

The Architect's Newspaper

Drama School

“Spaces without drama or surface is an illusion, but so is depth” at Chicago’s Graham Foundation

By Matthew Messner

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Spaces without drama or surface is an illusion, but so is depth, at Chicago's Graham Foundation. (Courtesy The Graham Foundation)

There is a productive dissonance among the many pieces in the current exhibition at the Graham Foundation, *Spaces without drama or surface is an illusion, but so is depth*. A dissonance between scale and size, performance and perception, and artifact and object. Each contribution from the 24 participating designers, architects, and artists implies its own narrative, separate from the other pieces. Yet, as a whole, the entire show has a clarity that resonates across the disparate objects and installations.



(Courtesy The Graham Foundation)

Spaces without drama is curated by the Mexico City–based Ruth Estévez and Wonne Ickx of LIGA, Space for Architecture. The duo propositioned participants to explore two-dimensional surfaces as a means of producing architectural space. The prompt is a direct reaction to the recent proliferation of digital collage, and an attempt at drawing a lineage through the historic works of canonical postmodern designers and artists. The result is a diverse set of works that straddle the lines of stage set, model, and installation. The genesis of much of the work comes from the Aldo Rossi’s *Small Scientific Theatre* and David Hockney’s design for *The Magic Flute*, both of which are present in the show in drawing and collage form. From that starting point, the more contemporary work ranges from full-scale environments to carefully crafted maquettes.

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(Courtesy The Graham Foundation)

At the largest scale, pieces throughout the show set the gallery spaces as stages to be explored, or backdrops to view the work against. *Cité de Réfuge* by OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen wraps two walls in a large curtain. This blocks off the Graham Foundation's ground-floor windows, while extending the visitor's view to *Ceuta: a refugee city in the no-man's-land between Spain and Morocco*. Batia Suter's *Vale/Cabinet* plays a similar game with some of the Graham's built-in cabinetry, which is tactically covered in digitally manipulated scenery. Silke Otto-Knapp's *Stage (after Kurt Schwitters)* is the closest to what might be called a true stage set. Large hand-painted panels fill the end of one gallery space, forcing viewers to weave among them to circulate through to another space. The result is a purposefully exposed "back-stage" which questions the piece's own illusion of space.

Other works seem to fit more comfortably in the category of illustration or model, but these still rarely play out as simple representations. While *House no.8, Image no.1, with Layers and Masks* by MOS Architects seems to be a simple, yet uncannily flat, model, its position in the middle of the gallery allows guests to peak through a peephole on its back side. This effectively filters the view of the rest of the gallery through the model. Sam Jacob's *Untitled* touches on a similar effect with a model of a series of spaces divided by four translucent colored planes. The resulting confusion of space and scale looking at the model itself can be extended to the greater gallery space as one looks through it.



(Courtesy The Graham Foundation)

Johnston Marklee's *Teatro del Mare* inversely makes the guest question the scale of the piece itself. The large model appears to be representing a scaled space, referencing the office's Vault House. But the inclusion of a series of full-size objects designed by Rossi twists the perception of the piece from scale model to display case, and then back. The cheekiest of any of the pieces is *Drop-Leaf Table in Oblique Elevation (with Drop-Leaf Table in Oblique Elevation)* by Norman Kelley. A finely crafted piece of furniture in its own right, the *Drop-Leaf Table* is skewed, as if directly built from an axonometric drawing. Sitting against the gallery wall, like one might expect a similar piece of furniture, the table is also the display stand for a smaller flattened version of itself. It should also be noted that the leaves and a small drawer in the table, like those of the miniature version, don't "work." This makes the table, as well-made as it may be, about as useful as any other theater set piece.



(Courtesy The Graham Foundation)

Along with the other fascinating works from the likes of Charles Moore, baukuh, fala atelier, Emilio Ambasz, Monadnock, Pezo von Ellrichshausen, and more, the show is a delight for the academic, as well as those simply interested in beautiful images and objects. At the least one will get to see original pieces by Hockney and Rossi, and at the most one will gain a new respect for power of flatness to evoke space, and—dare I say—drama.

Spaces without drama or surface is an illusion, but so is depth is on show at The Graham Foundation through July 1, 2017.

Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts
4 W Burton Place, Chicago