

At BMoCA, wonders of execution and demolition

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Robbie Rowland used a chainsaw to rip up a strip of wall and floor at BMoCA. The piece exposes windows at the museum, which are usually covered. (Provided by the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art)

What do we mean when we say the word "museum?" Do we mean the building itself or the art and artifacts? Are we referring to the experience of going there, of taking the afternoon off to explore ideas? Or the experience of being there, connecting face-to-face with the objects, artists, curators, other visitors?

Those aren't the kind of questions that come up about other words; a dog is a dog, "cat" means cat. But museums strive to make us think about everything deeply, so evaluating their own essence comes naturally, and as contemplated objects themselves, they give us a common framework for talking about what art means to us as a community. After all, exhibits come and go, but the "museum" remains.

"Substrate," the new exhibit at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art indulges in museum-think more than most shows. It's about the art, but also the architecture, and the act of making art and seeing it, and even about the institution's own history. It succeeds exuberantly at all of it.

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Off the top, the show provides the visceral thrills that attract us to museums in the first place. There are only seven objects, but every one has a wow factor. Each is a challenging concept and a wonder of execution.

Robbie Rowlands has cut out a 20-foot-long slice of the floor and wall with a chainsaw and curled up the wood and plaster like a ribbon.

Graham Eschen and Aaron Miller-Rehm have connected weights to the underside of the floor that push and pull on the hardwood, making a musical composition out of its natural creaks and squeals.

This is an exhibition full of impressive numbers. Theresa Anderson has drilled 25,000 holes in the floor and glued a single, sherbet-colored carpet fiber in each. Cheryl Pope made block prints of the floor's wavy wood grain — every square inch of it — on legal size paper. The 3,400 prints are displayed in two, neat stacks.

The common noun here is "floor," of course, and that's where these artists started their thinking. The century-old museum's painted hardwood is getting replaced this spring, so curator Mardee Goff seized the moment. She invited the artists to consider our connections to that thing we walk on, scuff and muddy up. That required letting them attack it with chain saws, grinders, hooks, straps, hammers and screws.

That a museum, so focused on its walls most of the time, would turn its attention downward, falls on the daring side. It's an odd concept to begin with and risky in that the artists need to challenge their own ideas about art, both how they construct it and how people view it. They have to deliver or the idea looks ridiculous.

A museum focusing so stridently on its physical self could appear to be navel-gazing. This is especially true in Boulder, a place one might fairly describe as self-absorbed.

Fortunately, just the opposite happens with "Substrate." The museum's floor stands in for all floors, and all museums. By letting the artists wreck it so thoroughly with power tools, we see just how precious we allow museums to be in our minds. How much we can let a building rein in the possibilities of art.

This is a terrific lesson for the museum world right now, rushing to hire brand-name architects to design buildings that cost millions, that are works of art themselves. Would we allow artists to have their way with such delicate structures? Do precious art houses serve art or a museum director's ego? Good stuff to think about, especially for citizens asked to foot the bill for expensive projects and donors asked to write checks.

And it wouldn't come up if the art here wasn't so transformative and clever in how it shifts our thinking to the floor.

Boulder artist Michael Theodore does that through sound and movement, suspending a series of gangly dowels from the ceiling so that just their tips touch the floor. His sticks are connected to motion sensors and, as viewers walk by, they move up and down, performing an interactive tap dance.

Like Rowlands, Adam Bateman cuts out a section of floor. He replaces it with a large window that exposes the museum's basement where its archives reside. He builds around it a raised "Platform for Viewing," upending notions of building organization and navigation, realigning the function of its individual parts.

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Pope uses the museum's floor as a metaphor for all of the acreage in Boulder and explores the history of land transformation, from Indians to Western settlers. Her prints of the wood grain exist only on the bottom of her 3,400 sheets, representing the forgotten stories of native people. On the top, quotes from 19th-century regional Chief Niwot and his current descendant, Ava Hamilton, explore the inaccurate interpretations of tribal history.

Rosane Volchan O'Connor has the entire second-level gallery to herself and creates a walk through an environment of bent wires, neon lights, paint and porcelain-dipped organic objects. Her "Membrana" turns the floor into a medium capable of supporting life forms — or something capable of that in some distant past. This world appears ragged, forsaken, ominous.

Anderson plays with the floor's tactile qualities but also the notion of surface. By inserting her fibers directly into the floor, she has made a rug of it. How odd. Above the floor, hover fluffy, feather-filled soft sculptures. They are anchored by yellow straps right through the wood and appear to be both pushing and pulling. Viewers are invited to touch.

At times, "Substrate" feels like a high school science project. The objects are rough-hewn, homemade, geeky. The concepts are high but the end products are not polished. It has the aura of a construction site, a work in progress.

That may or may not be intentional, though it works in the exhibition's favor. If you are going to break down the museum structure — physical and social — then demolition has to be the end game. You have to let things be messy.

"Substrate" is challenging but it never puts you off. It welcomes serious thinking but also poking, climbing, squeezing and listening. It's the kind of great adventure that redefines what a "museum" can do.

SUBSTRATE

The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art presents a group show featuring seven artists who work directly with the museum's floor. Through April 5. 1750 13th St., Boulder, CO.

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