

A Humble River Town Acquires the Ambience of Art

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Above, windows in a former factory that's becoming an exhibition space for the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, N.Y. Right, "Untitled (Rhode Island Shore)" by Peter Clark, at Collaborative Concepts in Beacon.

By KAY LARSON

THINK of it as Brooklyn Heights marries Main Street. Two-story brick buildings rub shoulders on either side of the two-lane road ambulating through this 18th- and 19th-century river settlement about an hour north of Manhattan. The pace is languid enough that moms quietly feed brownies to toddlers in the lazy sunlight falling on a sidewalk cafe. A backdrop of fluffy Catskill mountains rises at the end of the road.

But the turn-of-three-centuries ambience hides dramatic changes that are reshaping derelict buildings — themselves museum pieces — into the Hudson Valley's most promising hot spot for contemporary art. Down the hill, toward the Hudson River, Dia:Beacon is emerging in a din of whirring, grinding, sawing and polishing, as a former 1929 Nabisco box-printing factory becomes a stunning 292,000-square-foot Clean White Space, the perfect north-lighted container envisioned — and so named — by the Minimalists of the 60's generation.

Though closed for construction and installation until May, this dramatic extension of the Dia Art Foundation already contains three of Richard Serra's massive "Torqued Ellipses," purchased from a recent exhibition at Dia's headquarters in Chelsea, and a fourth Serra, a "Torqued Spiral," on long-term loan from the artist. They fill a long room, a former railway dock looking west to the river. The only illumination comes from a single wall of industrial windows. (There are no electric fixtures here or elsewhere in

the galleries to disturb the purity of space and light — a strategy borrowed from Donald Judd's installations in Marfa, Tex.)

The effect on the Serras is remarkable. In Chelsea, these great nested arcs of Cor-ten steel seemed oddly weightless. Here in the soft glow, the sculptures loom overhead with the presence of dusky red-rock canyons. Their mass is both balletic and colossal, like aircraft carriers on point. They are by far the most monumental sculptures in

An upstate extension of the Dia foundation leads the way as artists move into old Beacon, N.Y.

the Hudson Valley, short of the landscape itself.

For decades Dia supported the art of Judd, Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, Walter de Maria, Michael Heizer, Fred Sandback, Andy Warhol and their peers. Dia's director, Michael Govan, looking for space to house this huge collection, had been seeking a building in Manhattan. Then, in early 1998, he flew his light airplane up the Hudson. "Flying is my only hobby," he explained to a visitor one day recently in Beacon.

Soaring up the east bank of the river, Mr. Govan and his passengers, Dia's curator Lynne Cooke and the architect Richard Gluckman, were taking a leisurely airing to Mass MOCA in North Adams, Mass. They

circled over Garrison, N.Y., looking for a ruined castle Flavin had once convinced Dia to buy as an exhibiting space for his work. Then Cold Spring, then Beacon.

"We always look at factories," Mr. Govan said. "It's Dia's thing to find old buildings." This one, intriguingly, sat adjacent to the train station.

On the ground, Mr. Govan studied aviation maps and town records to locate the owner, International Paper. Then he drove up to see the building.

"It was a cold, dreary late winter day," he said, "and when I walked into the building it was brighter inside than outside." The maple floors, the open interior spaces and the simplicity of the building entranced him. "I was ready to take it on the spot," he said.

But first he brought all of Dia's artists up, and then the trustees. Eventually, International Paper donated the building and land. New York State gave \$2.7 million; another \$30 million came from private donors, chiefly Dia's chairman, Leonard Riggio, who is also the chairman of Barnes & Noble, Inc., and his wife, Louise.

Dia's presence is already transforming the Hudson watershed. The real estate developer William S. Ehrlich, smitten with Beacon's potential, has purchased an abandoned factory complex at the junction of Fishkill Creek and the Hudson. With David Ross, the former director of the San Fran-

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sculptors, joined Eric Arctander, Richard Bruce and Stephen Spaccarelli, who are painters, for five weeks of public labors in the gallery. They dug clay, cut up fallen trees, piled up stones, spread sand and gathered rusted concrete wire, concrete dust and scrap steel.

"Sticks & Stones" is a testament to simple ingenuity and playfulness. Nothing is pretentious; everything looks as if it was lots of fun to make. Slicing maple tree limbs into hockey-puck-style discs, Mr. Spaccarelli set them afloat on barely visible threads tacked to the ceiling; the chiming vortex rises off the floor like a flotilla of aliens on their way home. Mr. Spaccarelli and Mr. Bruce soaked their hands in mud and, scrabbling with streaky fingers, literally made a gesture painting right on the wall: Joan Mitchell in amber.

The sculptors took a cue equally from the painters. Mr. Clark laid a few metal squares on the floor and dotted them with seashells, creating a credible New Image painting. And he shaped a downed tree with a chain saw, hand adz and polisher; the hunks of polished wood bend along grain lines, appearing to nod and converse like elfin personages.

Over the summer, two artists, Peter Clark and Alex Uribe, organized an exhibition, "Sticks & Stones: (Under Construction)," inviting five artists, including themselves, to make art exclusively from natural materials and construction castoffs found in Beacon. Setting aside their usual solitary studio habits, Mr. Clark and Mr. Uribe, both

Mr. Uribe leaned bluestone slabs together into peaks that rise and fall in wave forms cascading across the floor, through the back room and out to the gravel patio at the rear. He also gathered chunks of mortar from a ruined chimney and — simply by nesting their corners together in a box — set up a

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flow of right angles that are a pickup-truck version of one of Frank Stella's black paintings.

The painters turned to the earth elements with evident glee. Mr. Arcander converted whitish granite-type river stones into impressionist studies of themselves by the simple expedient of multicolored pastel pigments, which give them a speckled bluestone coloring.

Mr. Bruce made a "constructivist painting" by settling geometric strips of steel on a bed of sand, invoking the floating shapes favored by Malevich and the Russian modernists. On the floor nearby he gave a nod to Minimalism, with two long thin lozenges of steel, twigs, ochre earth and gravel.

The lozenges could have been the subject of a long-winded prose article in an elite art journal some 30 years ago when Minimalism, Earth Art, Process Art and their ilk were young and fierce. Now that Mr. Serra's generation has claimed its place and abandoned its revolutionary zeal, the wit of these earthy dirt paintings seems mild and bucolic — nostalgia in sepia. □