
In show, controlled chaos

By Cate McQuaid

Globe Correspondent / November 14, 2010

PROVIDENCE — “Collision,” a collaborative exhibit featuring the work of 17 artists, was only partway up at the Rhode Island School of Design’s Museum of Art early last week — it opened Friday — and it was already living up to its name.

Lucky DeBellevue had placed a small, blue wall sculpture on top of Jeffrey Gibson’s installation of black-and-white prints, which covers an entire wall around a balcony overlooking the gallery. Franklin Evans had hung a curtain of floor-length tape, festooning the balcony and improbably adorning Gibson’s prints. Across the space, Marilyn Minter’s “Green Pink Caviar,” a video projection of a tongue licking bright candy, cut high across a corner and fell over Jackie Saccoccio’s calligraphic wall drawing. Its light bounced off Susan Jennings’s shiny, crystalline “Flow(ers),” suspended from the ceiling, which set reflective dots whirling through the space.

In “Collision,” art works, and artists, collide. The artists are inspired by one another’s pieces, and sometimes layer their own right on top. It’s improvisational. And the museum rolls with it.

“The installation people want to know how big something is,” said Judith Tannenbaum, the RISD museum’s curator of contemporary art. “But a lot changes. The Susan Jennings piece: On the checklist, it was one hanging sculpture.”

Now it’s several. “I didn’t have a clue about that,” said Tannenbaum.

DeBellevue was up from New York, working with the installation crew and artist-organizer Saccoccio to install his untitled three-panel net made of glittering pipe cleaners in the museum’s Lower Farago Gallery, the vaulting exhibition space that welcomes visitors who come in the Benefit Street entrance.

“It’s freeing to work this way,” DeBellevue said as he made sure his netted panels, strung up to fixtures on the high ceiling, were plumb. “There aren’t any rules. You can do something over other people’s work. You can do anything you want.”

He’s done it before. DeBellevue was one of 15 artists involved in Saccoccio’s 2008 project “Blue Balls,” at the Art Production Fund’s APF LAB in New York. Tannenbaum saw it, and invited Saccoccio up to Providence. All 15 “Blue Balls” artists signed on for “Collision,” and Saccoccio brought in two more.

Even when she’s the only artist in the gallery, Saccoccio is orchestrating the fertile chaos of “Collision,” shooting photos of the space with her phone, sending them to artists who can’t make it to Providence but are directing their contribution from afar, and implementing their plans.

“She’s the hinge around everything and everyone,” collaborator Nader Tehrani said, watching her work with the installation crew. “She brings the accidents and the subconscious compositions together.”

Surprises and unexpected juxtapositions often steer a work of art, and indeed, entire environments.

“Walk through the streets of Rome, and you see different civilizations, medieval next to Baroque, and contemporary shops, neon, high design,” says Saccoccio. “A show like this can be a very accelerated version of that, a several-week layering of happenings.”

Those happenings include an array of mediums and content, from Saccoccio’s gestural, abstract wall painting to Doug Wada’s photo-realist paintings of trash bags to Carl D’Alvia’s sculptures that merge animal and man-made. They are held together in a frame that alludes to the structure of the gallery. That element was designed by Tehrani,

a principal of the Boston architectural firm Office dA, Inc.

Passing through the foyer and along the roped-off edge of the gallery, Tehrani pointed to the high ceiling, where ductwork, pipes, and lighting tracks are laid bare. His architectural frame followed the lines already visible in the space: Black bars fall down the walls from the ceiling along the same path cut by ducts. “We’re implicating the ceiling, the world of services, implicating this space as a total environment,” he said.

Saccoccio’s wall piece dances over Tehrani’s bars; she painted with black, calligraphic gestures against the white wall, creating white negatives of them over Tehrani’s black passages. Their work passes over that of the late Michel Majerus, whose estate authorized the use of his textual wall painting. It reads “What Looks Good Today Might Not Look Good Tomorrow,” a fitting sentiment for the “Collision” process.

The enterprise is a risky one for an art museum. Curators never know exactly how an exhibit will look until it has been mounted, but this show takes that uncertainty to an extreme. Still, Tannenbaum is sanguine. “It’s my role to experiment,” she said. “This is a show about exhibition making.”

She points out that RISD Museum was a pioneer of the artist-curated exhibit, letting Andy Warhol loose in its collection back in 1969.

“Seventeen artists. That’s complicated,” Tannenbaum said. “It’s hard to keep track of. And it’s exciting. That was the goal.”

Anticipating the final result isn’t the point, said Saccoccio.

“The installation is a performance. It doesn’t matter how it looks in the end. People have done a tremendous job reacting to the space. The installation is a remnant of the layers that have come before,” she said. “Like Rome.”

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