

'The Recognitions' at Fireplace Project

By Janet Goleas

(07/10/2007) In "The Recognitions," curated by the artist and East Hampton resident David Salle, the Fireplace Project in Springs pays homage to the book of the same name by William Gaddis.

When Gaddis released "The Recognitions," his first novel, in 1955, it outraged reviewers, inciting critical angst ranging from detached respect to outright contempt. This dark, panoramic satire traverses a backdrop of fraud and counterfeiting as Wyatt Gwyon, a frustrated painter, resorts to art forgery in the pursuit of truth and aesthetic beauty. Dozens of characters pass through a web of literary allusions and metaphors for authenticity and artifice, futility, cunning, madness, and anarchy.

In the end, Gaddis, who died at home in East Hampton in 1998, had created a novel that revolutionized language with its elastic narrative and sprawling structure. It is widely considered a masterpiece of 20th-century American literature.

The works selected by Mr. Salle in this, his first curatorial venture since 1979, address some of the same themes employed in the landmark novel — four small sculptures by Gary Stephan, for example, which are positioned on a large platform in the center of the gallery.

Stark and rudimentary, the works are variously made of rocks, crushed tin foil, slices of cardboard, and other scraps of daily life. They are deceptively simple. The artist has sprinkled the pieces with black spray paint and dribbles of color. In "Reservoir" (2005), watery blue acrylic paint has puddled up in the fragmented trough of what looks like an upended cereal box.

Hmmm. These works seem to possess none of the hallmarks of fine art. They're crude and provisional, as if clinging to the underbelly of meaning. Recently Mr. Stephan recalled meeting a vendor in Mexico whose sole inventory was limited to an old piece of wood to which two rocks were connected by wires. "What is it?" asked Mr. Stephan.

between meanings.

David Salle's first curatorial venture since 1979 provocatively addresses the themes of a William Gaddis novel.

"It's a stereo," said the man. "These are the speakers," he said, pointing to the stones.

"I remember that moment," Mr. Stephan said. "The lack of affect — the truthfulness of that object and his belief in it — it was unforgettable." He has sought that level of candor in his art since then.

Not unlike Mr. Stephan's, the sculptures of Antoni Llena and Rachel Feinstein owe a debt to Italy's arte-povera, one of that country's most significant aesthetic movements. Translated, the term means "poor art." It refers not to impoverished artists, but to a complete openness in the use and choice of materials that moves far beyond the conventions of oil paint,



"Summer Cottage" by Maureen Gallace at the Fireplace Project in Springs

cast bronze, or polished marble.

In Ms. Llena's sculpture "No. 1 (Ciego/De Luminas/Barba)" (2006), a shred of green foam is balanced at the tips of two wedges of pine. At the top, an expanse of crackled packing tape careens down, cascading over torn paper to meet a finger-shaped bundle of rubber that lies at the edge of a tiny dead end. The results are surprising, as if the work has somehow transcended its own humility, which is considerable.

Similarly, the bulbous plaster forms and hammer shapes in Ms. Feinstein's sculptures are ingenuous and ungainly. Slouched across pedestals or leaning nonchalantly on the floor, they too slip like a moving target in. Also eschewing the hubris and monumentality of much modern sculpture, Vincent Fecteau makes models, structuring quasi-architectural forms from lowly materials such as foam core, papier-maché, and balsa wood. In "Untitled" (2001), a slanted, boxy form is carpeted with burlap. Its angles rise to a convoluted top punctuated with an empty roll of toilet paper and a tongue depressor that stand at the edge like tourists peering over the blacktop roof of an urban mastaba.

Likewise, Hans-Peter Feldman has explored undervalued aesthetic strategies such as vacation photos and family albums. Here, the artist assembled a wall of glossy photographs depicting blue sky and bright white clouds that examine and archive the conceptual side of collective memory.

Jack Pierson, whose métier ranges from photography to drawings and word art, contemplates themes of isolation and melancholy, desire, eroticism, and the legends of personal history. His "Self Portrait #6" (2003), from a series first shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial, makes reference to a type of carnal fundamentalism apropos of personal longing and love.

Two painters, Suzanne Joelson and Amy Sillman, explore interpersonal fictions. Ms. Joelson designs and produces handkerchiefs based on friends' faces. Only after they've been used and crumpled up do the handkerchiefs become the subject matter for her abstract paintings. For Ms. Sillman, the narrative is more subliminal, as if she is exposing transient mental images that have been captured mid-thought.

Shane Campbell wrestles his paint to the surface with muscular, writhing strokes, and Maureen Gallace's landscapes are deliberate, contemplative, and deeply intimate. In their own way, each of these artists is a storyteller, and, like Mr. Gwyon, the "Recognitions" protagonist, in pursuit of an ultimate truth of their own making.

Like the myriad characters that advance Mr. Gaddis's story through narration, the actors in Catherine Sullivan's mesmerizing video "Chittenden Screen Tests" (2005) pass through layer after layer of emotional drama. The 16 actors who populate the screen float across glossy, wood-paneled offices and baroque living rooms in a hypnotic performance of twists and turns.

At the root of each gesture and grimace is a level of contrivance that precisely measures emotional response like a musical notation, the emotive content floating by in double exposures and mirror images. Sensual, subversive, and at the same time codified, Ms. Sullivan's work finds order in a world of overwhelming disorder.

Like the oscillations throughout the structure of Gaddis's book, overlapping sequences meld together in a hypnotic mélange of personalities, language, and desperate laughter.

Don't miss this provocative group show. It will be up through Wednesday.