

“Island Universe”
59 Days on Governors Island
A Curatorial tour.

For the Island Universe exhibition a group of artists were invited to explore the five immediate elements of Governors Island: Water, Wind, Light, (Is)land, and People. Transforming the rooms, stairways, and hallways of a house into a series of installations, photo/video presentations, sculptures, murals, and performances, artists broadened the elements of Governors Island to range from its recreational present to the visible landscapes and landmarks in the collective memory of the city’s past.

Governors Island, a former coastguard base, became a Summer time art venue at the beginning of 21st century. Project 59, Inc was invited to create a program in one of the historic houses for 59 days. A bit flaky inside but sturdy, the almost 159 years old three story house was revived into a two story site specific artistic universe, an engrossing multimedia art world for almost 2500 visitors.

The exhibition “Island Universe” at the house #407A was in the middle of Colonels Row that is currently almost in the middle of the island. It used to be oceanfront before the underground volume from a Manhattan subway line was dumped on the Island, adding about 40 percent of its territory.

Known for creating “outfit” sculptures (epoxy+clothing) of common people, Ed Herman presented his 1991 replica of his life-size 1988 “Street Kids” (male and female) flying over the staircase. They were a perfect fit to the area lifting its traditionally transitional purpose to a fully used exhibition space. “Street Kids” first interior flight had a perceptual range from a broken in the air domestic version of Chagall’s couples to a tragic memory of 9/11 (which was in a clear view from the Governors Island) reinforced by the flaky wall behind.

The two flying figures had one more aspect of perception for visitors who climbed the stairs next to walls that sprouted a hallucinogenic mural of giant mushrooms with big whimsical eyes, “Eyes in the Walls or The Secret Life of Plants” by Dasha Ziborova’s. Dasha’s “elements” were microorganisms of the island that even when often overlooked, can clearly “see” us. The cold and rainy Spring/Summer season was generous for mushrooms making Dasha’s mural environmentally responsive with an amusing additional historical reference. The original Indian name for the Island was Paggank that sounds like a widely used Russian name for inedible mushrooms “poganka”.

The “Terra Firma” installation by Alberto Burzstyn,” had in the middle a sand box in the shape of the Governors Island. Quite popular among visitors with kids it referenced the suburban recreational alternatives of the island and was bordered by whimsical presentations of island surroundings: Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and Manhattan. Adrian Cameron’s sound piece was intermittently in the air above them all.

In the adjoining room, Margaret Roleke's installation represented a version of a catch lifted from the bottom of surrounding waters, layers of historic waste of the island that served for centuries as a military base. Lines of cords that created the image of the Statue of Liberty in Alberto's room transformed into ropes of Margaret's installation along with a radical change of the aspect on kids and toys. The peaceful reality of a sandbox was turned into one of weapon awareness. Margaret "pulled" clusters of (toy) pistols, cartridges, sleeves and other possible remnants of military ammunition with, as she stated, a few quite destructed "mermaids" trapped in the nets. The military history of the island was an element of her conceptual survey.

This aquatic exploration shared the room with the video footage of Billy.X.Curmano's legendary swimming voyage down the Mississippi river in 1987-1997. This was made as a performance with singing and rapping in the water, "drawing" with the strokes on the river's surface and creating devices to protect from a polluted water environment while promoting the ecological requirements for clean water.

In the nearby kitchen Lisa Hein and Bob Seng built another nautical (everlasting kinetic) installation *SWELL*, creating the shadow drawn effect of the rolling surface of the ocean. Visitors were immersed in it with a moving borderline of the swell rolling around the room, such a powerful effect that it seemed that eventually it could make you seasick. The waterline was rolling over the walls, kitchen cabinets, windows, and refrigerator, reminding of the proximity of the hurricane/tsunami zone.

Natalia Zubko for her *Eav'ning Light* installation transformed the space of the pantry room into an "island" of contemporary style inside the 19th century house. The installation had a gentle sloping "grass hill" and above it a steeper angle of the "sky view". Lights composition behind the viewing screen reflected an evening sunset sky. Visitors were invited to rest on the "hill", enjoying the view and hear once in a while the sound of distant thunders, created by Natalia's collaborator, sound artist, Beau Kenyon.

Four upstairs bedrooms, a closet and hallways hosted another ten artworks. In her installation "Island Flight" (19th century dress, wigs and birds) Alyson Pou referred to the history of the house itself (family housing started on the island in 1870's), and the role of women as the house/family keeper and as intermediate residents of the island (it was primarily masculine for 200 years prior to the housing). Alyson compares house and family to the nest and nest to the island with birds (ravens) as symbols of transformation and rebirth. The birds flew into the naturally appearing "cloud" made by the peeling ceiling.

The nearby "fauna" room represented the animal kingdom and related issues. Initially proposed for the outside, the sculpture of a Moose, made from materials scavenged on the island by Alberto Burzstyn, got trapped inside the (bed)room for a dramatic (claustrophobic) presentation of animals that left the island long ago. Mary Ting's installation represented rodents interacting with pealed walls, along with birds, bees and spiders, part of the kingdom still existing on the island.

There were four different art works in the next bedroom. Ellen Harvey's installation "All That Glitters" was about our governments through an unusual perspective on interior ornamentation. During the 20th century it shifted from ornamental decoration toward practical simplicity while the "royal" ornaments or as Ellen calls them "dictator chic" turned up to stay mostly in the "hands of power". The audience could see themselves in the mirrors, lined up in the style of modern minimalism. On the other side there was an identical pattern of golden panels against a photo collage background of contemporary "royal styles" of both Kremlin halls and Trump's apartments that proclaimed the asphyxiating distance between the "people" and those allegedly elected to serve them.

Signifying both the existence of a historic fireplace and the topic of the interior decoration, Irina Danilova in collaboration with Hiram Levy, created the Organic Geometric Ornament, picking up on both geometrical and floral references of classical styles, along with a version of "Desert Wells", a sand installation on the floor. This became an environmental setting for Billy X. Curmano's video documentation of the "The Death Valley Desert Classic performance: 40 days of fasting in the Dead Valley National Park".

On the way to the last room with Rita Leduk's light and sound installation Tofte Pod (2018), in the middle of the hallway, Irina Danilova and Hiram Levy interactive reflection installation beamed from a closet. People passing by made a draft that created reflected movement reminiscent of sunlight on water.

There were unusual reflective effects in Rita's Tofte Pod along with a projection onto a construction with layers of film. "Centered in a darkened room, four translucent, layered "walls" of acetate abstract and conflate depictions of a natural landscape", seen from inside.

The Island Universe Show started and finished with "water based" artworks by two artists from Italy. Visitors were greeted by a slide show from Rino Telaro 's 1975 performance "Waiting for the right moment". They saw the artist sitting in the middle of the flow of a river as the flow of life next to a toaster with a tennis racket in his hand; A sarcastic impersonation of the life of artist, who has to be ready to return the ball when it comes.

Chiena, the annual water festival run by Angelo Riviello and Utopia Art Space in the high mountain Italian town Compagna (near Salerno) was established in 1985 in a memory of the 1980 southern Italy devastating earthquake. The mountain river was diverted to let water run through the town to clean its debris. Every year since its establishment, in the summer time, the river is blocked for the Chiena Festival of Art about the environment and the role of water in it.

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Curator: Irina Danilova.