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WEIGHT OF THE WALLS: ETHAN MURROW'S "HAULING" AT THE CURRIER

Friday, March 8th, 2019 // Artscope Online, Exhibits, News, Visual Arts



Ethan Murrow, "Hauling," 2019, view of exhibit with kinetic scroll sculpture and wall drawing, at Currier Museum, Manchester, New Hampshire.

by Olivia MacDonald

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With approximately 900 fine-tipped Sharpie pens, Ethan Murrow blends storytelling with history, community and labor on the white walls of the Currier Museum in Manchester, New Hampshire. In his new exhibition, “Hauling,” globular collages of hundreds of tools including a saw, wooden wheel, speedometer, nail, net and modern high-tech machinery, tower over visitors. Alongside them, drawn people hold ropes and play a kind of tug-of-war with the mechanic entities, while some carry the weight of them in their hands or on their shoulders. The diagonal tugging of ropes creates movement across the walls, where visitors stand in the center of a laborious scene.

The exhibit draws upon the industrial history of Manchester, which during the mid-19th century, held the largest cotton mill worldwide. Today, old mill buildings house restaurants, shops and art galleries. Murrow combines the tools that helped build the city with residents of today, whom he staged in a photoshoot. By involving people of the community, his art becomes an effort of teamwork to haul the equipment. This mirrors his creative process, which brought together 20 researchers, actors and artists to work on the piece commissioned by the museum.

In the center of the room, a “kinetic sculpture,” as Murrow refers to it, resembles the mill looms or machinery of early industrial Manchester. Titled “Underpinnings,” this 52-foot-long rotating scroll made of Tyvek, a plastic, high-density polyethylene paper, includes a frayed rope drawing and words like “hiring,” “allowing,” “dancing,” “governing” and “giving” occupy the edges, signifying the cyclicity of these actions in everyday life.

A wall also holds two 48” x 48” paper drawings titled “Ledgers of Hine” and “Manipulating Data” with softer graphite lines and shading. The first presents a boy in a dominant stance, standing on old labor documents, referencing the influential child labor photographer, Lewis Hine, whose photographs of mill children along the East Coast for the National Child Labor Committee helped put modern child labor laws in place. The latter frames three women tugging at stacks of circuit boards, which points to modern technological advancements of computers and the collections of data they “haul.” Murrow describes these pieces as adding “a layer of intimacy to the show” because of the smaller format than the wall drawings and the smoothness of the medium.

By drawing in black and white, Murrow and his team emphasize the contrast and allow spectators to focus on the tools and machinery themselves in their rawness and complexities, fully devoid of color. This two-year, labor-intensive project echoes the subject of the installation and Sharpies act as Murrow’s tools of choice.

Museum guests also become involved by questioning what we “haul” in our lives like fears, guilt or a career and writing them on tags to hang on a cord. The slips of paper contain a powerful energy, a release of burdens that “mechanize” our lives.

“Ethan Murrow: Hauling” remains on view through May 12 at the Currier Museum of Art, 50 Ash St., Manchester, New Hampshire. The kinetic sculpture that is part of the exhibition will be activated daily from 11 a.m. – 1 p.m. A book detailing the exhibit will be released on March 10. For more information, call (603) 699-6144.