

The New York Observer: 'Scrapyard Sculptures Charm, But Bronzed Bodies Disappoint', by Mario Naves, February 4th, 2007

Scrapyard Sculptures Charm, But Bronzed Bodies Disappoint



Courtesy of the Jack Tilton Gallery
Pliable geometry: Thomas Kiesewetter

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Out of the nine sculptures on view in Thomas Kiesewetter's second one-man show at the Jack Tilton Gallery, two stand out as so much better than the rest, so much more themselves.

To understand why, it helps to go back to the artist's American debut—one of the happier discoveries in recent memory—at Tilton's old Soho space in 2003. From his home base in Berlin, Mr. Kiesewetter recycles scrap metal—industrial bits and pieces whose original functions remain, for the layman, something of a mystery—into creations possessing a crude Constructivist vigor. Placed upon pedestals of the artist's making (unpainted wood often punctuated with knotholes), the sculptures exuded an endearing, almost folksy clunkiness; finesse was markedly absent.

It's an ungainly strain of comedy. Angles and planes are disjointed and askew; arcing lines bounce off straight and thrusting supports. Funnel-like shapes and sloping rectangular planks add up to a surprisingly pliable geometry. Mr. Kiesewetter's shapes, rhythms and tensions feel simultaneously offhand and choreographed, seemingly arbitrary and immaculately poised. Each piece strains dramatically against the limits of its constituent parts, like a drunken construction

crane or a ventilation duct attempting a pirouette.

The materials bring along with them a degree of loss and vulnerability—found objects often do, given that they've outlived their practical purpose. Mr. Kiesewetter thwarts nostalgia—the pitfall and sometime curse of those trading in secondhand ready-mades—by treating those materials casually, though not without affection. He does show an interest in historical patina, but his aim is transformation, not reiteration. He's an artist who believes in the independent viability of form.

Allusions to the figure are fairly obvious; Mr. Kiesewetter is only nominally an abstract artist. Certainly the sculptures are proportioned to the body, notwithstanding liberties in logic, and their verticality reinforces this suggestion. In these jaunty, muscular, kinetic accumulations of stuff, gesture counts for a lot.

The figural references can be straightforward: Several pieces have legs, one has arms, most are topped with heads (or something like them, anyway). Wild and slippery torsions bring to mind animal life: This piece has flippers, that one sniffs its rear end, another walks like a duck. There are moments (probably more than an admirer would like to admit) when the work becomes too literal or cartoonish. One sculpture could be cousin to a Keith Haring glyph—not good.

More auspiciously, Mr. Kiesewetter's art recalls the junkyard totems of Richard Stankiewicz and the welded-steel constructions of David Smith—artists who, for better and worse, never shook off the figure. Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, a grandiosely impractical architectural model that was never realized, has been cited as another key to understanding Mr. Kiesewetter's vision.

More to the point are the primitivist sculptures of Julio Gonzalez, the metal smith who significantly influenced (and taught welding to) his good friend and fellow Spaniard, Pablo Picasso. The blocky effigies of Joel Shapiro come to mind as well, though Mr. Kiesewetter's loosey-goosey buildups don't share Mr. Shapiro's minimalist take on classicism.

Alas, Mr. Kiesewetter's recent pieces—or at least the majority of them—don't "wow" like the previous work. The dispassion they prompt has less to do with sculptural form or artistic growth than with material integrity. Was it a commercial consideration to cast seven of the pieces in bronze? Multiples do, in theory, mean greater monetary gain: Bigger bucks are likely when selling an edition of three than in selling an "Ed. of unique" (as the gallery oxymoronically puts it). But bronze places an all-but-fatal damper on the artist's piecemeal élan. The effect is akin to taxidermy.

The enjoyment we experience when viewing Mr. Kiesewetter's wobbly personages has everything to do with the individual processes that created them, as well as the weird, silly and propitious contrasts that result from disparate materials coming together.

That's why the two uncast sculptures at Tilton benefit so much from comparison to the bronzes. They thrive on such an inventive confluence of media: thin sheets of metal, staples, wire, wood, paint, what looks like concrete and—a new material for Mr. Kiesewetter—cardboard. Their motivation and shaping are dexterous and clear, their surfaces varied, their movements winningly true-to-life.

Once all that is stifled, sculptural vigor—and with it, Mr. Kiesewetter's witty, humane absurdism—is considerably diminished. A venerable process like bronze-casting is antithetical to this sculptor's whimsies. Bronze is too freighted with gravitas to suit them.

We don't expect Larry, Curly and Moe to do Hamlet; we shouldn't expect—or want—Mr. Kiesewetter to do Donatello. Neither should he.

Thomas Kiesewetter is at the Jack Tilton Gallery, 8 East 76th Street, until Feb. 10.