in physical scale.

Aporia is an immense, disorienting wooden model of a crystalline structure. The vertices of the open latticework meet at 109-degree angles, and their visual relations change dramatically as the viewer changes physical position. The dominating presence of this work of basswood and steel is carefully thought out: if Hermeion is a humanly scaled gift to humanity, Aporia is a challenge to the viewer’s own sense of bodily significance. Despite the limited size imposed in such phenomena as crystallization, the mineral world that underlies and is contained within our own bodies is bigger than we are.

Kairos is a collision of contrasting forms in the stasis of carved stone. The black granite that forms the base contains a vortex shape that implies motion and change within its immobility. The white granite vessel form that balances precariously (though with engineered stability) upon it is, again, conceived of as presenting an opening rather than a contending solidity; despite its emphatic materiality, Artemis conceives it as an emblem of discovery through a sort of aperture, or a space that leads elsewhere.

The suggestion of a vacant vehicle for journeying fits, however vertiginously, into this set of immaterial relations implicit in the interaction between two distinctly opposing material objects. Artemis views them not as objects but as metaphors for forces. This is a paradoxical balance between thought and material solidity, between the real and the ideal when the latter is viewed as the imaginative perception of the real structures behind our perceptually obvious reality.

Living nature invades the gallery in an elegantly rounded bed of moss adjacent to the stones that have been endowed with a metaphorical energy. The moss is misted twice during each cycle of the Events That Rhyme video, the mechanism controlled by particular parts of the soundtrack. In this manner, an actual fragment of the web of life is sustained in an artificial environment by a transient manifestation of light and sound that presents images of, indeed, structurally rhyming events.

From skies and weather systems to wave interference patterns in bodies of water, from the shape of amethyst crystals to the angle of the neck of a wading egret, there are subtle repetitions that reveal that nature has a surprisingly limited repertoire of underlying shapes within which it fashions an immense array of gaseous, liquid, crystalline, and organic forms.
The video’s sweeps and dissolves present these forms in vivid interplay. The vessel shape drifts downward across the screen with regularity, revealing a different perspective within its boundaries.

As always in Artemis’s installations, the forms within each of the works are surpassingly beautiful. The visual qualities of materials and the visual impact of individual geometric relations and overall proportions have always been important to her, as is attested by public sculptures on view in the Atlanta metropolitan area from the campus of Agnes Scott College to Gwinnett County’s newest LEED-certified library.

But the ideas behind the beautiful shapes have always been primary. This marriage of physical form with ambitiously intellectual content has been and remains a method of exploration, an aesthetic of completion that nevertheless remains quintessentially tentative. The work is left open to something more, and one feels that the events that rhyme in the MOCA GA show could be joined by further exemplars in the future.
The visual metaphors of this particular decisive moment, this gift from immaterial mind, tie together loosely but definitively. Artemis quotes sculptor Martin Puryear’s insight regarding this: “Coherence is not the same as resolution. The most interesting art for me retains a flickering quality, where opposed ideas can be retained in tense coexistence.”

- Dr. Jerry Cullum

Kairos
2009
Granite
120 x 48 x 72 inches