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Elevated Perspectives Artworks Along the High Line

By Martha Schwendener Aug. 7, 2014



Josh Kline's "Skittles" is part of the High Line's "Archeo" exhibition.

"Archeo" is this season's exhibition of artworks presented on the High Line, the elevated railway turned greenway on the West Side of Manhattan that has become a tourist magnet and emblem of gentrified New York. Shortening the word "archaeology," the exhibition of outdoor sculpture by seven contemporary artists focuses on technology and obsolescence. It also provides some connection with the history and culture of the High Line, which, with its carefully selected benches and botanicals, can otherwise feel like a detached people mover carrying you through a bucolic landscape in the sky.

One of the most successful installations is Marianne Vitale's "Common Crossings," a lineup of five elongated sculptures installed near 24th Street. The sculptures are made from the steel components of railroad switches known as frogs. Ms. Vitale has rotated the frogs vertically, so that they look vaguely anthropomorphic, or like totems.

Ms. Vitale's railroad components pointedly conjure the history of the High Line itself, but sometimes in less obvious ways. The elevated tracks were built in the 1920s and '30s because 10th Avenue, nicknamed Death Avenue, had been the scene of a number of train accidents; the avenue had its own "cowboys," waving red flags to warn pedestrians. Ms. Vitale's repurposed rails feel in this context like grave steles or memorials.

After the High Line fell out of service (its website says the last working train, pulling three carloads of frozen turkeys, was in 1980), it became an overgrown urban ruin. Jessica Jackson Hutchins's neo-hippie sculptures conjure this moment, though it's unclear sometimes whether she's parodying or celebrating the commodification of back-to-nature counterculture (probably a bit of both). "Fountain," near 14th Street, is a stack of found ceramics sitting on an old seat cushion, nestled amid the greenery like a Japanese shrine. "Him and Me," just south of 26th Street, but below the walkway — you must lean over the railing to view it — is a pile of ceramics balanced on a hand-woven hammock that makes a kind of sly joke about leisure and display: Art rests while humans trudge dutifully along.

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Yngve Holen's and Isabelle Cornaro's sculptures are less enlivening. Mr. Holen's installation at 20th Street is made with washing-machine drums burrowed in the plants, a nature-and-consumer-culture juxtaposition that feels obvious and familiar. Similarly, Ms. Cornaro's rectilinear steel columns at the south end of the High Line look like restaurant decorations, with their cast-relief surfaces of ropes and bricks. (The placard accompanying the sculptures claims a link to 16th-century wunderkammers, or cabinets of curiosity, but this reference seems dubious.) Antoine Catala's "breathing" sculpture, a minimalist plinth with bean-shaped, pneumatic membrane installed just north of 26th Street, is also too subtle for this environment.

Across the bar from the Standard Hotel, Josh Kline takes the most activist stance. Critics of the Bloomberg-era, tourist-friendly "luxury" New York have cited the High Line as a prime indicator of uneven development. (The Arts & Labor group of Occupy Wall Street staged its first action on the High Line.) Mr. Kline's refrigerator filled with custom-made smoothies mimics the expensive "health" beverages found in delicatessens and gourmet markets. Ingredients listed on the front of the beverage containers veer among the material, political and poetic: "tourism, starbucks, sunglasses, metrocard, hotel soap, cupcake, cheesecake, cronut," and "sick day, dayquil, redbull, ritalin, claritin, aspirin, advil, aleve."

High Line works not part of the "Archeo" show include a contemporary classic: Peter Fischli and David Weiss's 1987 film "The Way Things Go," screened every evening at 7 near 14th Street. It features a linear Rube Goldberg contraption that functions a bit like a booby-trapped High Line.

Mark Dion's "A Field Guide and Handbook" of the High Line (for "Flâneurs, Cosmopolitans & Bon Vivants"), modeling itself after an old-fashioned nature pamphlet, tourist guide or etiquette manual, provides a smart, funny historical "guide" that mixes science and art, fact and fiction. You can buy it online or at Printed Matter on 10th Avenue.

Ed Ruscha was commissioned this year to create a two-dimensional work on the side of an apartment building on 22nd Street, visible on the High Line. The dark pink mural, executed by a professional sign painter, isn't one of Mr. Ruscha's best works. This one merely says, "Honey, I Twisted Through More Damn Traffic Today" (a statement taken from one of his pastel drawings from the 1970s). It also seems more fitting for Los Angeles; Mr. Ruscha is based there, and his work is most associated with that city. And yet, after twisting through the pedestrian traffic on this tourist confection, perhaps Mr. Ruscha, one of the subtlest and canniest commentators on postwar culture in contemporary art, has captured the ethos of the High Line.