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Chapel Reimagined

by Danielle Winterton on September 20, 2010



The Waterburg Chapel, originally built in the 1840s and restored by Paul Chambers, was the site of the latest digital projection by Karen Brummund Friday, September 17, 2010. Photo by Karen Brummund

WE EXPECT TO SEE ART IMITATING LIFE, but art intersecting life is another matter altogether. Otherwise jaded urban residents will still sometimes stop to observe performance art as they encounter it in city streets and subways, but this experience is less common for many others who are limited to seeing only the familiar expressions of street musicians and conventionally placed municipally commissioned murals. But if you happened to be driving by Waterburg Plaza in Trumansburg on Friday at dusk, you would have been privy to a large-scale installation by an exciting regionally-based interdisciplinary artist who used the 1840s Waterburg Chapel as her most recent “canvas” or “screen,” on which she projected a startling loop of images designed to distort over the facade.

The intention of interruption is clear, and most welcome and refreshing in a busy culture of on-the-go daily activity. In the last few years, Brummund has done a series of time-based drawings that transform the appearance of an otherwise familiar piece of architecture. For these projects, she enlarges a sketch of a building’s façade and then applies it in individual sheets to cover the entire exterior surface of the building. The inevitable peeling away of these sheets as they float off the building is then videotaped, and the building in its original form is again revealed, so there is a very literal movement from reality to fantastic imaginative vision and back again.

In 2008, Brummund worked with a barn in Groton on a time-based drawing project called *Storm Road*, and more recently, in August she completed a similar installation at the Visual Studies Workshop Gallery in Rochester. On her blog, Brummund noted that while the Rochester installation

was going up, many different kinds of people who passed by were overcome with curiosity and paused to “stop and talk art” as they processed the unusual scene.

“I’m still thinking about that phrase ‘I just had to stop...,’” Brummund writes. “When was the last time I just had to stop and find out what was going on in my neighborhood? in any neighborhood? for something that wasn’t dealing with my property?”

Now Brummund is experimenting with digital projections rather than applied sketches, and the Waterburg Chapel project was the third of its kind. For a November 2009 project at Casa Poli in central Chile, Brummund said the location of the site was on a cliff, where the steep drop-off and strong winds precluded a paper-based installation. Instead, she used video projections on the exterior. “It’s a pretty new series in the sense that I’ve only been doing these for a year,” she said. “I’ve created a few, but I have more in mind for this series.”

For the Waterburg Chapel, “I wanted to do a project on Greek revival because it was so prevalent in the US for ideological reasons,” Brummund said. “and because it was easy to build and make look good. The style spread, and it was no longer about philosophy and ideas. So that was interesting, how the style lost meaning along the way.”

Brummund looked at architectural plans and historical images from the US and Europe in gathering material, as well as photographs of the site itself. Recognizable regional buildings that bore marks of the high Greek revival style were incorporated and projected onto the chapel façade, along with other photographic combinations and collages.

In making decisions about the order of images, Brummund said, “I am thinking conceptually, telling a story, or having a discussion, looking at the aesthetic play between one or two (images). You want your hand to be out of it as much as possible ... I’m not trying to overwork it, but just see how the building distorts it.”

About 100 people came out to the Friday night showing, Brummund said, and the reactions ranged from those who were particularly interested in the history of the site and the building to those primarily intrigued with matters of form such as how the columns of the projection lined up with the chapel’s. The historical dialogue surrounding the site invites contemplation; while not a lot is known about the congregation of the chapel, Brummund said, the site is noteworthy for being the first place in Ulysses to have an electric lightbulb, as well as a stop on the underground railroad. The chapel was in complete disrepair when it was restored by artist Paul Chambers in 1999; since then, Chambers has also restored the adjacent buggy barn with the help of a preservation award from Historic Ithaca.

What I found most surprising was the way the Waterburg Chapel itself seemed to entirely recede from my perspective as I watched the series of images, which were in turns pleasing, intriguing, recognizable, abstract. Dusk darkened the skies with smoky grays and deep navy blues, which set off the cream and yellow tones of the surrounding goldenrod and Queen Anne’s Lace and enhanced the drama of the visual experience. The images depicted sketched columns, photographed fields, simulated trees, checkered patterns, lines that faded in and out, shapes that blacked out one by one, and shapes that tilted and then uprighted themselves; each slide seemed to tell a multitude of stories, four or five seconds at a time.

Brummund's time-based drawings have been called "puzzling," and this description applies to the video projections as well. The impressive scale and apparent technical simplicity of these works evoke simultaneous sensations of familiar and unfamiliar. "You have to piece it together," Brummund said. "The images don't always clearly make sense. There's a visual puzzle to think through and put together. There's enough dissonance (for the viewer) to want to ask, to want to bother to be engaged, to figure it out, to connect the pieces that aren't there."

A video of Karen Brummund's installation will be shown for Historic Ithaca's History Cafe on Local Greek Revival, to take place on October 21st at 5:30pm at The History Center.

Danielle Winterton is a fiction writer, frequent contributor to and editor of The Ithaca Post, and co-founding editor of Essays & Fictions.

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