

Bjerklie's experiment integrates spontaneous use of video with live performance to investigate time and consciousness. For example, during the closing night performance, he interacted with the audience through signage containing his cell phone number on the video monitor, interrupting real-time sparring with his taped alter ego to answer calls. With this set-up, Bjerklie redefines his formerly solitary expression into a spontaneous responsiveness to his environment. Regarding these performances, he writes, "I can safely say they are quite incomplete." This is a wonderful thing, considering that this episode revived the nearly dormant underground performance art scene in New York.

—L.P. Streitfeld

NEW YORK

Ramón de Soto

Gabarron Foundation

Ramón de Soto is an artist from Valencia, Spain, who has spent time exploring Zen Buddhism in Japan. He pursues values from other places and cultures in the hope of attaining an art language that will do justice to an awareness of Zen. His recent exhibition, "Reflections on Memory," offered 10 sculptures and 14 drawings; the iron mandalas and drawings reflect a month spent in a Japanese Zen monastery. de Soto's ink works from 1990 articulate his experiences in the retreat—for instance, a nicely realized view of a small bridge in the monastery garden—while the slightly raised circular mandalas, aligned in a row in the large rectangular gallery space, search out connections between a Modernist sculptural idiom and the unspoken, but powerful, tradition of Zen.

Japanese Zen Buddhism values the sudden shock of insight, and while de Soto's works seek peaceful meditative values, his materials offer a particularly persuasive vision of the

swift enlightenment won by contemplation, simple work, and the pursuit of momentary beauty. Mandalas, traditionally aids to meditation, are powerful constructions in de Soto's hands. In his small-disk series, "Landscapes of Memory" (1997), small raised bumps are placed randomly on the plates—much like the placement of stones in a Zen rock garden. These unusual pieces present a reduction in the garden's space but accomplish a meaningfulness very much like that experienced in Zen: an open emptiness accompanied by silent, visionary clarity. For de Soto, both nature and vision can be achieved in the same sculpture. It is easy to see *Moon Mandala* (1997) as a lunar circle, although the bumps on its surface may again refer to the rock garden's contemplative thought.

de Soto is particularly determined to explore and define his relations with cultures other than his own. In this way, he becomes a kind of "everyman," joined to the human condition by the drive of his imagination and the extent to which he

is willing to internalize values proceeding from ideas, actions, and objects that are not his alone. Identifying with other peoples and their cultures, he is able to empathize in particularly intense ways. This sympathy is found in *Holocaust Altar* (2008), which consists of a simple gray steel menorah cut into the surface of a rust-colored steel block.

The menorah symbolizes de Soto's identification with Jewish history, in particular the tragedy of the Holocaust. Some might find it odd for a non-Jewish, Spanish sculptor to create a memorial to Jewish tradition; however, de Soto's strength of imagination is such that he pulls it off in a sculpture of genuine expansiveness. The image is not so much symbolic as it is an embodied expression of belief. Here, as in many of de Soto's works, he makes clear his ability to absorb differences in cultures, a connection that enables him to draw correspondences from far and wide and makes him a truly international artist.

—Jonathan Goodman

NEW YORK

Roxy Paine

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Thousands of wildly gyrating steel branches cast bold shadows across the rooftop space of the Met in *Maelstrom*, Roxy Paine's stormy dendroid world connecting nature and culture. Paine suggests that culture and nature have unexplored correspondences, and that both are in big trouble—that natural and manmade disasters, from the 1908 Tunguska meteor strike in Siberia (an acknowledged influence) to species extinction, to nuclear and other blow-ups have something out-of-control in common, something to which we need to pay attention. For him, the term "dendroid" includes vascular systems in trees and plants, berserk pipelines in industrial factories, axons and neurons in humans, and anything else that we might conjure or project.

His seven-ton metal jungle, created with a six-man crew over a nine-month period, joins, stretches, anchors, and re-purposes 10,000 rods, tubes, pipes, and bent steel

Ramón de Soto, "Landscapes of Memory" series, 1997. Rusted steel, 2.5 x 48.5 x 48.5 cm. each.



plates. The 130-by-45-foot construction leaves some open space on the 8,000-square-foot roof and can be negotiated easily, although children can navigate some sections better than adults. As the composition expands and contracts in three dimensions, the industrial origins of the piping, including its markings, are sometimes evident. Two large firehouse-red handles attached to the walls suggest an industrial network. Some areas where the pipe expands or contracts in certain ways suggest animal shapes or body parts. Some “amputated” pipes end abruptly; others wander off into space. Some dive straight into a wall or a green hedge—culture wanting to join nature, perhaps.

Paine told the *New York Times* that *Maelstrom* embodies five states simultaneously: a downed forest destroyed by a force; the force itself; the idea of treeness in the process of becoming abstract; a pipeline run amuck; and a mental storm such as an epileptic seizure. The addition of epilepsy—a convulsive, electrical state associated with Socrates and other men of genius—suggests human suffering, loss of memory, and foul mental weather. *Maelstrom* is an abstract composition that variously flows, crawls, plunges, and soars. As in Paine’s previous interpretations of fungi, trees, robotic worlds, and earth formations, often in states of decay, erosion, or collapse, these misshapen things serve as reminders of deviant forms/states that may be beautiful, deadly, or both.

—Jan Garden Castro

NEW YORK

Michael Rakowitz Lombard-Freid Projects

In his recent work, Michael Rakowitz assumes the role of historian to demonstrate the fine line separating fiction from reality. Using vellum drawings, sculptures, and arti-



facts, he maps how science fiction elements seeped into Iraq’s national iconography under Saddam Hussein and tracks the origins of governmental uniforms, monuments, and weaponry to surprising sources such as Jules Verne and George Lucas.

Largely associative, Rakowitz’s narrative begins with the 18th-century French invention of the hot air balloon and its ultimate use as a war device. He then follows the life of scientist Gerald Bull, beginning with his days as a child prodigy in Canada and ending with his development of supergun artillery and Project Babylon at the behest of Saddam. Most importantly, Rakowitz uncovers the direct interest of

Saddam and his sons Uday and Qusay in the “Star Wars” movies, and how that interest manifested itself in various aspects of the Iraqi collective image. These anecdotes and others serve as a convincing basis to Rakowitz’s thesis that Saddam’s rule was ironically informed by Western influences.

While 13 drawings relay the didactic product of Rakowitz’s research, two large sculptures embody the interpretation of his revelations. *Victory Arch (Strike the Empire Back Series)* (2009) is Rakowitz’s version of the famous 1989 Baghdad monument commemorating the victory of Iraq over Iran. It is composed of the same elements as the original—two hands holding crossed

swords, with enemy helmets strewn below. Yet in this rendering, the hands—originally fashioned in bronze after Saddam’s—are papier-mâché made from the allegorical romance novels rumored to be penned by the leader himself (copies of the books are also on view). The swords of Qadisiyya appear as light sabers glowing with the colors of the Iraqi flag, while the enemy helmets are composed of maimed GI Joe figurines set in clear plastic and shaped into configurations that resemble Darth Vader’s helmet. While imposing a playful spin on Saddam’s triumphant vision for Iraq, Rakowitz retains a critical eye in applying the iconography of sci-fi villains to Iraqi national symbols.

Above: Roxy Paine, *Maelstrom*, 2009. Stainless steel, installation view. Below: Michael Rakowitz, *Victory Arch (Strike the Empire Back Series)*, 2009. Mixed media, installation view.

