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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Sculptures Share Space With Strutting Peacocks

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Hamilton— THESE days, Grounds for Sculpture is looking better than ever. With strutting peacocks competing with brilliantly colored glass sculptures by Dale Chihuly, and a sublime landscape that has benefited from the chronic spring rain, the park is an ethereal setting for the 201 sculptures set around the 35-acre garden.

The newest outdoor installation is "Space of Stone" by Magdalena Abakanowicz, the Polish artist who exhibits internationally. She has been working on this project for three years. Although the piece is in place, its official unveiling is in late July, and so on a recent visit, the gravel path to the site was unfinished while tape marked the future placement of lights. But even in the midst of the work going on around it, the sculpture makes a dramatic impact.

The piece consists of 22 triangular monoliths positioned in an arrangement that may seem random but forms a partial circle between two manmade grass-covered berms. The monoliths are made of textured stones of Pennsylvania and Vermont gray granite, and possess a painterly effect, with colors ranging from eggshell white to warm golden brown to coal black. As a visitor approaches, the stones appear to emerge from the site.

Ms. Abakanowicz has commented, "Sculpture does not decorate but is part of the metaphoric language which conveys more than we can express in words."

Inside the museum buildings, Zigi Ben-Haim and Illya Kagan share the spring indoor exhibition schedule with Mr. Chihuly, whose winter show was extended until July 6. Mr. Ben-Haim, 57, an Israeli-American artist, is represented by 13 metal sculptures and four recent paintings, an enlarged version of an exhibition that has been touring nationally for several years. Mr. Kagan, a 34-year-old American, is showing works made since 1991 -- 11 oil paintings and 15 terra cotta sculptures.

Mr. Ben-Haim's sculptures, from 1984 to 1999, are comprised of geometric units of painted wire mesh over steel frames, revealing the artist's assimilation of contemporary artistic trends.

Intended for outdoor display, the human-scaled abstract sculptures are, regrettably, exhibited indoors here.

In "Without Neighbors," the juxtaposition of a cocoon-like floor piece with cantilevered boxes demands multiple viewpoints. Mesh gives the biomorphic sculpture a sense of lightness and airiness; at the same time, its see-through covering allows the basic structure to be seen.

Mr. Ben-Haim moves effortlessly between the three-dimensional and two-dimensional. As a painter, he begins with a metal frame from which hang rectangular or square panels of aluminum. "Rhapsody in Blue" is a large mural of 384 parts that leans diagonally against the gallery wall. This complex work depicts text, musical notations and pictorial imagery to create a syncopated visual rhythm.

Mr. Kagan's work is overtly representational. Working outside, he paints scenes of charmed places that reveal a refreshingly genuine immediacy. With "Moor Road, Fall," the artist concentrates on the colorful autumnal landscape of Nantucket, where he lives and works. The road determines the soaring perspective design, while the sky provides the light and atmosphere, echoing the practices of many late 19th-century French painters.

As a sculptor, the artist also works in a painterly way. Fingerprints can be seen in the terra cotta he modeled for a group of portraits of celebrated artists who similarly enjoyed the outdoors. Though the 19th-century painter Eastman Johnson may seem like a curious choice, the artist also had a studio on Nantucket.

Mr. Kagan's sculptures are presented on elegantly simplified wooden pedestals that look like legs supporting each bust.

Mr. Kagan has also created a series of sculptures based on Honoré Daumier's line drawings of lawyers. Like a political commentator, he could not resist the 1992 Presidential campaign, creating expressive images of George Bush ("Politician I") and Bill Clinton ("Politician II").

The artist is enthusiastically looking forward to the 2004 election.

"Zigi Ben-Haim, "Journey With Me" and "Illya Kagan, Sculpture and Paintings" are at Grounds for Sculpture, 18 Fairgrounds Road, Hamilton, through July 13. Information: (609)586-0616 or www.groundsfor Sculpture.org.

Photos: "Politician II," above, a portrait of Bill Clinton, by Illya Kagan; "Without Neighbors," below, by Zigi Ben-Haim; and "Space of Stone," by Magdalena Abakanowicz are on display at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton.