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ART REVIEW

At MIT, seeing art as a place you can return to



“Gwenneth Boelens: At Odds” is up at MIT List Visual Arts Center through April 16.

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 02, 2017

CAMBRIDGE — Every now and then you’ll hear a loud “Clomp!” as you walk through Gwenneth Boelens’s show at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. It’s the sound of “Riveted II,” two wooden batons mounted on metal. They bang. Minutes pass, and you forget them. Then, “Clomp!”

“Gwenneth Boelens: At Odds” and “Charlotte Moth: Seeing While Moving,” running concurrently at the List, squint at intangibles such as time, space, memory, and absence. These are common enough subjects, but Boelens and Moth sometimes approach them sidelong. Scads of art theory or odd groupings obfuscate a direct response. Moth, in particular, drags us down hot, overly conceptual rabbit holes.

It's easy to get lost. Then "Riveted II" has the refreshingly jolting effect of the swat of a Zen master's switch on the back of a dreamy monk. It wakes you up.

Still, individual works in the exhibitions prompt bittersweet responses to lost utopias, uncanny associations of place and time, and heightened attunement to the senses.

"At Odds," Boelens's first museum show, is blessedly corporeal; that provides something to grab hold of, although the works don't always dovetail. "Riveted II," for all its usefulness, is an outlier, more mental than physical.

The Dutch artist studied dance as a child; and in a monograph about her work she remembers rehearsing in a cramped studio, having to shrink her movements as she neared a wall. Her art has a similar sense of physical appraisal.

Boelens started off as a photographer employing 19th-century techniques such as wet-plate collodion, fascinated as much by the painterly process as she was by the outcome. That focused her on the traces her actions left. Kilroy was here : a simultaneous sense of presence and absence.

Now, she works with one of the oldest and most direct forms of photography, the photogram. Expose photosensitive paper to light, and whatever casts a shadow leaves a pale image.

The high-voltage results, ghostly and strident, capture shadowy intimations of the artist playing with shields, sticks, and swaths of fabric, in layers of light with febrile halos of purple and burnt orange, like after-images seared into your retina. Her movement reckons with the physical. So does scale. Two of the photograms are bigger than you or me; engulfing, yet the figure of the artist — sometimes, just bits of her — makes them personal.

Shields used in the works' performance lie on the floor. In the photogram "At Odds," the shield is all opaque light — angelic, yet defensive. On the ground, it's a discarded tortoise shell — heavy, dead, and done.

The biggest work here, "Undo," a scrim of woven, whitish fabric suspended from the ceiling, divides the gallery. It likewise balances epic with intimate. Boelens meticulously pulled threads from along the center. Several threads unraveling at one end narrow to just a single thread at the other.

Red smudges surround the vanishing line. The artist used a chemical that leaves fingerprints behind. It's all very "CSI" — prints, a perpetrator! — until you think of all the fingers that have touched this cloth, the traces not left behind. Therein lies a history, a community through time.

The British-born Moth is nominally based in Paris, but she's a nomad, traveling among artist's residencies with an analog camera in hand. Since 1999, she's built "Travelogue," the collection of

photographs she draws upon to make her art.

Moth would fit perfectly in “The Artist’s Museum,” at the Institute of Contemporary Art (through March 26), which celebrates artists’ collections as embodiments of their imaginations. Like the artists in that show, Moth makes spry, associative work in which the gaps between images can be as fertile as the images themselves.

In “Noting Thoughts” several of her photos — of corners, graffiti, light fixtures, things we walk past without noticing — sit upright on tables highlighted with sections of color. Snippets of text appear on the tabletops, philosophical tidbits about language, structure, and presentation. Moth invites us to make our own associations as we move through, to intuit a place that has a skeleton of ideas and flesh of concrete and metal.

Things get claustrophobic in “Study for a 16mm Film,” a navel-gazing projection at the back of the gallery that dwells on glass fixtures, mirrors, shifting lights, and rotating platforms. It’s all about staging, engaging in a decades-long debate — whether or not to use a plinth has been a burning topic. Display matters, of course. It shapes our experience of the art. But as a film’s subject matter, it’s airless.

Moth’s a modernism fan girl, and that, too, could get exclusionary, but her slide show “For Claude Parent and Victor Pasmore,” named for architects, is sweetly melancholy and hypnotic. One projector spotlights Parent’s modernist church in France, another Pasmore’s Brutalist pavilion in England.

Images take us outdoors to a verdant gully, to an algae-topped pool; we see stained expanses of concrete, and light pouring warmly through stained glass. Modern architecture was once visionary and utopian; now it’s ancestral, stately but passé. Time has encroached — done its damage, foiled dreams — but still these places draw us.

Boelens says in her monograph that she sees a work of art as a place you can return to. Her art and Moth’s have that in common. For Moth, that place is in your head. For Boelens, it’s in your body. Sometimes, they get us there.

GWENNETH BOELEN: At Odds

CHARLOTTE MOTH: Seeing While Moving

At MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through April 16. 617-253-4680, listart.mit.edu

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@cmecq](https://twitter.com/cmecq).