

THE PROJECT

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ART IN REVIEW

'Slouching Towards Bethlehem'
By ROBERTA SMITH

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Slouching Towards Bethlehem'
The Project
37 West 57th Street, Manhattan
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As befits its title, which descends from W. B. Yeats's apocalyptic poem "Second Coming" by way of Joan Didion's "through a glass darkly" book of essays on America in the 1960's, this smart if uneven group show meditates on the state of the nation, past and present. Organized by Jeffrey Uslip, the associate director at The Project, it also reflects on the tensions between corporate, counter and everyday culture, often by contrasting the roles of insiders and outsiders.

Molly Corey, for example, makes small geodesic domes from photographs, including a group portrait of the members of the Redrock Commune in southern Colorado, where she spent her early childhood, and a close-up of wall text concerning "The Hippie Scene," from a recent museum survey of California art. More didactically, Oscar Tuazon makes a small but habitable geodesic dome from sheets of metal, most printed with articles about osteoporosis (which afflicts many aging boomers). It contains a foam mattress and counterculture reading material like "The Foxfire Book," which details how to live off the land.

Jenny Perlin's "Possible Models," one of the show's strongest works, sticks to the present with a short animated film in which charming, childlike script spells out letter by letter three distinctly uncharming narratives, whose subjects are the history of malls, a fictional cruise ship of the future and a real Somali immigrant charged with plotting a terrorist attack in Michigan.

Karlis Rekevics's "Submersive" evokes free-floating paranoia, as well as the early-1970's sculptures of Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman and Joel Shapiro. It is a dourly elegant sculpture made of heavy plaster casts of thick planks of wood, traffic barriers and I-beams.

More subversively, Michael Phelan and Jonah Freeman look back to late-1960's acid-rock poster art in two small, richly patterned hallucinatory images, printed on the sheets of blotter paper used to hold LSD, which are perforated with grids and resemble tiny quilts. These works are undampened by nostalgia (which cannot be said for Mr. Phelan's painting using a poster of Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead) and make an excellent case for computer art.

In this context, "Learning From Las Vegas," a video compilation by Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, suggests a culture in which false excuses are the norm and genuine apologies rare.

Julie Becker's photographs evoke the lair of an anarchist who may be plotting to cart off an office building. Fritz Welch and Gedi Sibony cobble together found materials and objects to make disjunctive commentaries on the real or the abstract. Rachel Harrison evokes some kind of excess with a multicolored chunk of foam resting on a bed of plastic straws, while Matt Johnson improves on the classic "honey bear" dispenser with a cast-brass cap that keeps the honey near the working end of the bottle.

Using a rediscovered, disintegrating tape of his own music, the composer William Basinski creates a sound piece reminiscent of a Hollywood movie theme. It sounds grand but never goes anywhere except downhill, creating an aural slouch that echoes through the show and is an apt metaphor for all kinds of current situations.

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