

Marguerite Kahrl

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ART REVIEW

A Landfill in the Eyes Of Artists Who Beheld It

By KEN JOHNSON

The 2,200-acre Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island is said to be one of two man-made structures on earth visible to the naked eye from space. (The other, supposedly, is the Great Wall of China; the claims are denied by NASA.) Created in 1948, Fresh Kills was the brainchild of Robert Moses, who used it as part of a plan to have the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge built. In 1974 the landfill was ingesting half of all the garbage produced by New York City. In 1995 the Environmental Protection Agency estimated that it was generating almost 2 percent of all the world's methane. Today that gas is being extracted, bottled and sold for heating fuel. New York City's last landfill, Fresh Kills closed in March, only to reopen shortly after Sept. 11 to accept rubble from the destroyed World Trade Center buildings.

"*Fresh Kills: Artists Respond to the Closure of the Staten Island Landfill*" is at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island, (718) 448-2500, Ext. 260, through May 27.

These are just a few of the interesting facts you can learn by visiting "Fresh Kills: Artists Respond to the Closure of the Staten Island Landfill," an exhibition at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center's Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art.

Some of the works on view, by 19 artists and artist-teams, are also interesting, but the subject eclipses the art. Indeed, it makes you want to see a good documentary film (or read a good book) about Fresh Kills rather than sort through this rather confusing and uneven collection of paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos and conceptual works, some of which are directly about Fresh Kills while others deal more generally with environmental issues.

Quality aside, an exhibition like this highlights the problem of using art to raise consciousness about specific worldly matters. Often the degree to which art calls attention to itself as art is inversely related to its ability to illuminate the ostensible topic. That's the case, at least, with this show.

Consider, for example, Rackstraw Downes's beautiful panoramic canvas painted on site in 1993. A brief statement by the artist says that his picture represents a spectrum of ac-



Max Yawney/Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art

Marguerite Kahrl's vehicles were built from salvaged parts.

tivities at Fresh Kills from barges approaching on the water at the left to the unloading at docks in the middle to tractors hauling garbage-laden wagons uphill at the right. This is not uninformative, but the picture's most captivating qualities are painterly: the deft brushwork, the exhilarating evocation of light and space. If you really wanted to understand the processing of garbage at Fresh Kills, some kind of graphic diagram would be more useful.

Part of the problem with Fresh Kills as a subject for art is that most of it is not accessible to visual inspection; the real action, after all, is underground. There is a lot of docu-

mentary photography in the show, but none of it conveys the landfill's mind-boggling scale and complexity — physically, scientifically, historically or sociologically.

Perhaps, then, a more conceptual approach would work. Alexis Rockman, for example, produced for the show a series of watery, sepia-toned paintings on paper of animals that thrive on the margins of human civilization: raccoons, rats, cockroaches, flies and sea gulls, among others. This relates to the general topic of ecology, but there is a more specific connection: the pictures are made not from watercolor but from leachate, the noxious liquid that oozes out of landfills.

Where the leachate question is most impressively illuminated, however, is not in any work of art but in one of the many prolix text panels arranged throughout the show. Here we learn that in 1992, the Fresh Kills landfill was producing four million gallons of leachate every day.

Another conceptually driven project is Marguerite Kahrl's set of three small motorized, methane-fueled vehicles built from parts salvaged from dumps. Again, a relevant issue — recycling — is invoked, but what is more engaging than the environmentalist lesson is the mechanical and sculptural ingenuity of these little remote-controlled buggies. (You can see them in motion in a short video.)

Steven Siegel has created an impressive simulation of a section of a dump. Piled up in a gallery corner is a mountain of household rubbish — tires, television sets, bicycles, computer equipment, pots and pans, toys and on and on. Tacked to opposite walls are descriptive lists provided by people who donated to Mr. Siegel's project, including items like "a bunch of socks that don't match or fit" and "someone's Beanie Baby alligator." There is poetry in this, but if you consider what goes into and comes out of a real dump, it barely grazes the tip of the iceberg.

Other conceptualists deal with composting (Stacy Levy's "Composting Clock"); "sonic recycling" (recordings of ambient noise by Regine Beyer with John Hudak); amateur archaeology (Mark Dion's "Staten Island Bottle Collector's

Club," with headquarters in the Snug Harbor gatehouse); recycling, again (Anne-Katrin Spiess's didactic installation of cans, bottles and newspapers in glass cases); and the landfill as a metaphorical "Memory Field" (an installation of sound broadcasting ductwork and a simulated muddy dump surface by Sean O'Reilly).

If no one artist has come up with a vehicle imaginatively expansive enough to embrace fully the enormity of Fresh Kills and what it represents, the show, including all its text panels, does have a powerful cumulative effect. It's not what you might expect, however; what it arouses is not environmentalist militancy but curiosity and even awe.

One of the show's most revelatory moments comes in a three-screen video installation by the artist laureate of the New York Sanitation System, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and the filmmakers Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra. In a fascinating interview segment, a Fresh Kills engineer describes how methane is extracted. It is vacuumed out of wells sunk into the landfill, a process that must be carefully regulated because too much suction will bring in oxygen, upsetting the anaerobic process of methane production and producing underground fires.

One begins to imagine the landfill not just as a big, inert dump but as a giant, living and breathing organism, a kind of Frankenstein's monster, which, properly contained and cared for, might actually contribute to the well-being of the world.