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Populism, Technology and Interactivity

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Make no mistake: Grounds for Sculpture, the 42-acre public sculpture park in Hamilton, aims to be populist. Its mission, according to the organization's Web site, is to "promote an understanding of and appreciation for contemporary sculpture for all people."

Of the three temporary exhibitions currently on view, "Plugged In: Interactive Art in Electronic Media," installed in the mezzanine gallery of the Domestic Arts Building, makes the most promising stab at connecting art and the people. After all, technology is one of the few things Americans of diverse ages and backgrounds share, and technological developments, from the 19th-century invention of paint in tubes to 20th-century televisions, have inspired artists.

Technology is generally developed by experts, however — or inventors possessing great talent, perspicacity and ingenuity. The artists included in "Plugged In" don't feel like experts at all, either as artists or as technologists. Instead, the exhibition, organized by Christopher Ault, an associate professor of interactive media at the College of New Jersey, features his former classmates from the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University, a master's program dedicated, according to its Web site, to exploring "the imaginative use of communications technologies."

One of the more engaging works in the show is Daniel Shiffman's "Voronoi" (2008), a screen connected to a camera that captures the viewer's image and turns it into tessellated, mosaiclike fragments based on the mathematical Voronoi diagram. That the image comes into greater focus the longer a viewer stands in front of the work accounts for some of its appeal. On the whole, however, it is a fairly simplistic version of interactivity and technologically enhanced portraiture.

John Kuiphoff's "PaintPress" (2011) is also visually appealing but conceptually simplistic. It involves moving a computer mouse around a piece of fabric and watching bursts of color and light erupt on a monitor — think of Tinkerbell waving her wand in Disney animations, and you have the idea.

Another promising work is Heather Dewey-Hagborg's "Totem" (2010), a gypsum tower that records visitors' conversations and spits them out in fragmented form over the course of the exhibition. Unfortunately, the fragments of speech returned by the sculpture feel so random — and are so hard to hear — that the piece fails to connect human speech, meaning and technology in a profound fashion.

Similarly, "HTTB (ACTWED)" from 2011 by Philip Sanders — a colleague of Mr. Ault's at the College of New Jersey, rather than a fellow Interactive Telecommunications Program classmate — offers a panorama of digital images projected onto different surfaces, but the work ultimately shows us very little we have not seen in technology or installation art.

If "Plugged In" feels like a not-particularly-successful exhibition of student work, Daniel Henderson's exhibition, on the first floor of the Domestic Arts Building, suffers from different problems. Mr. Henderson, according to the brochure accompanying the exhibition, did not set out to become an artist; he started making objects in 2007 after a successful career in technology and digital communications.

(The brochure states that his prototype for a "picture phone," a system of receiving images via mobile phone developed in the early 1990s, is in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution.)

Although Mr. Henderson might be the most qualified person on the premises to consider imaginative uses for technology, his sculptures are based on a crudely conceived formula: supersize an old design object and recreate it in luxurious materials, particularly stone. So we have a "Princess Phone" (2008), sculptured out of Iranian pink onyx; an old gas pump made with black marble; and a Marconi radio crafted with French Rouge du Roi marble and other materials.

"Message in a Bottle" (2010), an oversize glass soda bottle placed on a mound of sand with a giant human footprint, is a particularly vapid statement; it feels like a companion piece to Nicholas Sparks's saccharine 1998 novel of the same title.

Mr. Henderson's sculptures borrow from a familiar vocabulary: the Pop output of Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and others. His "innovation" is to focus on the vintage and retro, and to remake these icons of yesteryear design with luxury materials. But while the early Pop masters created a sense of the uncanny with ordinary and everyday objects, Mr. Henderson's works register more like slick, nifty curiosities.

James Surls, an artist based in Colorado whose work is on view in the Museum Building, has been exhibiting his sculptures since the 1970s. His early work was couched in a Neo-Expressionist, Neo-Surrealist idiom that favored trees and other forms sprouting out of houselike structures, as well as disembodied eyes — fundamental Surrealist symbols — attached to sculptural appendages. "Forever Gone" (1999), a miniature house with a pine tree extending out of its pitched roof, is an example of this pleasingly weird, although not too weird, body of work.

Recent sculptures are considerably tamer. Flowers are one of Mr. Surls's current primary motifs, and he arranges, them, blown up like Mr. Henderson's design objects, carved from wood and attached to bronze armatures, in configurations that feel blandly decorative rather than mysterious, intriguing or ingenious.

Outside the museum buildings, Grounds for Sculpture's lush gardens and outdoor spaces feature more than 200 works by artists like Kiki Smith, Anthony Caro, Magdalena Abakanowicz and George Segal. Recently exhibitions in the Domestic Arts and Museum Buildings have featured sculpture by Keith Haring, Chakaia Booker and the clay masters Toshiko Takaezu and Peter Voulkos, and kinetic sculptures by George Rickey. This summer, however, the temporary exhibitions feel weak.

Next month, the museum opens a seven-acre outdoor sculpture gallery featuring more than 20 works by Steve Tobin. That may give art lovers something more to look forward to.

"Plugged In: Interactive Art in Electronic Media" and "Daniel Henderson: The Art of Invention," both through Sept. 18, and "James Surls: In Balance," through Oct. 2, are at Grounds for Sculpture, 18 Fairgrounds Road, Hamilton. Information: groundsforsculpture.org or (609) 586-0616.