

ARTS | NEW JERSEY

Strange Sculptures Are a Surrealist Mystery

At the Hunterdon Museum, Juxtaposition of Materials and Memories

“Material Traces,” the exhibition of Marion Held’s work currently at the Hunterdon Art Museum, is well worth seeing for its own sake. It also provides a journey into one of the stranger sculptural psyches at work today in New Jersey.

ART REVIEW

**BENJAMIN
GENOCCHIO**

The show spills out of the downstairs gallery into the lobby, where you will find “Teeth” (2004), consisting of a row of large ceramic teeth installed inside a set of oversize cast-rubber jaws. It is a bizarre work, at once archaic and modern, immediately accessible and yet deeply puzzling. It puts one in mind of archeological displays of human remains — or a visit to the dentist.

It also suggests both memory and loss, themes that recur throughout the dozen or so pieces on display.

Ms. Held’s sculptures, and drawings in both charcoal and pencil, are tender but unsentimental. Her work is often humorous, but compassionate. I would even characterize it as elegiac, which might explain why it stays with you long after you have left the show.

The featured work is from 1997 to the present, assembled for the show by Carol Rosen, a guest curator.

The mystery in Ms. Held’s work derives in large measure from the incongruous juxtaposition of various objects. In “Well” (2006), for instance, a painted Senegalese “water bag,” traditionally used for collecting water from wells, rests on a table surrounded by spoons. How these objects relate to one another

“Marion Held: Material Traces,” Hunterdon Art Museum, 7 Lower Center Street, Clinton, through Sept. 13; (908) 735-8415 or hunterdonartmuseum.org.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

CONTRAST In “Material Traces,” Marion Held mixes disparate materials.

and what they mean is not entirely clear.

Nor can I say that I understand the meaning behind “Crib” (1997), the oldest piece in the show, in which a metal crib is filled with rough black stoneware pods, haphazardly fashioned, some of them wrapped in rubber straps or cotton thread. The range of associations evoked is broad — childhood, death, migration. This is teasing, thought-provoking art akin to Theater of the Absurd.

Surrealism comes to mind throughout the show, as much a result of the art-

**An exhibit that evokes
Miró’s biomorphic art
asks viewers to find their
own meaning.**

ist’s use of playful and unexpected juxtaposition as for her use of biomorphic forms — painted, drawn or sculptured imagery suggestive of living organisms. Her charcoal and pencil drawings in particular are reminiscent at times of paintings by the surrealist Joan Miró, who was famous for his biomorphic imagery.

Ms. Held’s art is also surrealist in its emphasis on the subconscious significance of its objects and imagery, leaving it up to viewers to find their own meaning. It doesn’t help that the exhibition lacks a catalog, or that the explanatory wall text tells viewers that the artist’s work is “never specific.”

Even a statement by the artist on her Web site, marionheld.com, offers precious little insight into her thinking: “My sculpture has the intensity of old bones; almost real, but actually without any corollary in the material world.” Ms. Held, who lives in Montclair, also talks about her art “posing questions.” Navigating this show is like feeling your way in the dark.

If you come here looking for answers or meaning, you’ll leave empty-handed. But come with an openness to entertainingly experimental art and you will find much to mull over and admire, like “Hiddenness” (2003), in which found objects are partly submerged in cast rubber on a table with a built-in light. The sumptuous amber color of the illuminated rubber oozes a delightful physicality.

Some of the sculptures are funny, such as “Splitting Hairs” (2007), in which a tuft of hair seems to be growing out of a chunk of cast rubber. But others feel more despairing, such as “Bone Buggies” (2001), consisting of a pair of dilapidated baby carriages containing what appear to be skeletal remains, made of stone and cast rubber. This piece seems to embody death, or a memory of long-lost happiness.

Gazing at a sculpture like “Bone Buggies,” I can imagine that the exhibition might horrify some viewers. Ms. Held’s work seems to be an art born of suffering. But it is also an art of liberation, in which the artist has apparently broken with the emotions that inspired the work. Is making art a kind of therapy for the artist? I don’t know, but Ms. Held is certainly a master at imbuing random materials with psychological richness.