



## Entering Andrea Zittel's Critical Space

Walking into Andrea Zittel's new show "Critical Space" at MOCA/Geffen, a midcareer survey that first showed last winter at the New Museum in Chelsea, one runs head-on into *Homestead Unit #7*, a stealth, desert shack framed from light steel that evokes midcentury austerity gone off the grid. The basic design is inspired by classic homestead cabins, and its quaint dimensions are intended to avoid the permitting requirements of San Bernardino County, where, to this day, many such structures can still be found in the desert around Joshua Tree, close to where the artist's "A-Z West" compound stands on the eastern edge of town. Since her arrival there in the fall of 1999, Zittel's desert digs have been a magnet for culturistas from around the globe who come for the "High Desert Test Sites," an annual show that has featured established artists like Raymond Pettibon and Jack Pierson as well as notable up-and-comers such as Eli Sudbeck (a.k.a. Assume Vivid Astro Focus), Jeddiah Caesar and Mungo Thomson.

*Homestead Unit #7*, with its angled, corrugated-steel roof, birch-panel walls, built-in benches, shelves and bed, is an artist's vision realized in architectural terms: the unit serves as effectively as a sculptural work as it does as an actual residence and draws on a theme that runs throughout the obsessively reconsidered, experimental version of modern life featured in "Critical Space," the psychological and physical paring down of living concerns.

Born and raised in Escondido, Zittel completed her formal training at the left-of-center Rhode Island School of Design and, like many artists who came up in the early '90s, landed in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Setting up shop in that Ellis Island-like arts incubator, Zittel, by 1993, was enjoying solo shows in San Francisco, Los Angeles and, of course, New York. Her fast ascent provided the artist with little time to reflect. Until maybe now, that is.

"I've always kind of laughed at my own uptightness, and looking back now at the early work, that's just something that's so present for me," she laughs. "I mean, almost to the point of feeling like some of the work suf-

## Be your own guinea pig

fers from a complete absence of my own hand. But growing up in the '80s and looking at artists like Jeff Koons or like Ashley Bickerton's work, which had this very clean, well-made, traditionally considered masculine artistic authority about it, I was always drawn to that kind of superclean aesthetic and thought it might be interesting for a young woman to try producing works like that."

We're standing in her studio in Highland Park, and it's not long before her MOCA show goes up. Zittel is contemplating a brightly colored panel earmarked for one of the walls.

"You know, when I got out of school in the early '90s, that was probably the height of institutional criticism, and I was making these pieces with this kind of retro '80s feel to them," she continues, "but really almost as a way of rebelling from that. Now, though, as I get older and more brain cells die, I get less uptight."

And it's true, uptight isn't the vibe Zittel gives off, even as she brushes aside her streaked-brown hair, clicks her mouse and frets over the 141 e-mails she has yet to open. Maybe it's the self-professed 'southern Cal mall girl' twang that all her East Coast years failed to erase, or maybe it's just the undeniable truth about her, but with Zittel, one feels like the

defenses are quickly relaxed. She's frank about pretty much everything, including herself - not afraid to point out her own foibles and quick to admit she's searching for answers on all fronts at all times.

That being said, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone

who wouldn't be sucking a little wind juggling a formidable international career, a relationship, a 3 year old son, constantly in-flux residence/living experiments located in Brooklyn, Joshua Tree and Los Angeles, not to mention the deadline bearing down on a show surveying the last 15 years of her career - or, at least, the pieces the art handlers could 'manage to get through the front door.'

"With these kinds of things, there's the ideal show, and then there's the show that's possible, she says, having dropped her paintbrush and moved to the other workroom, where she is now cutting triangles of cloth that will eventually end up adorning her opening-night outfit. "We made a list and then narrowed it down. Of course, there were some larger, outdoor pieces that couldn't come. And then there was [L.A. collector] Dean Valentine's Escape Vehicle, which the art movers couldn't guarantee they could get out of the house without damaging. So, you know, you kinda get what you can, then do the best to try and make it work as a whole."

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**altogether and just use bowls.**

The worst part about the unwieldy logistics of her bigger pieces is that the show can't fully accommodate the collaborative nature of her work.

"A big part of the idea, and a big part of my work that's very important to me, is that people would personalize them, so that each one had a whole life once they physically left my studio," she says. "For me, with the Living Units and Escape Vehicles, by far the most interesting thing about them is what people do with them once they get them and what that reveals about them and what they value...what someone does when they can do anything."

Hanging out with Zittel, one gets a sense of the unique space she inhabits both as a person and as an artist. She is at once engaged almost relentlessly in an individual pursuit of alternatives to the commonplace: and at the same time extremely generous and thirsting for the back-and-forth more traditionally associated, for lack of a better term, with a collective-oriented artist. After all, it's the problems presented by everyday living, lifestyle, and modern life in general that are the essence of Zittel's work.

For example, for 2000's *Free Running Rhythms and Patterns*, Zittel lived in a room ready for personal touches for a week without any clocks under the watchful eye of a surveillance camera, which later provided a time log for reference. The concept was to explore how it feels to live without imposed time structures. Or, as Zittel puts it, "an unmediated experience created by a very mediated situation."

Lately, though, the artist admits that her "art of lifestyle" trademark has been a cause for increasing disquietude, now that everybody and their brother seem hell-bent on grabbing their own little chunk of lifestyle-maven real estate.

"I always reference this Jerry Brown quote where he was talking about the importance of becoming a 'citizen' versus just becoming a 'consumer,'" says Zittel, "I worry that we've become so conditioned as consumers that we're only capable of choosing from the options that are presented to us. We need to remember we're capable of creating other options, that there's a whole other world of possibilities beyond what we're being offered."

"But if you had the right idea, would you be open to the mass production of it?" I ask.

"Absolutely. Hey, I would have loved to invent the safety pin. I think it's brilliant. For years I've been telling anyone that would listen that we could get rid of plates altogether and just use bowls," she says, sifting through a rack of smocks, all made by her extended A-Z posse with a collective eye on creating a Smock Shop.

"But how does one saw into a big porterhouse when it's all piled up in a bowl?"

"That's exactly what David Dodge [Zittel's significant other, father of their son, Emmett, and an artist in his own right] says!" she fires back, a little exasperated. "Look, it's simple. You precut the steak, cook it in a wok, then set it in the bowl overtop a layer of rice and vegetables."

Zittel's well-manufactured art, with its allusions to an almost Danish industrial aesthetic, is softened by her Southern California playfulness and made all that much more compelling by the fact that the artist lives what she preaches. She is her own guinea pig. She even, spent chunks of one summer floating around on the *A-Z Pocket Property* - an island made of concrete off the coast of Denmark.

Her first stab at this kind of thing came in 1993, when she attempted, within the confines of her 200-square-foot storefront, to create her own breed of bantam chicken. The endeavor made *The New Yorker* despite Zittel, under pressure from local authorities and a panicky landlord, having to pull the plug on the project.

Zittel's "Personal Uniforms," which she began fabricating back in the early '90s, became another early trademark. The artist would wear one of the series of single outfits for an entire season, more or less. "That way, while I was wearing it, I had time to plot my next outfit," she says.

Such experiments have turned her into a sort of avatar in long hippie skirt and hiking boots, dipping back into the Renaissance-era merging of art and science.

Cruising around "Critical Space" just prior to its opening, we come upon the now-infamous *A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight-Breeds*, a sculptural piece in the form of a pyramid made of tiny breeding cages. Next is an extensive array of the aforementioned uniforms taken from the past 15 years: beginning with the roughly hewn smocks, then heading toward more elegant, often crocheted cuts that look like some kind of far-out Pebbles/Barbarella garb.

To the left of the entrance is one of two more recently completed pieces - a crocheted wall hanging called *Single-Strand:Forward Motion* that appears as a cascade of right angles formed by brown and black yarn. I ask if she was thinking about Sol LeWitt's wall drawings when she made the piece.

"Absolutely," Zittel says. "I'm totally interested in the way that logic can shape form, but didn't want the logic to be the end in and of itself. Throughout the execution of the piece, I remained actively engaged in seeing how far I could take those rules, and how I could push them to create a kind of formal and visual complexity."

Although Zittel has been adjunct teaching since the mid-'90s (Yale, Columbia, UCLA and Art Center College of Design), she recently, accepted a steady post with the MFA department at USC. I ask why she took the gig.

"I don't think my answer is exactly what you're looking for," she says, "probably the biggest reason I continue teaching is because it's a way for me to continue learning. Sometimes it just seems like the older you get, even amongst my artist friends, the less we actually talk about art."

"And for that privilege, what is it that you try to impart to your students?" I ask.

"I think the key that people can get from an MFA program is to figure out what it is they do and learn how to do it to the best of their ability. If they have enough of a sense of themselves, they won't let us ruin them."

Continuing on through "Critical Space," the most satisfaction comes from imagining oneself physically inside the creations/experiments. To fully digest Zittel's intent, sit, down, close your eyes and really imagine how the *A-Z Warm and Cool Chambers*, basically two roomy closets that the artist constructed after she'd moved into a larger, more industrial space and found the temperature inside would vary to extremes - might soothe and temper an afternoon respite.

Though Zittel is often referenced, both positively and negatively, as an "artist of lifestyle," I would argue that she is more an artist of environments. The A-Z Escape Vehicles, wherein the artist, in her collaborative way, has created movable spaces to suit the user collector, are perfect examples. The show includes only two, but it's enough to get the gist. One, belonging to her NYC gallerist, Andrea Rosen, is a kind of powder blue, pimp-mama mobile. The other is a kind of Spartan Jacuzzi-on-wheels. The two pieces imply the range of possibilities, though it would have been more effective to see a half dozen more from the quiver.

On opening night, despite the logistical and other anxieties that come with a show of this magnitude, and despite her show careening through the mannequins featuring her stylish creations, Zittel seems upbeat about the show. In particular, she's happy to have a venue in Los Angeles, which seems to be her adopted home, that marks a kind of return to her Southern California roots.

"When people ask me, my answer is always pretty much," she smiles, "I'm running East Coast software through a West Coast hard drive."

**ANDREA ZITTEL** "Critical Space," MOCA at the Geffen Contemporary. 152 N. Central Ave., Downtown LA, 626-6222 Through May 14