

# Mike Walsh Makes Connections

Memorial, personal reliquary, manifesto

In *Link*, his latest site-specific installation, Mike E. Walsh makes excellent use of the Adell McMillan Gallery's unusual space, which includes a wall-mounted display cabinet on the mid-flight landing on the way to the gallery. The exhibit starts on the landing, then proceeds counterclockwise on the upper floor.

Despite the enforced fragmentation of the layout, the installation should be viewed as a single, complex assemblage of eclectic, mostly found, objects. "It's like making a very big box people can walk into," Walsh said, an extended version of the shadow-boxes Joseph Cornell, among others, pioneered.

"The title refers to the links between the things you choose to do with your life," Walsh said. Many of the links among the installation components are readily apparent, but others are mysterious and left to the visitor's imagination.



*Link*, site-specific installation by Mike E. Walsh. Detail, box: cloth-wrapped figure, spheres, house and text.

W.H. Auden's poem, "Funeral Blues," provides the installation with narrative structure and temporal sequence. The poem links the installation's various parts into a cohesive whole. Central to the interconnected themes complementing and reinforcing each other throughout the piece is the AIDS issue. Walsh, an AIDS activist, approaches the subject from many angles.

Centuries-old medical technology — old-fashioned beakers, old chemist's paraphernalia; crusted, well-used blood-letting bowls; chemist's ladders — project an historical slant. AIDS is a modern disease, yet every object associated with treatment is antiquated. We're reminded of older diseases for which there were no cures, of blood-letting and other inappropriate remedies used by doctors.

Walsh implies history itself repeats with AIDS.

No remedy has yet been found, yet this worldwide epidemic receives less and less attention. AIDS has become a quiet killer. Walsh's piece functions as socio-political message and commentary.

"The burning houses," Walsh explained, "are symbolic of an out-of-control pandemic ignored by the developed world and the media, symbolized by a TV monitor tuned to white-noise. AIDS is more closeted now than before."

Shrouded figures and heads further represent the invisibility of AIDS victims, and oak leaves strewn about the floor their anonymous deaths. Omnipresent old-fashioned measuring devices — pendulums, slide-rules — raise issues of temporality, yet the work is less about death and mortality than about untimely, premature death.

In Auden's poem, a sense of lives cut short is also central. Its first words — "Stop all the clocks" — are illustrated with a series of paper-clocks, all stopped at 11 o'clock. As an installation, the work itself is ephemeral, an artform whose existence is always cut short, that exists only at 11 o'clock.

Mystery deepens as parts of the installation become a personal reliquary, and both common objects and cultural imagery become private symbols. Besides their obvious function as links, ladders symbolize transcendence and overcoming prejudice. Walsh said the duck, rabbit and birds that appear in some of the house-shaped boxes are "personal gods or humorous objects." Fetishistic use of found materials renders their presence an enigma viewers need to solve for themselves.

Fragmentation is both a formal and thematic constant.

"Fragmentation, my main device,"

Walsh said, "takes form in layers and expresses personal, social and political despair in an era of worldwide pandemic. I ritualistically deconstruct the human body into component fragments: eyes, heads, mouths, ears and mummy-like figures. I also symbolically deconstruct the body into organic components — from piles of rock salt to bowls of blood-red liquid left to evaporate and form layers of mold." Chromosomes are among the bodily fragments figuring prominently.

A strong sense of visual and aesthetic unity counters this fragmentation. Found objects are given the same surface treatment and color, with warm, reddish-browns reminiscent of both autumn and blood. The entire installation is meticulously structured and thought-out. Design and layout are impeccable.

References to art history and artists abound. Cornell's work is alluded to by way of imagery such as vials, birds, pin-ball-machines. A Plexiglas box containing 4,000 names of AIDS victims invites viewers to take one name and remember its owner. This piece echoes social conceptualist Karen Finley's installation, *Memento Mori*.

Walsh's sled, fitted with a box that pumps "blood" into a bowl, is a conscious reference to German artist Joseph Beuys. Walsh said



*Link*, site-specific installation by Mike E. Walsh. Detail: sled, bowl/blood red liquid, spheres and shredded paper.

the present work is "viscerally linked" to Beuys. "Like Beuys' fat and felt-covered sleds," he said, "my sled offers a hope of recovery and survival linked to the future (plane) and the past (broken ionic column). The symbolism is clear: We are linked to our past choices. The sled passes over a bed of shredded paper — AIDS research and documentation ignored by the average person."

Walsh's work functions simultaneously as ritualized memorial with 276 house-shaped, wall-mounted tags, each listing a person lost to AIDS. And as a museum, in its presentation of artifacts. Also, a personal reliquary. A narrative, a poem illustration. Socio-political commentary. Manifesto. Historical record. And as an example of postmodernist appropriation.

"I'm a conceptual artist, but not of the '60s type, rather in the sense of social conceptualism, thinking about issues," Walsh explained. "I find myself returning to humanistic issues — a reevaluation of the personal, the experiential — as sources for art, and the reemerging concern for the impact AIDS will have on our future," he said.

Hurry. Mike E. Walsh's site-specific installation, *Link*, closes its exhibition at the UO's Adell McMillan Gallery in the EMU on April 30.

EW

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