

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today: Cloudy, afternoon showers, high 53. Tonight, an early shower, low 46. Tomorrow, continued mild, cloudy, high 56. Yesterday, high 58, low 37. Details and weather map, Page 33.

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

ART REVIEW

From Moscow To the Bergen Mall



By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

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SO where do you go to see the work of funky, young American artists? You go to the Bergen Museum of Art and Science, of course, the only museum in New Jersey (and maybe the world) that shares its digs with a Burger King, a Gap and a Saks Fifth Avenue.

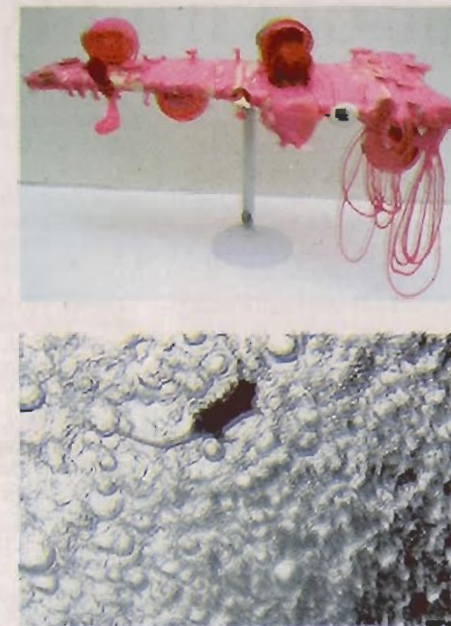
It's in the basement here at the Bergen Mall, a temporary fix after the museum was booted out of its building by Bergen County seven years ago; the museum is still looking for a new home.

Pity, then, that it doesn't matter how good the show is because the site overwhelms the visitor. Just about anything would look bad in here, a crypt with cheap linoleum floors, low ceilings and fluorescent lights. The volunteer staff has done its best, but the space still looks like a place the government stows enemy combatants.

Putting this out of mind if you are able, the selection of artists and works by the freelance curator Natalia Kolodzei is deeply entertaining. The show includes nine artists, most of whom are among the most talked about of a younger generation in America. Most of them live in New York City, with the happy exception of Sarah Sweeney, who lives and works in New Brunswick. It is good to see local talent make the cut.

The exhibition arrives at the Bergen Mall after an unexpected stop at a museum in Moscow, where it was received with enthusiasm, according to several news clippings displayed in the gallery. Ms. Kolodzei, a Russian immigrant living in New Jersey, arranged for the Moscow show, her family's foundation helping to cover touring costs. She hopes to do other collaborations between the two countries.

Ms. Kolodzei has avoided darker, more political material, including anything to do with the current war — which will no doubt appeal to other possible national tour sites.



Left, Julian Montague's installation "The Stray Shopping Cart"; top, a sculpture by Jon-Paul Villegas; and Adam John Stennett's video "Mouse Swimming Overhead" at the Bergen Mall in Paramus.

Still, the exhibition has a lot of fresh and energetic new work, including several of Jon-Paul Villegas's wonky, brightly painted sculptures made to resemble melted home appliances. They are nifty.

Mr. Villegas's sculptures are easy to love — they are radiantly colorful, slickly crafty and possess an ephemeral beauty that is soothing and invigorating. These objects are designed to give you pleasure, and perhaps think just a little. He is an art-world darling, loved by critics and hounded by the market, for which he can never produce enough. This is stuff for a very modernist mantelpiece.

There is also some more conceptual fare, like documentation from Julian Montague's installation "The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification" (2002-4). The project consists of hundreds of itemized, carefully classified photographs of shopping carts abandoned throughout America, mostly in suburban areas. The result is a detailed taxonomy of the stray shopping cart. Cool.

Mr. Montague, as far as I know, has never sourced material for his project in New Jersey. He should be unleashed on the Garden State (courtesy of an obliging museum), where, I well imagine, there are thousands of disused and dumped shopping carts. He might even expand his project to include other symbols of urban blight, like abandoned factories and businesses, or boarded-up storefronts.

Then there is Adam John Stennett's nine-minute video of a mouse swimming. It doesn't sound like much, I know, but shot from overhead it has an almost unnerving degree of tension, with the little rodent's life seemingly hanging in the balance. You watch just to see what happens, which when thinking about it now, seems kind of cruel. I guess that's the point, or at least something to think about here.

The exhibition has been cut down by a third from its Moscow showing, better to fit the space at the Bergen Mall. With around 50 works, it is still probably too large, but it doesn't feel like it, courtesy of some sensitive positioning — notwithstanding the intrusive presence of a grand piano and several permanently displayed dollhouses. The artists, curator and artworks deserved so much better than this.

"Young American Artists of Today," Bergen Museum of Art and Science, Bergen Mall (Lower Promenade), Route 4 East, Paramus, through March 11. Information: (201) 291-8848 or www.thebergenmuseum.com.