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A Life's Cacophony

The Berkeley Art Museum puts Paul Kos in retrospect, but it's not for the weak of will.

BY LINDSEY WESTBROOK

feedback@eastbayexpress.com

As I approached the front desk at the Berkeley Art Museum and flashed my press pass, a loud bell gonged from one of the galleries. "There it goes again," sighed one of the ticket-takers, and I got my first insight into what it's like to host a Paul Kos retrospective.

Kos was a leading figure in the Bay Area's conceptual art movement -- a pioneer in video, performance, and installation art during the 1960s and '70s. He enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute's MFA program in 1967, and has taught there for 25 years now in the New Genres department. His close friends and collaborators in the early years included Tom Marioni, founder of San Francisco's Museum of Conceptual Art and executive director of the Richmond Art Center from 1968 until 1971, and David Ireland, founder of the Capp Street Project.

Some of the stories surrounding Kos' art projects might sound like fraternity antics if he hadn't given them so much thought. There was the episode of the "Richmond Glacier" in 1969, for instance, where he blocked the entrance to his first-ever solo show at the Richmond Art Center with a 7,000-pound iceberg. Or the time in 1986 when he plucked an icicle from his mountain cabin, drove down to an art auction in San Francisco, and sold it to a local collector (who presumably knew he was bidding on an unrefrigerated piece of ice). This was conceptual art,



"Tunnel," 1995, wood table, cheese round, and toy train with track.



"Lot's Wife," 1969, three photographs mounted on board.

Details

Everything Matters: Paul Kos, a Retrospective

Details: Wed.-Sun. 11 a.m.-7 p.m.

510-642-0808

www.bampfa.berkeley.edu
Where: At the Berkeley Art Museum, 2626 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, through July 20

this week in Culture

after all, and the objects were supposed to be subordinate to the ideas behind them. After the objects disappeared or the performances ended, the art would exist only in the heads of whoever had been there to see it.

Hosting a Kos retrospective, then, isn't so easy. Museums are designed to hold *things*, and to protect those *things* from the public's grubby paws. But many of Kos' works exist now only in the form of photos or, like "Guadalupe Bell," require viewers to handle the art. The good news is that he and his gallerist, Paule Anglim, both live in the Bay Area and were able to help the museum reconstruct many of his old projects, contributing numerous objects, photographs, and other memorabilia to the show.

Despite his extensive involvement, however, Kos' authorial voice is conspicuously absent. Maybe he's the type who likes to let his work speak for him, but it still seems strange that so few works in the show are presented with any of the essential information about his process or how the viewer is supposed to make the art "work." I stared at "Silenced Tongues" for a long time before giving up and moving on; only after reading the exhibition catalog did it make sense. Kos' voice hardly appears in the catalog, either. It's great on explanation and biography, but he doesn't do any of the talking.

Out of necessity, the show includes a lot of pictures of artworks that were originally performance-based. Photographic highlights include "Lot's Wife" (1969), a tower of salt licks set among the cows at Marin County's Di Rosa Preserve, and "The Sound of Ice Melting" (1970), a collection of super-sensitive microphones surrounding a block of ice. "Sand Piece" was originally exhibited in 1971 as a huge installation requiring a two-story gallery. Kos punched a hole in the floor of the upper level and dumped a mountain of sand over it, which sifted down into a perfect cone on the first floor. It's represented at the BAM with just a small, static hill of sand that evokes its predecessor without placing such rigorous demands on the exhibition space.

A long compilation of some of Kos' best videos plays in one of the back rooms. The earliest work is 1971's "Warlocking," recorded with a Sony Portapak video camera back when only a couple of people in the entire Bay Area owned them. The clips range in length from a spare sixty seconds to eight and a half minutes, but for an MTV-generation viewer most of them require some patience -- even the most interesting ones, like "Pilot Light/Pilot Butte" (1974), another now-legendary performance piece in which the artist shaped a block of ice into a magnifying lens and used it to light a wood fire with the sun's rays.

As the tape rolls, you'll start to get a feel for the various threads that run through the past thirty years of his work: simplicity, balance, the

From the Week of Wednesday, April 23, 2003

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use of natural materials and phenomena, experiments with measure and timing, and a very Zen-like patience. The title of the exhibition refers to a recent quote by Kos, who was in turn quoting Czech poet Václav Havel: that in the West everything works and nothing matters, whereas in the East nothing works and everything matters. Most of Kos' works are composed of just a few elements, often so simple that they'd seem childish if they weren't also so poetic and evocative. He is practically a magician at getting mundane materials like ice or cheese to point outside themselves. Sometimes, as with his balancing broom-candle-bell "Equilibre IV" (1992), he seems quite literally to be a magician.


As I sat in the gallery watching the videotape late on a Wednesday evening, a couple stuck their heads around the corner and then immediately turned to walk out. One of them said to the other, "Forget it ... I can't think any more tonight!" I sympathized. The show definitely isn't the kind of thing you can breeze through. Often the pieces require several minutes of watching, or looking at the date and trying to remember what was going on in the world then. One of the rear galleries features a group of works Kos produced around the end of the Cold War and, even armed with the exhibition catalog, I still couldn't make heads or tails out of "Trotsky" (1989) -- a red stool with an ice axe driven in the gallery wall above -- until I tried an Internet search at home later. (Trotsky was murdered with an ice axe, by the way ... who knew?) The many artworks using red pawns are a little easier to "get," but there's still a marked historical distance that separates us from the immediate emotions and politics surrounding their creation; **ten years from now we'll probably look back at L.G. Williams' duct-tape sculptures, now showing now at Linc Real Art in San Francisco, with the same kind of subtle estrangement.**


The physical layout of the retrospective also has some interesting ramifications. So many of the installations are sound-based that the noise bleeds from one gallery to another. As you sit and watch "Chartres Bleu" (1983-86), a reconstruction of a stained-glass window in the Chartres Cathedral using TV monitors, the contemplative mood gets chipped away by the typewriter-clacking of "rEVOLUTION" (1972-73) and the occasional clang of "Guadalupe Bell" (1989). The impossibility of experiencing these works the way Kos originally conceived them could easily be annoying if you let it get to you, but it's better to be philosophical about it. Figure that a retrospective of his work is a unique piece of installation art in itself, and the cumulative cacophony is its soundtrack.

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