

negation/nostalgia/love letter

April 17, 2013

Among From With

Andrew Witkin: Platform 11

deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum

January 27 through April 21, 2013

Installed in the hallway and two galleries at the top of the deCordova Museum is Andrew Witkin's *Among From With*. The installation is attentive to the borders that exist in a museum and attempts to break these down. In the hallway are several minimalist plywood chairs aligned and spaced along the wall with black felt-like banners hung on the wall. The chairs occupy both the space of sculpture and the function of a space for waiting. The banners contain long lists of names and fragments of thoughts. The names are mostly art

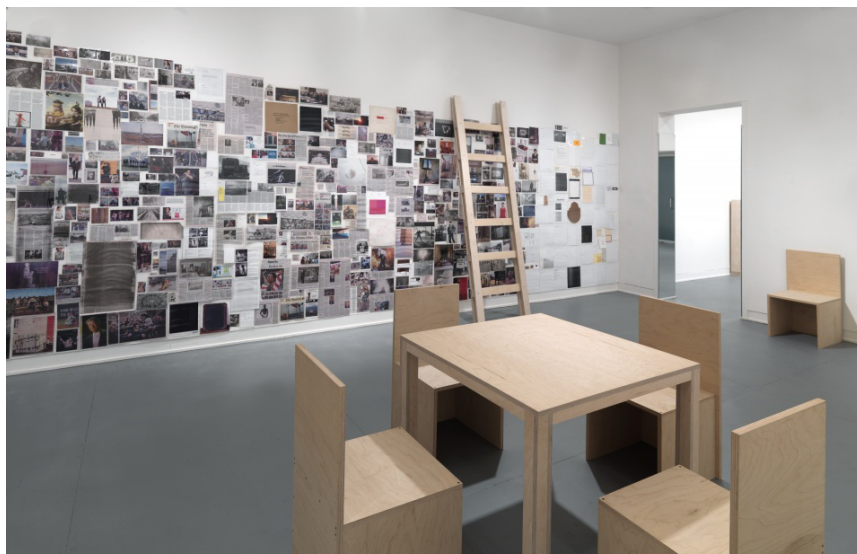
names with musicians and baseball, etc. The thoughts are about art and being. This hallway smells good, all that fresh wood. The lists accumulate as a love letter: to those who have influenced and sustained both in thought and presence. The love letter is to the world of art and thought. I am reminded how small a world it is since many of the names and the thoughts would also appear on my own list.

On entering the second gallery there are: two more chairs (now clearly serving as sculpture) a plexi-box holding a multitude of small photo references, and a massive stack of framed artworks leaned against the wall. The stack is probably the most compelling single art work in the entire installation. It has sculptural presence and compelling formal attributes. Most importantly, it is profoundly challenging in that it is both nihilistic and stimulating to desire. It is a quiet and determined prohibition to seeing the art. It is a melancholic meditation on mortality, particularly the mortality of a studio artist and the stuff that activity accumulates. It is a negation of pleasurable viewing and refuses revelation. It stimulates a longing to see things simply because one can't.

The next room (after passing through a doorway vividly changed by two opposing mirrors) undoes the prohibition of looking and gives out what appears to be a lot of visual and written information in the form of an entire wall of clippings and mementoes supported by stacked boxes which clearly contain much more of the same material, and supported by an ongoing soundtrack that plays out several different versions of the song, *My Way*. This is all somewhat tempered by a stark minimalist table and chairs in the center of the room and a long thin table containing stacks of sterile white books that do contain pages of phrases, but they first appear sterile and empty. By now it has become clear that there is a very conscious unfolding tension in this work between minimalism and its alternatives...a love of the minimalist atmosphere but a simultaneous desire to undo it and acknowledge the complications and even nostalgic noise that sullies our longings for transcendent purity.

The wall of clippings and the supplementary boxes reveal contradictions as well. It all appears so private, but as I delve into a closer study my own world again seems reflected, my world of *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, art magazines, Red Sox, Celtics, etc...this is my world of reference as well, and Witkin is simply far more obsessive about collecting and revealing. There is also a recurring issue of hiding and showing—of things tucked away, then flooded out. As a knowledgeable viewer, my own uniqueness is questioned and celebrated. Within the exhibition there exists a question about touching or moving or sitting on the art. The small catalogue explicitly encourages this, so I dig into the boxes. Again, hundreds of laminated clippings emerge, many familiar. I find one short one, "No dear, I don't have a computer," that also leads me to contemplate how, in the midst of all this cataloguing, there is no computer present.

I had visited the deCordova about a month before to see the exhibition *Paint Things*. At that time I briefly ran up stairs to see Witkin's work, work I was unfamiliar with. I thought the work looked well made, intentional and loaded with ideas and



reference. But I also chose not to engage it, it felt familiar (not surprising), overloaded with verbal information, and probably of real interest if one chose to engage. This installation unfolds slowly and it was only in being invited, as a writer, to consider it that I found the layers of tension and contradiction that enliven and broaden it. In my own work as a painter I have been thinking about my relationship to minimalism and the very contradictions that are beautifully brought forward by Witkin. Minimalism once held out the promise of an art uninflected by expression and the artistic self, perhaps a purer, cleaner art. Minimalism arose at a specific moment and answered the needs of certain voices within a specific cultural moment. That moment has passed. The draw of that way of making art remains, but it appears to be impossible to hold in this muddy critical moment. Witkin has engaged precisely this dilemma.

-Craig Stockwell