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Sculpture MFA showcases personal space

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The first two artists in Part One of the Sculpture MFA thesis exhibition currently up at Green Gallery are not using the gallery to display a collection of discrete objects; rather, they have created installations that turn public viewing spaces into personal rooms.

Joe Graham-Felsen's ART '11 room is the first of the two. Everything in the space is white — the walls, the ceiling, the geometric objects of various shapes and sizes positioned around the room, as well as the frames of the pictures hanging on the walls. The objects range from a large white flowerpot with a spiny plant growing out of it to a knee-high parking divider and waist- and head-high pyramidal structures of ambiguous function. The artist is standing front-and-center in his house: a large, white square block stretching from floor to ceiling with a picture of his face hanging at eye-level on each of its four plains.

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While the room is arranged comfortably for the square Joe, we, the visitors in his angular home, are forced to squeeze around parking-dividers, to edge between the spiny plant and the wall, and finally to squirm through one of the small doorways — each only a foot and a half high — if we want to move to the adjoining room. Like other art that plays with and appropriates space, Joe forces us to enter his space: we are invited to navigate but forced to accommodate. The installation differs from others like it because the artist is not the absent creator but is cast in the room as one of the objects affecting us. In this way Graham-Felsen complicates the artist's role by adding a physical and interactive dimension to what, in similar pieces, is often a strictly conceptual role.

This is also why the room next to Graham-Felsen's provides such an interesting contrast. For the adjacent installation, Stephen Dewyer ART '11 has mounted cameras both inside and outside the room — all trained on the doors leading in — and situated projectors in front of mirrors. These mirrors in turn reflect projected light and images back through a web of sheets and blinds that are fixed to the ceiling and trail

down almost to the floor. But because the projectors project the images being captured by the camera in real time, at certain moments and at strange angles, you can see bits of yourself bouncing across the space.

Here there are two options: the viewer's presence can create a filmed reflection when the person being projected is the person watching, or the room can become temporarily inhabited by people in the hallway outside — also as a result of video and projection. In both cases, the space functions much more like a dynamic stage (the artist as hidden director) than a static environment with a permanent and inanimate resident. In opposition to Graham-Felsen's, this room turns on the transience of the images flitting across the walls as viewers and passersby step in and out of the camera's viewfinder.

The issue of artist and stage comes up again in a video piece by Andy Maas ART '11 on display in the lower mezzanine. The video opens with a puppet-sized stage built by the artist with two small doorways opening onto it. At first the stage is empty except for a glass of water, a Snickers bar and a Twix bar, but soon two hands enter from the side doors and promptly unwrap the candy. The hands then begin kneading the two chocolate bars together before dunking them into the water and kneading them some more. By the end of the process, the two bars have inevitably combined to form a brown roll that looks decidedly like fecal matter, and as if to emphasize this, at the end of the video one of the two hands squeezes the chocolate log through it like a surrogate sphincter.

The show on the stage begins as a childish endeavor — playing with chocolate — but devolves into a very explicit representation of the digestive process. Playing is something that often involves more than one person, but digestion and defecation are the most private processes of all. By conflating the two and by putting them on a stage, Maas subtly turns the viewer from a benign spectator into a voyeur of the highest order, simultaneously blurring the line between performing and revealing.

There are two other artists whose work is featured in the show: Zeineb Shahidi Marnani ART '11 and Rachel Salamone ART '11. Each of the five exhibitions is equipped to stand alone, but taken together certain emergent properties are brought to bare: the transitions from the first to the second room is just one of the more obvious examples.

Walk through slowly — try to go alone — and the rooms will begin to give you something back.

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