

art & photo

Yurts and Stalagmites

Outdoor sculpture as more than decorative object or propaganda tool

by Jerry Saltz

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Socrates Sculpture Park
Emerging Artist Fellowship Exhibition
32-01 Vernon Boulevard
Long Island City
Through March 4, 2007

The great sculptor Mark Di Suvero should be given some sort of presidential metal for his amazing generosity. Twenty years ago this maverick broke ground on a breathtaking triangular piece of Long Island City waterfront across from East Harlem, on what had been an abandoned landfill and an illegal dumpsite. On this plot, he established the four and a half utopian acres known as Socrates Sculpture Park. Since 1986, over 500 artists have been featured in more than 50 exhibitions there.

The current show of 20 emerging artists is more than good enough to prove that my own personal truism, "Ninety-nine percent of all public sculpture is crap," may no longer be accurate. Almost all of the art here is coming from artists who are interested in outdoor sculpture as more than a decorative object or tedious propaganda tool. This auspicious trend has been amplified of late by organizations like Public Art Fund, the Sculpture Center, Art in General, and Creative Time, all of whom have been getting public sculpture into the world in exciting, innovative ways.

At Socrates, nearly every piece provides a jolt: the totem sculpture by Martha Friedman; the dumpsters by Cal Lane; the crotched park bench by Heather Hart; the miniature shanties by Rachel Champion; the Pepto-Bismol-colored yurt by William Bryan Purcell; the obdurate stalagmite by Rudy Shepherd; and the Peanuts cartoon crashed to earth by Ian Cooper. Also outstanding is Ethan Breckenridge's M.C. Escher-like labyrinthal sculpture, Mamiko Otsubo's beautiful teeny modernist homes on stilts, and Nicholas Herman's modular meteorite. Snoop around and you'll bump into other excellent pieces. In one of these, Fabienne Lasserre manages to riff on one of modernism's most revisited objects, Merit Oppenheim's surrealist fur-lined teacup. Lasserre, narrowly avoiding cliché, combines Magritte and Freud, and covers an entire tree trunk and sundry branches in fur. It's wild, witty, and subtle . . . like a lot of work here.