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## NEW.YORK ART.CRIT

John Haber  
in New York City

### Latest News and Reviews

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#### 8.4.08 — VEGETABLE MINERAL

Sculpture in Dumbo faces some serious competition. Where the Brooklyn Bridge already soars above, **Olafur Eliasson** has built a waterfall. Where the East River already leads to the lower Manhattan skyline, ferries and kayaks regularly fill the waters. Where declining industry, artist studios, and empty cobblestone streets ended not long ago in a quiet but lovely park, picnickers and sunbathers now sprawl across lush greenery. What is an artist to do? If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Since at least 9/11, the summer show in **Empire Fulton-Ferry State Park** and the playground to the north has changed with the times. "**Between the Bridges**" responded to a **perceived absence** and, in years since, to **emotional recovery**. This year's model, "Relative Environment," copes instead with excessive presence. As if taking a cue from Eliasson, the Brooklyn Waterfront Arts Coalition chooses work that navigates between natural and created habitats. It lacks his sense of drama, his engineering skills, and for the most part his site specificity, and it could stand some new life. Just hunting it all down, however, makes a neighborhood of luxury rentals and condos appear a little more natural and a little wilder.

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As curators, Ursula Clark and Tyrome Tripoli bring several returning contributors—and some predictable strategies, starting with whimsical habitats. Springhetti/Teppich metal flowers sport a new paint job, and Tammy Bickel's *Steel Rose* has some pointedly aggressive edges instead of thorns. Michael Mutt and Doug Makemson create life forms that might have just crept on shore from a prehistoric sea. Clark herself has a penchant for makeshift wooden shelters, as in her homespun twin towers a few years before. This year her twigs form a large nest on the ground, filled with artificial pine cones and, for reasons that escape me, something like plastic lanterns.

Judging by the title, *Verdun Basket*, they may allude to the spikes on German helmets from World War I.

Some of the puns on nature and civilization allude instead to machinery. Joe Chirchirillo's branches swing while gears remain at rest, Matt Johnson has a cross between a rusted tractor and a tricycle, and Tripoli's *Crankshaft City* refuses to power anything. Lucy Hodgson's *Oh Swell* evokes both waves and a roller coaster, with a long track of thatching on metal. Scattered pieces on the grass link it to relics of Brooklyn's history. Only one artist delivers a lecture on environmentalism, but just as well. Rod Northcutt's *Fish and Flotsam* resembles the text panels on the railings of a natural history museum, a reminder that PVCs and plastic food containers from McDonald's or a salad bar do indeed foul the shore.

Others stick to the forms of Modernism and past biomorphic abstraction. Bill Wood has a kind of black Calder stabile low to the ground, Henry Royer's large metal clasp forms a plain oval, and Bernard Klevickas's stacked lily pads resemble Swedish furniture. Bill Wood's purple pigeon comes closer to Lego. A bit more assertively, Fritz Horstman's *Reclining Crystal* could pass as the hockey mask in a horror flick, while Jonas Lindberg's *Puffballs* might outline a makeshift **Buckminster Fuller** dome. For the most part, though, work stays too restrained for idealism or fantasy. When Richard Brachman makes his solar home on an earth floor the size of a dollhouse, it could imply a future unable to sustain itself much past the show's September 7 close.

At their best, the artists explore a space that sunbathers blissfully ignore. To the north, sculpture pushes under the Manhattan Bridge. To the south, Julia Whitney Barnes's silvery *Gilded Phytophilic Bats* (literally, "plant loving") hang disguised in a tree, where flight and vegetation converge. Mohr/Hoecher's planter or pigeon feeder in the shape of the Brooklyn Bridge would be too cute for words in a backyard. Here, though, it attracts enough birds to give it an assist. Barbara Campisi clusters white spores across dozens of feet of coastal rocks, in imitation of seaweed, but also like shells or eggs, as if poised between stages of life.

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