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CULTURE MONSTER
ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: David Askevold's surprising presence

The artist is the focus of an engaging survey at the Pasadena Armory for the Arts that also features collaborations with former students Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler.

David Askevold with Tony Oursler, "Two Beasts," 2007-10, projected video. (Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times / July 19, 2012)

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic
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David Askevold is one of those artists more widely known through the influence brought to bear on former students, such as Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler from his CalArts teaching days, than for his own work. In fact, an early collaborative piece with Kelley and a late one with Oursler are included in a tight but engaging Askevold survey at the Pasadena Armory for the Arts.

Echoes of familiar Kelley and Oursler sensibilities reverberate in many places in the show. Yet a distinctive edge marks the Nova Scotia artist's forays into combining image with text and using video, which he began in earnest in the 1970s. (Askevold died in 2008 at age 67.) He was tilling new fields where other artists found fertile ground.

Askevold's materials are typically modest, but at their best they generate a presence that can surprise. The adjectives that repeatedly come to mind — mercurial, haunted, perverse, ephemeral, quicksilver — might suggest his often remarkable capacity to exorcise the ghost in the machinery of modern life.

Needless to say, that doesn't make for art that grabs you by the lapels. Instead, it worms its way into your consciousness.

Take "Don't Eat Crow," an ordinary metal shed of the kind you might find at Sears or Home Depot to put out in the back yard for storing garden tools. Inside are two stools and a big television monitor. The program that's playing seems at first like a typical nature show — a black crow hopping about in close-up on a leafy branch. Sit and watch a moment, though, and "Wild Kingdom" falls away.

TV nature shows don't usually feature woozy, bluesy soundtracks. A woman's low voice reads letters in which she recounts to a friend her struggles as an unpublished author — a starving artist, resigned to storage. It isn't absent fame or missed fortune that comes through her story but instead a deep and unrequited yearning to connect through her art. A layer of poignancy is added by the quiet connection that Askevold forges: No crow will be eaten, no wrong will be proved in any artistic effort.

The generosity of spirit in a work such as this characterizes much of Askevold's work. What is "spirit" anyway — especially in a modern, technological world where Nietzsche buried god?

Askevold's work is largely restricted to such distinctly modern materials as photographs, printed text, video and satellite or other images printed out in bright, ink-jet colors. In "The Nova Scotia Project: Once Upon a Time in the East," a 1993 piece from which the show gets its title, scores of ink-jet prints of aerial views of small coastal harbors read as the porous membrane between inner realms and outer worlds.

A harbor is a place of shelter. Our aerial view puts us in the position of a technological eyeball, while the subtitle obliquely refers to a 1974 Canadian film of eccentrically interconnected stories.

Askevold also knew the Nova Scotia landscape well. Born in Conrad, Mont., he studied at the University of Montana, the Brooklyn Museum Art School and the Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri, but he moved to Halifax in 1968. Intermittently, he taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design for a dozen years, interrupted by periodic stints at CalArts, UC Irvine and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

"3 Spot Game," an eccentric 1968 wall sculpture that's the show's earliest work, is a semi-invisible group of seven small, rectangular pieces of clear plexiglass strung together on a length of thin steel cable threaded through holes drilled in the thick plastic. The panels lean, hang and abut the wall at various angles.

It almost looks like a display of transparent paintings that exploded. The cable loops around, through and between them, as if it were a three-dimensional drawing in space that was darting in and out of seven rogue picture-planes attempting to escape the confines of the wall.

Each end of the long steel cable is tethered to an aluminum bar, like the handles of a jump rope. The work is indeed based on a game, although instead of a child's pastime it's a sophisticated mathematician's puzzle. As in much Minimalist sculpture, the objective rules of math provided a system to remove individual subjectivity from the art's final form.

If the kooky, not quite fully resolved piece has a relative in mature art of the period, it might be something by Eva Hesse. Visually, the artists' works are different, but her use of atypical industrial materials such as resin, wire, rubber and fiberglass was likewise engaged in unraveling traditional boundaries between painting and sculpture.

A centerpiece of the show is a group of 11 television sets on a pair of rough-hewn tables and benches, where 16 single-channel videotapes can be watched. Do-it-yourself simplicity is a hallmark, not only of the display's design but of the videos as well.

"John Todd and His Songs" (1976-77), for example, is simply a medium-close-up of a seated man singing improvisations a cappella. (Whether it's the occultist John Todd, whose checkered career ended in prison and a mental institution, I cannot say.) The ad hoc lyrics invite spirits to enter into his music. Two women, one of them blindfolded, join him. The eccentric trio, reacting in the moment and in response to the immediate environment, seems an impossible mix of bliss and affliction.

The traveling retrospective, organized by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, is the kind of exhibition you want to dip in and out of. By themselves, the videos require about three hours to see in their entirety. The show is on view through Sept. 15, so there's time.

The final work, made in concert with Oursler, is a projected mosaic-grid of 20 video images that continuously change. A scan of a face, a military band, a handwritten note, a horse's eye, souvenir-store knickknacks, a tattoo and dozens more pictures, some still and some moving, come in and out of view. They turn up within different rectangles of the grid like checkers jumping around a checkerboard. They seem to be repeating at random, gaining different tones and implications according to the ever-changing context.

Titled "Two Beasts" (2007-10), it was made over an extended period of time in which the artists communicated electronically, sending still photographs and short video clips to each other. (Oursler finished it after Askevold's death.) The audio is a subdued, abstract dirge. Shown in a narrow, darkened room, it becomes a stained-glass window for our time.

"David Askevold: Once Upon a Time in the East," Pasadena Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., (626) 792-5101, through Sept. 15. Closed Monday. http://www.armoryarts.org

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