

Art in America

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JASON MIDDLEBROOK

UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM UNIVERSITY OF ALBANY
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ALBANY

Jason Middlebrook's ambitious project "Live with Less" used as its basic material discarded cardboard boxes collected on campus over a two-month period. Many of them were recycled into the show's tour de force, *Cardboard Stack* (2009), consisting of 2 tons of the flattened stuff assembled in a column that conjured a tornado. Piled like landfill detritus, it majestically ascended the atrium's entire 35-foot height. Middlebrook's persistent themes—nature v. culture, repurposing throwaways, runaway consumption and its impact on the environment—were on full and varied view in this exhibition. There were many high points in this updated, Americanized version of *Arte Povera*, including a room-size miniature city made of medium-size cardboard boxes—their interiors illuminated by Christmas lights—that seemed a nod to James Casebere, Rachel Whiteread, medieval hill towns or shantytowns and favelas.

The show began in the lobby, which was plastered with hand-painted signs executed with the help of art students and others in the community, an outreach component important to Middlebrook's practice. They suggested the makeshift signs and shelters of the homeless, except the texts are more philosophical or exhortative, culled from the artist's notebooks; they included an amusing comparison of Middlebrook to Tiger Woods and quotes from famous artists.

On the first floor were 10 large works on paper (ranging from 2001 to '08) that, though far less dramatic than the cardboard constructions, were the most beautiful component of the show. The majority were a mix of acrylic, ink and pencil, and displayed Middlebrook's skill as a draftsman and colorist, combining delicate renderings of landscapes and cityscapes, and the small and large details that comprise them—houses, fences, leaves, fossils, shells, diatoms, ganglia and more—with expressive brushwork, washes and abstract swirls, stripes and geometric patterns.

The floor above seemed more celestial, metaphorically joined to the first by the



Jason Middlebrook:
Cardboard Stack, 2009,
2 tons of discarded
boxes, approx. 35 feet
high; at the University
of Albany.

tower of cardboard. Dominating the space were the four soaring vertical elements of *Stacked Night Sky* (2009), a patchwork of painted black cardboard dotted with points of color and scored by lines that resembles an illuminated city seen from an airplane, with an image of ominous barbed wire stretched across the bottom section. Vividly painted planks of cherry, walnut, cottonwood and cedar leaned against the wall à la John McCracken sculpture or surfboards, and Nakashima-like benches of reclaimed wood embellished with painted stripes and dots were located throughout the space. Lastly, there were hundreds of varied bottles—actually concrete casts of containers salvaged from a dump near his studio—placed on the floor and along the ledges of the upstairs gallery. They were nearly indistinguishable from the real, weathered things, their status somewhere between art, functional object, junk and industrial fossil. Playfully earnest and visually provocative, Middlebrook's work makes us think about downsizing, waste, art-making and inventive recycling, although somewhat contradictorily. This very enjoyable and well-stocked show was not the best advocate for living with less, but, hey, we know what he means.