JASON MIDDLEBROOK: ANOTHER WORLD

A leap into the digital world, drawing and painting transposed

Thursday, September 10-Saturday, November 21, 2020
Ruth C. Horton Gallery
Acclaimed for his complex, mesmerizing compositions, Jason Middlebrook is perhaps best known for his shimmering, sinuously lined or geometrically patterned paintings on planks of elm, maple, and other hardwoods—sculptural hybrids or “plank paintings” that exist somewhere between painting and sculpture. For this exhibition, Middlebrook explores an entirely different direction, moving from his hybrid three-dimensional sculptural work to an expansive two-dimensional wall work. The Moss Arts Center commissioned him to create a 17-by-25 ½-foot site-specific work of art along the longest wall of the Ruth C. Horton Gallery. Titled Another World, Middlebrook delved into new territory to create this new work, experimenting for the first time with merging his exceptional skill in drawing and painting with digital processes, and this at grand scale. While the artist has in the past created large-scale wall works—Tread Lightly (2014), for example, a monumental, 24-by-80-foot wall painting at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the project at the Moss Arts Center represents his first artistic endeavor at the intersection of art and the spectrum of digital possibilities.
Another World is a digital print on PhotoTex¹ derived from a meticulously rendered drawing made with pen, ink, graphite, colored pencils, and acrylic paint on cold-pressed 300-pound mixed media paper. Over the course of several months Middlebrook envisioned and conceptualized the work, developed it through numerous sketches, and in a labor-intensive process created a 40-by-60-inch, precise, densely inscribed, and vividly colored drawing. This was then scanned, digitally rendered on PhotoTex, and mounted to the gallery wall.

Panoramic with a rich density of flowing line, color, and patterning, Another World presents a visual journey in a grand sweep through multiple perspectives, intersecting and/or colliding formations, and points of view. The work’s imagery, inspired in part by the soaring architectural elements of the Moss Arts Center, is rooted in this world, though, sifted and transformed through the artist’s imagination. From one end to the other the imagery ventures beyond our immediately recognizable reality into another realm. It’s a complex, intriguing, and fluid landscape. In it, abstraction converges with representation; precise, hard-edged line with undulating forms. Hints of recognizable imagery—the angular, geometric forms of the Moss Arts Center’s glass windows and the spectacular, curvilinear architectural structures of the Anne and Ellen Fife Theatre ceiling; hints of cloudy skies, starry nights, and inflamed horizons—all vie for our attention then dissolve in a surging wave of rhythmic motion. And throughout, beams of brilliant color break through and streak across, electrifying the surface with scintillating optics. Here the natural and the artificial, nature and the manmade, order and chaos meld into, counterbalance, or contend with each other.

In one sense Another World is overwhelming on account of its grand scale; the composition’s complexity; and how line, form, and radiant color coalesce to mesmerizing effect. But in addition to the work’s beauty, it’s the catalytic energy of nature, beneath and above the surface, that generates a sense of wonder and awe—bringing to mind the 18th-century Romantic landscape painters and their evocation of the sublime. Beauty and awe are certainly some of what is at play here. But the subtext is one of our time, this time, and this moment: disruption. There is beauty and reverence here, for both nature and the built environment, but collision and upheaval circulate throughout.

What Middlebrook conveys through his exquisite drawing and compositional skills is a contested landscape, one in which the urban environment encroaches upon, butts up against, and/or crashes into nature.

¹PhotoTex is an adhesive polyester fabric material that can be printed on and adhered to smooth surfaces.
It’s the relationship of humankind to nature, however uplifting or fraught, that fascinates Middlebrook. But what also engages him is the astounding tenacity of nature, that throughout millennia has been irrepressible and resistant. Aztec pyramids give way to the jungle and, as Middlebrook has commented, however built over our world becomes, greenery eventually emerges through cracks in the concrete. Despite the perilous state of our natural environment today, the message here is one of optimism—of endurance, resilience, and perseverance. These metaphors and ideas aside, Another World presents us with a visual “tour de force” that invites viewers into another place—an imagined and multi-layered one, a place of both invention and thought, but also a place of inspiration, visual complexity, and delight.

Margo Ann Crutchfield
Curator at Large

Jason Middlebrook (b. 1966 in Jackson, Michigan)
Lives and works in Hudson, New York

Jason Middlebrook is a nationally acclaimed artist whose work has been shown extensively throughout the United States with exhibitions at major museums, including the New Museum in New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, among others. Middlebrook’s work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), and the Princeton University Art Museum, among others.


For more information, please visit milesmcenery.com/artists/jason-middlebrook and jasonmiddlebrook.com.
ALSO ON VIEW

Art and Social Conscience
Calling attention to socio/political issues and the need for change

CAUSE COLLECTIVE: In Search of the Truth
Ryan Alexiev, Jim Ricks, Hank Willis Thomas, Jorge Sanchez, and Will Sylvester
Francis T. Eck Exhibition Corridor
Thursday, September 10-Saturday, October 10, 2020

A video installation of concise thoughts and observations by individuals from across the globe grappling with one of the most pertinent social, political, and philosophical issues of our times: what the truth is and what it means.

22 Steps
Thursday, September 10-Saturday, November 21, 2020

Rendered in text on the Moss Arts Center’s stairs is a pertinent statement by Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis (1940-2020) from Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change, paying attention to and reflecting our country’s ongoing struggle for social justice.

Four Freedoms
Hank Willis Thomas and Emily Shur in collaboration with Eric Gottesman and Wyatt Gallery of For Freedom
Francis T. Eck Exhibition Corridor
Thursday, October 15-Saturday, November 21, 2020

A call to action; re-envisioning Americana: a more diverse, inclusive, and humane society.

A photographic installation of works from 2016 to present by renowned activist Hank Willis Thomas and photographer Emily Shur redresses the absence of multiple peoples and cultural narratives in Norman Rockwell’s iconic paintings, while opening up, exploring, and encouraging deeper discussion of what freedom in the 21st century is and can be.

Student Arts Spotlight

Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery and Sherwood Payne Quillen ’71 Reception Gallery
Thursday, October 8-Wednesday, November 18, 2020

The Moss Arts Center Student Ambassadors present a selection of works by Virginia Tech students from numerous majors and class years in a celebration of creativity and diversity of perspectives and inspirations.

Another World, 2020
Digital print on PhotoTex
17 x 25 ½ feet
On view at the Moss Arts Center
For the most up to date gallery hours and for more information about exhibitions and events, please visit artscenter.vt.edu.

To schedule a tour or class visit, please contact Meggin Hicklin, exhibitions program manager, at megh79@vt.edu.

For more information about exhibitions and events:

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