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**10th Annual  
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**Frolic: New Art  
from Taiwan**



Natsu, Dehisce, 2007, installation view

## Dehisce and A Course in Minerals

**KKProjects in New Orleans  
Curated by Kaechele and  
Koan Jeff Baysa**

**by Catherine Burke**

KKProjects consisted of six buildings on one block just off St. Roch Avenue in a neighborhood of New Orleans where Arts, Music, and Desire Streets run parallel. Evocative street names were only one of the charms that caught the attention of Kirsha Kaechele when she first visited the area. After she acquired a building that had been a neighborhood bakery in 2002, Kaechele set a plan in motion to create an art space. The Bakery was transformed into a large open gallery space, complete with skylight and landscaped back patio. From its location at the center of the block, the maiden gallery proudly surveys the art district evolving around it – a cluster of derelict houses in stages of decay, now galleries containing site-specific installations by international artists.

The use of dilapidated houses as exhibition spaces was inspired in part by the storm, although Kaechele owned more than half of them pre-storm (and, like many buildings in the economically depressed area, all were previously

derelict). But the circumstances of post-Katrina New Orleans have endowed these structures with poignancy and relevancy as places to display art. Expressing age, history, and abandonment, the spaces gave artists an opportunity to converse with a space often older than themselves, and to engage significant contemporary issues directly, instead of the pristine isolation of a minimalist art gallery. Art on display in a collapsing house, while complicit with the building's decay; was instrumental in the structure's metamorphosis. Like thousands of others in New Orleans, buildings that are sinking and crumbling under the weight of vines are on their way to becoming something else – perhaps the backdrop for a horror film and eventually islands. Why not art spaces?

The current exhibit, *Dehisce and A Course in Minerals*, co-curated by Kaechele and Dr. Koan Jeff Baysa consisted of installations that aimed to excavate these spaces, giving them new identities or uncovering elements hidden within. Coinciding with *DesCours*, an eight-day contemporary architecture and art event showcasing new media and interactive installations in the city, the show opened with *A Course in Minerals*, a lavish dinner for 200 guests. Seated at a single table running the entire length

of the abandoned block, guests were treated to a six-course menu, inspired by minerals, which was curated by Kaechele and overseen by an advisory panel consisting of artists, scientists, and academics. The dishes, which included a psychotropic mushroom soup, were collaborations between artists and renowned chef Ian Schnobelen. With the dilapidated neighborhood serving as both backdrop and witness to the ceremony, and candlelight flickering on the skin of servers painted gold, the block was ritualistically anointed. Art spaces emerged from the chrysalis of decay.

Dehisce, a term used in both medicine and botany, refers to a rupture, either of a wound re-opening or a ripe flower releasing its seeds; the show is in the unique position of claiming both definitions as pertinent. Entering the spaces, we sense both disaster and potential. Like the minerals served course by course during the opening dinner, the installations varied in their use of materials: from the heavy and earth-based, as with huge carved mammalian bones or dirt, to the light and airy, like bits of string or strands of beads, down to something as intangible as light. In the most renovated of the block's galleries, delicate sculptures add a sense of lightness and fragility to the more formal gallery environment.

The Old Bakery featured organic sculptures by San Francisco-based artist, Erica Gangsei. Crafted of humble materials like yarn and wire, her sculptures were subtle gestures within the space, hanging from the ceiling and peeking out of irregularities in the walls. A horizontal line of crocheted lace suspended from the gallery's ceiling seemed slight and insignificant at first glance, but the hard shadow of a water line that it cast onto the gallery walls lent the piece greater weight. Small assemblages of fabric and found materials mounted on the opposite wall created the sense of strange and diffident little creatures revealing themselves for the first time.

In the Derelict Cottage exhibition space behind the Bakery, two large picture windows were installed in one

of the last remaining walls of a decaying house, transforming it into a display case whose sturdy windows will most likely outlive the rest of the structure. In this delicately balanced space, Japanese artist Natsu created an installation of webs made of wires, sequins, and beads seductive for their beauty and the disconcerting sense that they had been crafted to ensnare on a human scale. The sculpture earned extra credit with local bead-weary audiences for its clever use of material, strands of plastic and sequins spun into webs that seemed to glint like precious jewels.

The artists in the derelict houses across the street adopted a more aggressive approach and with heavier materials evoked a sense of time past. In the derelict *Whitehouse*, with façade, lawn, and front yard junk painted white, artist Janet Bellotto suspended part of a styrofoam whale skeleton from the ceiling, creating a fossilized archway that merged history with architecture.

Next door, Kim and Scott Pterodactyl intervened after one of the artists, hired to fix the gallery's door, decided to keep working in the space and, renegade style, took it over for the installation just days before the opening. They decided to cut a passageway through a closet where clothes hung, leading us intrusively through a house still littered with its previous tenants' things. We emerged in the backyard where the tangled thicket had been draped overhead with pink vinyl from Brad Pitt's *Lower 9th Ward Project*, creating a dreamy world of hot pink air.

Another installation, *LightHouse*, by Norwegian artist Anne Senstad with the support of the Office of Contemporary Art Oslo, was a consideration on the loss to a neighborhood of houses no longer "alive," or illuminated. With neon office lights installed along crumbling walls and rubble, the abandoned shotgun house illuminated the block like a giant jack-o-lantern.

Margaret Evangeline's (*America*) installation in Derelict Cottage II was also a performance. The piece began with a crew of illegal workers hired to create

the entire installation – from pouring the dirt to painting the façade. In her statement, Evangeline aimed to convey a message of hope. However, I interpreted the juxtaposition of the house's façade, (*America*) painted in superhero-esque primary colors, combined with a dismal scene inside the dirt-covered home under 'deconstruction' by construction workers, as a cynical, heavy-handed comment on a superpower unable to stem the decay from its threshold.

The ground floor of the Arts House included two artists with interactive photo projects. Gayle Laird turned part of the space into a camera obscura, piercing the wall of the building to create a projection of the outside street in the gallery darkroom. A project by New Orleans native Lisa Lozano, who is now based in San Francisco, moved in the opposite direction, bringing her photographic assemblage out to the street in the form of a traveling photo booth. What kept her mini portrait studio fresh and interesting is the picture window cut out of the back of the booth revealing a slice of neighborhood as the backdrop to the portrait. As a result, a medium usually reserved for the universal and anonymous, the

ubiquitous photo booth portrait, was grounded into a time and a place, allowing it to be as much a portrait of the neighborhood as a portrait of the individuals who were a part of it.

Encouraging interaction within the diverse community surrounding the space was an important part of KKProjects. From many, community response to the project ranged from the enthusiastic "Go on, girl, go get it!" to messages graffitied by the traveling gutter punk community, "Art Fags go back to New York." For Kaechele, the very elements that some would consider problematic about exhibiting art in this context became a conversation between artist and site – the site being not only the houses but also the community.

The space also hosts events for the neighborhood. Christopher Sullivan's recent champagne brunch in the gallery featured a free-throw practice with 92 basketballs rescued from New Orleans streets after the storm. Kaechele plans to expand the project into programs involving neighborhood children.

KKProjects is a reminder that now more than ever, space should be considered as a flexible resource, which the artist, as alchemist, has the power and responsibility to continually re-invent.



Margaret Evangeline, (*America*), 2007, photo of performance and installation