

The B Section

FEATURES, ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT, AND MORE! • MARCH 1, 2001

THE JOHNS HOPKINS
NEWS-LETTER

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BodySpace breaks art world boundaries

BY CAROLINE M. SAFFER
THE JOHNS HOPKINS NEWS-LETTER

I generally try not to cover exhibitions at the same museum in so close a time frame, but after looking over materials concerning the Baltimore Museum of Art's latest, *BodySpace*, I recognized a show in need of immediate coverage. So, last Friday, off I went to the BMA, where I encountered one of the most unusual exhibits I have yet to be exposed to over the course of my relatively short study of art history.

I would consider *BodySpace* to be better experienced first-hand than described by someone who has already seen it, but perhaps I can illustrate several points about the show that might induce my readers to give it a try. *BodySpace*, viewed holistically, seems to concentrate more upon conception than upon image; it presents not a prolific number of works, but a carefully chosen few that best illuminate the artistic ideas and philosophies that the exhibit strives to portray.

The show includes works from the past decade by nine contemporary artists from around the globe, and most fundamentally focuses on the way that each work "engages the physical body of the viewer, calling into question the relations between viewer and object and viewer and space," hence the title of the exhibition. *BodySpace* also raises questions on object perception, the boundary between public and private, and the difference between art and non-art objects.

These themes, all nested within a minimalist setting and style, present a challenge to the viewer, yet leave so much room for contemplation and imagination. I don't think I have ever been to a museum exhibition in which so much open conversation among the viewers about the works was taking place. Somehow, the BMA has a way of consistently breaking down the boundary between viewer and museum, making its galleries places of creative perusal, rather than austere formality.

The most prominent and provoking works in *BodySpace* are multimedia and largely three-dimensional. Over the last several months, installation work (such as that seen in this exhibit) has become one of my favorite art forms, probably for a few of the very reasons that *BodySpace* attempts to explore: the frequent use of "common" objects, the breakdown between the audience and the art, the possibility for experimentation.

The second work that probably catches most viewers' attention im-

mediately upon entering the first gallery is *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home* (1999) by the Korean artist Do-Ho Suh, a "to-scale replica of a traditional 18th-century Korean home" made of sewn silk and metal armatures. The reason I note *Seoul Home* as second is because of another installation of a closet-like bathroom, also by Suh and fashioned of silk, that actually spills out of the exhibition space, almost startling the viewer as he or she enters the galleries. *Seoul Home* has a sense of being less a solid entity than a product of the artist's imagination.

The gigantic structure is suspended from the ceiling, forcing viewers to situate themselves beneath it and look straight up to examine the work, and the fluid texture and translucent, sea-green color of the silk enhance the feeling of weightlessness. All the features of the house — windows, doors, fixtures, even the rafters of the roof — are rendered in simple, yet exquisite, details through the lines of sewing. One of the aspects of *Seoul Home* that particularly intrigued me was the way the ultra-modern presentation seemed to conflict with its older subject matter.

Do-Ho Suh reconciles these consistencies by using them to his ad-

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vantage to address the influence of one's native culture and ancestry, even within modern existence.

One work that was at first nearly lost in my periphery was Claudia Matzko's *Salt Wall* (1999), due to the way it melds so naturally with the

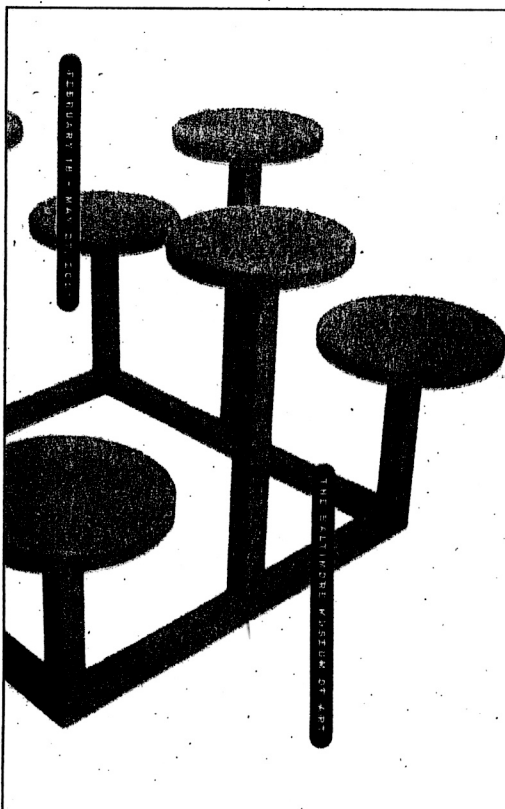
existing gallery wall. *Salt Wall* is exactly what its title describes it to be, comprised of several hundred tiles formed of salt and placed together in a grid form. The idea of mass-production (such as that originally propagated by Warhol) is both present and yet denied through the evidence of the artist's hand on each individual tile; despite their initial clinical sense, this work was made entirely from raw, natural materials and human creativity and persistence, without any interference by machines.

Most of the works in the exhibition are characterized by the use of one or two colors and a sense of rational orders, which brings about a sense of freedom in the viewer's interpretations of the work through its very constraints. *Untitled (White)* (2000) by Josiah McEleny certainly embodies these qualities, in addition to being an engaging piece concerning the difference between art and craft. *Untitled (White)* is comprised of a multi-leveled, grid-like shelf upon which more than 50 pieces of hand-blown glasswork are arranged. The combination of the hard geometry of the opaque, white-painted wood shelf against the soft, shining curves of the glassware create a stunning contrast.

You have to wonder why you're not as intrigued when confronted with a similar presentation in a place like the Pottery Barn. Is it because of the sheer variety, the whimsical shapes, ranging from a perfect egg to an upside-down beehive, of these vases, goblets and other vessels? Or is it because McEleny's creation is placed in a museum, as an installation piece, that we are able to view it as art?

Not all of the works in *BodySpace* are quite so monumental — in fact, I won't even go into Ernesto Neto's *Sister Naves* (1999), the only work to take up an entire room with its structure like a fantasy insect structure out of Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*. The exhibit also includes some smaller installation work, drawings and photography.

In *Untitled* (2000) by Robert Gober, a sketch of a hand with a large sink drain in the center of the palm,



COURTESY OF THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART
David Schafer's "Stepped Density," 2000 is part of the BMA's *BodySpace* exhibit

the artist seems to question not so much how a human interacts with objects, but more so how a human is like the objects with which he or she interacts. After all, humans have their own facilities for drainage, for both physical and emotional needs. Also, there is a series of eight black-and-white photographs of sand [*Untitled (Sand)*] (1993-1994) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres in the last gallery, the "Reading Room" of *BodySpace*, which ends the exhibit on a pleasantly provocative, if somewhat traditional, note.

In addition to the involvement of all five senses, as well as the mind and imagination, that which this exhibition demands, the multi-national aspect of the artists of *BodySpace* is a particularly attractive part of the exhibit, giving viewers a chance to see the way that artists from completely different cultural backgrounds can nevertheless come together under certain themes explored and shared

by all humanity. In the same way, encourage viewers, especially those used to more traditional modes of art, to venture into *BodySpace*. *BodySpace* is a fresh, concise view of many current issues in contemporary art, a look at the direction in which the art world is moving, and the ways that we, the viewers, can continue to relate to works of art physically, mentally and emotionally, as they evolve into a new era.

BodySpace will be on display through May 27 at The Baltimore Museum of Art, located on Art Museum Drive, just behind Shriver Hall. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, admission is free for JHU students with ID.

Also, check out free events and lectures at the BMA on the permanent collection and ongoing exhibits each month. Call 410-396-7100 or log onto <http://www.artbma.org> for more information.