Gleaming silver greets the museum-goer of The Rose this semester in its upper gallery. Made of several metallic bridges, this is “Chris Burden: Master Builder.” Burden is an interesting artist who is increasingly connected to The Rose. He is the creator of the major installation “Light of Reason,” which will be a large public work outside The Rose, to be completed in 2014. But to be honest, if you have heard of Burden, it is probably because of his 1970s performance art piece, “Shoot.” In “Shoot,” Burden stood across the room from his assistant, who then shot him in the arm with a .22 rifle.

That being said, “Chris Burden: Master Builder” is not quite as exciting as Burden’s performance art. Burden crafts these bridges out of erector building sets, toys meant for children. The wall text placed at the start of the exhibit makes exciting claims—the bridges can hold hundreds of pounds while being lifted easily with a finger. This text goes on to purport that Burden is nothing less than a genius, a master at building and at art, creating pieces that are both aesthetically pleasing and cleverly innovative.

In our opinion, these affirmations are not supported by the actual show. Frankly, it is a dry exhibit. The bridges are nothing aesthetically new, dating to the 13th century. They look lovely against the blue backdrop of the walls, but lovely falls short of my expectations. The idea of a light structure holding incredible amounts of weight is intriguing at first; however, I still do not find it dazzling. Similar bridges can be found in high school physics classes across the country. I was especially taken aback by a sign imploring “Do Not Touch” on a bridge with gears, something clearly designed to touch. Gears conjure images of the permanent MIT Museum exhibit, “Gestural Engineering: The Art of Arthur Ganson,” where there are buttons, pulleys and triggers that allow the viewer to really engage with the art and science. In comparison, the Burden exhibit seemed unnecessarily distant. It told me to believe that Burden was brilliant, without letting me explore this notion for myself.

If you venture out of the upper Rose and into the Foster stairwell, you are greeted by a video installation of Burden’s called “What My Dad Gave Me.” It is a video of a massive erector set skyscraper Burden created. The Rose will be installing one of these skyscrapers inside the museum, rising through the atrium, later this spring.

In contrast, “The Matter That Surrounds Us” by Wols and Charline von Heyl is everything “Chris Burden: Master Builder” is not. It is an absolutely beautiful exhibit. The framing of the art is perfect and allows the works to play off each other in color and in texture, enveloping the visitor in a swath of color. This exhibition begins with brief text introducing the reader to Wols and von Heyl, but not giving too much away about either artist. It also sets up the parallel between the two by simply stating that von Heyls, a contemporary artist, was influenced by the work of Wols, who worked in the early 20th century. The unusual pairing functions as a vessel of intellectual discourse, something hugely important in university art museums. There is a brochure of more detailed text available to take in the exhibition, which students could read at their leisure.

Immediately, the viewer can make connections between the two artists. A large von Heyls canvas of a woman’s head converses with a smaller, more abstract Wols illustration really well. A head can emerge in the Wols piece to complement the von Heyls, or the audience can appreciate the purely aesthetic differences. Both artists have a style that realizes the variety of colors, textures and surfaces the art can produce. In this regard, this exhibit is reminiscent of “Light Years” by Jack Whitten in 1971-1973, an excellent exhibit The Rose put on last semester.
My favorite part of this exhibition, however, was the quotes included in the wall label. The curator let the art literally speak for itself. In one of the best examples, Charline von Heyls was quoted in response to her colleague’s critique of her art, “These weren’t the paintings I wanted to make, but they were the paintings I wanted to see.” This theme of making art that isn’t pretentious, but instead making art as a profoundly personal and uniquely visual statement, is carried throughout this exhibit. It is a breath of fresh air that made me connect with the art on a deeper level. The two different artists and their perspectives on art made for interesting conversations. I thought about the art a lot, talked about it with other students and drew my own conclusions. This gallery was alive.

In The Rose Video Gallery this spring is Josephine Meckseper’s “Mall of America.” The focus of this exhibit is the Mall of America, one of the world’s largest shopping malls, in Bloomington, Minnesota. This may seem mundane at first, but Meckseper claims it is not: “The focus ... was to show the iconography of U.S. American consumer ritual in relation to military expansion.”

Meckseper attempts to defamiliarize the experience of going to the mall, which is a relatively common activity for Americans. The artist does so by using red and blue filters and a sinister soundtrack to accompany footage of objects we find relatively normal, such as people passing by, sale sings and mannequins.

The camera focuses on big brand names, such as “Pepsi” and “Budweiser,” and the use of Americanocentric phrases like “U.S.A.” and “All-American”, which, according to the introduction pamphlet, makes the mall “[read] as one large advertisement for America.” She also opted to juxtapose this with a recording of the military using Napalm in hopes of showing the relation between nationalism and consumption, thus insinuating that neither are sustainable. The video within the video is called “Fighter Pilot” and, unlike the footage of the mall, is in full-color. Her two videos within the exhibit show that the “rampant consumerism we are witnessing is in part founded on our increased militarism at home and abroad ... [and] expose the systems that perpetuate inequality.”

To be honest, Meckseper’s efforts to underscore the imbalance of economic wealth are unsuccessful. Rather than creating an ominous atmosphere, Meckseper’s video bores audience members. She focuses on the mall for an extremely long period of time and many of the things she focuses her camera on are not frightening at all—even with the red and blue filter—because after a while, the audience habituates. There are little to no shocking changes to prevent people from zoning out. Some of the future museum-goers will find themselves maybe even a little bored.

The final exhibit, “Bowls Balls Souls Holes” by Mika Rottenberg is placed in the Lois Foster Gallery. Interestingly, it is artist Mika Rottenberg’s first solo museum exhibition in the United States.

There are three video installations: “Squeeze” (2010), “Tsss” (2013) and “Bowls Balls Souls Holes” (2014). The last video was commissioned and partially funded by The Rose. All three of the video installations were eccentric and extremely difficult to understand. None of the videos are either logical or realistic; instead, a museum visitor is treated to relatively confusing narratives. However, it seems like Rottenberg wanted each installation to “abide by their own hermetic, relentless logic.” No one looked like they understood anything, but I believe that that was Rottenberg’s intent.

The Rose’s spring exhibit is definitely worth seeing. Although you may not understand all the art included in it, it is thought-provoking. These exhibits are open until June 8, 2014.

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