



Art Papers
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Rob Fischer is interested in the things people leave behind. Abandoned houses, furniture, books, wood flooring, and metal pipes are treasures to this artist, who transforms discarded materials into evocative, poignant works that reflect today's mobile society.

Fischer lives and works in Brooklyn, but his work is heavily influenced by the rural landscape of his native Minnesota. One of his earliest works, *Disappearing Boat*, 1998, is rooted in the covered fishing vessels unique to the south shore of Lake Superior and in the tiny cabins floating on the Mississippi River. Starting with the hull of a used boat, he built up a rectangular structure that looks much like a boxcar. The roof and siding, however, are made of panes of mirrors.

Traditionally, we climb into a boat. But Fischer's structure has no entrance, and we are forced to view the work from the exterior. This boat traded its functionality to become the shell of something past. The mirrored structure seems to hold memories, inaccessible and hidden. Those who try to enter or to see what lies within the walls are rebuked, finding only their reflection.

Fischer made another similar structure of metal, mirror, and glass. This one borrowed the familiar shape of an ice fishing cabin or a mobile home. Its first incarnation, *Mirrored House on Floats*, 1999, was created during a residency at Art In General in New York. The gallery was open while the work was under construction, and visitors could wander

inside the six-foot-long structure to view the interior. After the show, Fischer lengthened the house into the fourteen-foot piece, *Mirrored House*, 1999, which is a closed structure like *Mirrored Boat*.

Lying closer to the ground, *Mirrored House* does something optically quite different: it absorbs the environment around it. "Its physicality is still there," explains Fischer, "but visually it disappears." To exploit this amazing effect, he took the house to numerous locations in central Minnesota and photographed it.

Floated on a lake in a crisp winter landscape, the reflection of the house in the water and the water onto the sides of the house makes it appear as if the structure were

TEXT / REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

AMIDST THE RUBBLE: THE ART OF ROB FISCHER



PAGE 1: **Robert Fischer**, *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 2005, wood, plaster, lights, wiring, plumbing, flooring, scaffolding (installation view: Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York) / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: one of two panels from *Mirrored House*, 1999-2004, c-print, diptych: 40 x 28 inches each; *Mirrored Boat (Disappearing Boat)*, 1998, mixed media, 5 x 3.5 x 16 feet (all images courtesy of the artist, Mary Goldman Gallery, Los Angeles and Cohan and Leslie, New York)

slowly, calmly sinking. Placed in a field of knee-high grass, the building looks as if it were partly wrapped in a blanket of vibrant yellow, and partly absorbed by the deep blue of the summer sky. In the woods, the naked trees seem to grow through the structure itself. Sitting amongst the fallen leaves, it seems about to sink back into the landscape as a log decomposes back into the forest floor.

The lifecycle of objects is a paramount notion in Fischer's work. The creation, use, and subsequent abandon of an object or structure to decay constitute his process. "There is sadness in the way things are destroyed by nature," he says. "But at the same time it is a transformative experience. [*Mirrored House*] is an expression of that. It doesn't take that long for nature to take it right back."

Fischer developed a way to save his personal refuse from this fate by building dumpsters and filling them with the remnants of past sculptures. A sort of purgatory for unwanted objects, a dumpster is usually a temporary receptacle for abandoned matter

on its way to the junkyard. Fischer's steel-framed dumpsters, however, preserve and somehow glorify his waste. Their glass-paneled sides ensure visitors are able to see the varied contents.

In his work for the 2004 Whitney Biennial, *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies)*, a dumpster holds books, chairs, floorboards, and a system of metal pipes, which run water continuously. It is as if the artist were acknowledging that life-blood still pumps through these objects. For *Ash Dumpster, 2003-2004*, Fischer burned damaged or unwanted objects from his studio. The charred remains give the work a coffin-like feeling.³

Given the contemporary penchant for voyeurism, it is quite captivating to visually sift through the contents of these dumpsters. The work is nonetheless also gut wrenchingly sad. Reflected in each dumpster are objects we might have seen in our relatives' homes, stuffed into an attic, basement or garage.

Concurrently with the mirrored and dumpster sculptures, Fischer began a series of

photo-hybrids made by painting acrylic on c-type prints. Often taken from a moving car, the random snapshots are of mobile homes, hunting shacks or trucks parked randomly on the side of the road, with no other visible vestige of civilization. Once printed, Fischer obscures the windows, admitting a "feeling of being able to protect a person or personality by painting the windows all white." With the individualism removed, the structures become obscure, lone outcroppings in the landscape. In some images, Fischer adds flames and billows of dark smoke, foreshadowing these structures' eventual disappearance, swallowed up into the landscape or burned to the ground.

Fischer seems to accept the impermanence of precious or beloved objects—a trait he extends to his own practice as he reconfigures once-loved sculptures. "If I have the piece around, I'm going to keep working on it," he acknowledges. *Mirrored House*, for example, was refitted and presented at Rockefeller Plaza in 2005 in a group show entitled *Art*



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *UFO (Green and White Tilted)*, 2004, acrylic on c-print, 20 x 30 inches; *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies)*, 2004, mixed media, 8 x 7 x 20 feet

Rock. In the same year, his solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria featured *Not Waving but Drowning*. This new work was in fact half of his earlier *Disappearing Boat*, which he had sliced in two. *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies Dissected)* was also on view, re-presenting the contents of the dumpster exhibited at the Whitney Biennial in an entirely new context.

Revealing the interior of the boat and taking objects out of the dumpster, these works represent a shift towards exposure of what is sometimes hidden from view. "More than looking at [a sculpture] as an expression," he explains, "now its *function* becomes the expression." Returning to the subject of the house, he explores its structure and internal cycles in a series of important works. *Hallway that Led to Nowhere* was a fictional space Fischer created at the Mary Goldman Gallery in Los Angeles in 2003. By recontextualizing the hallway, Fischer encouraged visitors to walk through and experience the physicality of a space normally taken for granted. *Stacks*

(*Closets and Hallways*), originally presented at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum before being reworked for the Altria show, carved up hallways and rooms, and stacked them one upon another. The deconstructed architecture suggests a reconsideration of various liminal spaces—spaces in-between that are as common as they are overlooked. Also in the Altria show was *Manyfold [Minotaur]*, 2005, one of Fischer's most beautiful works to date. The elegantly simple work uses worn and discarded floorboards to trace the path in, across, up, over, down, and out of an interior architectural space.

Fischer's works reflect a collective look at impermanence and memory. No work signifies a particular story or communicates a personal history. No longer functional, his objects provide perspective. They remind us that, in our mobile society and in our quest for the shiny and new, we too often leave behind objects that were once integral to our lives, treasured and loved.

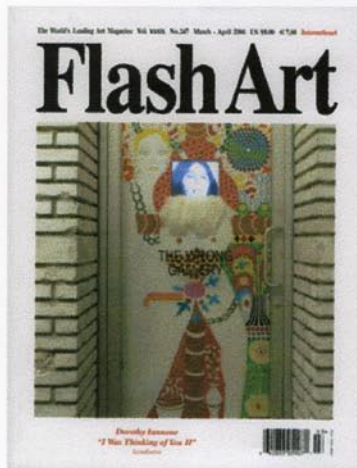
NOTES

1. See interview with the artist in *Rob Fischer. In Site*, Madison, WI: Madison Art Center, 2000.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the author's interview with the artist, June 11, 2006.
3. Robert Fischer, email to author, June 10, 2006.

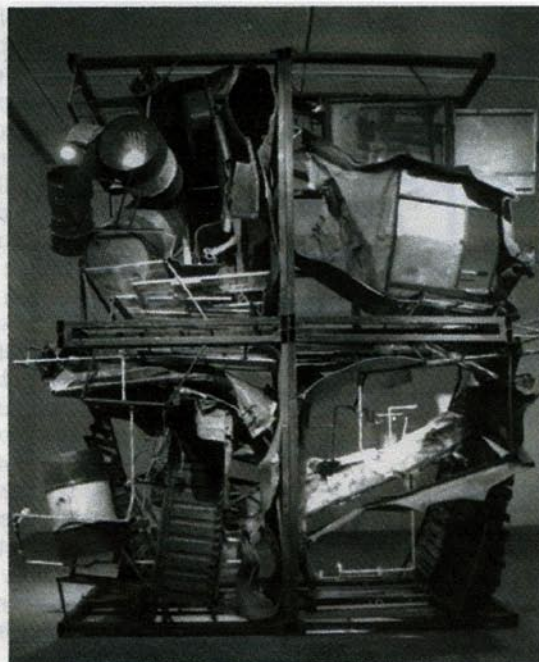
Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a critic and curator based in Atlanta.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Manyfold (Minotaur)*, 2005, wood, steel, 86 x 86 x 78 inches; *Hallway to Connect Two Perceived Rooms*, 2003, mixed media, 96 x 132 x 44 inches



Flash Art
March-April, 2006



ROB FISCHER, 30 Yards (Minor Tragedies Dissected), 2005. Steel, glass, chairs, row boat, pickup truck bed, airplane fuselage, trailer, pipes, electrical conduit, wiring, lights, fan, wood, plywood, wood flooring, papers, paint, 154 x 396 x 437 cm. Courtesy of Cohan and Leslie, New York, and Mary Goldman Gallery, Los Angeles.

NEW YORK

ROB FISCHER

WHITNEY MUSEUM AT ALTRIA

Rob Fischer's world is a jungle of junk. Steel, glass, plaster, wood and wires, old pieces of furniture and even a section of an airplane are some of the materials that Fischer finds, recycles, and then reassembles in complex constructions, which are at the same time monumental and precarious. Seven new sculptures and one photograph occupy the atrium and the gallery of the Whitney Museum at Altria.

Your vigor for life appalls me is a 35-foot tall Tower of Babel, captured in a moment of decay. Looking at it, one gets the feeling of exploring the inner composition of an eerie body made of sheetrock, architectural elements, domestic objects and pipes. All parts are assembled together through a system of plumbing and scaffolding, which run throughout the tower like the veins in an odd looking creature. A similar but subtler procedure is applied to *30 Yards (Minor Tragedies Dissected)*, an intricate sculpture realized by amassing found materials and throwing together whatever Fischer could put his hands on, including some sections of an older sculpture that was exhibited at the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

Although these Merzbau-like constructions are spectacular for their dimensions and complexity, the sculptures that better succeed are the less elaborate ones, such as *I bet you think this song is about you*, a rusted framework covered by mirrors standing like a corroded guillotine, and *God wrote Convoy in here*, a blue tractor sleeper cabin in which the artist has jammed a powerful lamp that projects a white light all around the sculpture. In these works, the artist emphasizes the simple purity of materials such as steel, mirror and light, merging a vernacular architecture with an aura of melancholia.

By recycling common things and turning functional objects into non-functional elements, Fischer adopts a strategy common in the 1970s to artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson and nowadays extremely popular among younger artists such as Simon Starling, Michael Sailstorfer and Hans Schabus. Fischer's is a DIY process-based practice hovering between construction and destruction, between functionality and uselessness. Unlike his European colleagues though, Rob Fischer also plays with his Midwesterner origins and envisions a postindustrial world where every object is covered by rust and consumed by time.

Cecilia Alemani

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2005

ART

THE BUILDERS

Art That Requires A Hard Hat

IN the contemporary art world, there's practically nothing that can't be used to get the job done. In recent years, artists have employed everything from plasticized salt to fingernail clippings to gallons of water from the Bermuda Triangle. Even DNA. (Joe Davis, a biological artist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has encoded a fragment of text by Heraclitus into a gene of a fruit fly.)

But over the last year in New York, artists increasingly needed something else: a good structural engineer. It was the year of hard-hat art.

Besides the most publicized example — "The Gates" by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Central Park, 23 meandering miles worth of nuts, bolts, steel plates, fabric and PVC tubing — there was also Robert Smithson's long-envisioned "Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island," which involved building an island from scratch, complete with 10 trees, 3 huge rocks, a bunch of shrubs and tons of dirt. For a week the project turned a boathouse on Staten Island into what looked like a convention for the Army Corps of Engineers.

Pierre Huyghe, the French artist, also descended on Central Park with a construction team worthy of a Peter Jackson epic. In October, he took over Wollman Rink to stage an elaborate art "musical" — emphasis on the quote

marks — whose set involved looming rock-concert floodlight towers and huge jet-black glaciers made from Styrofoam. Mr. Huyghe, who usually maintains the mondaine cool of a good Parisian, was practically giddy as he watched tool-belted workers swarm over the rink at his beck and call. "I am quite enjoying this," he said.

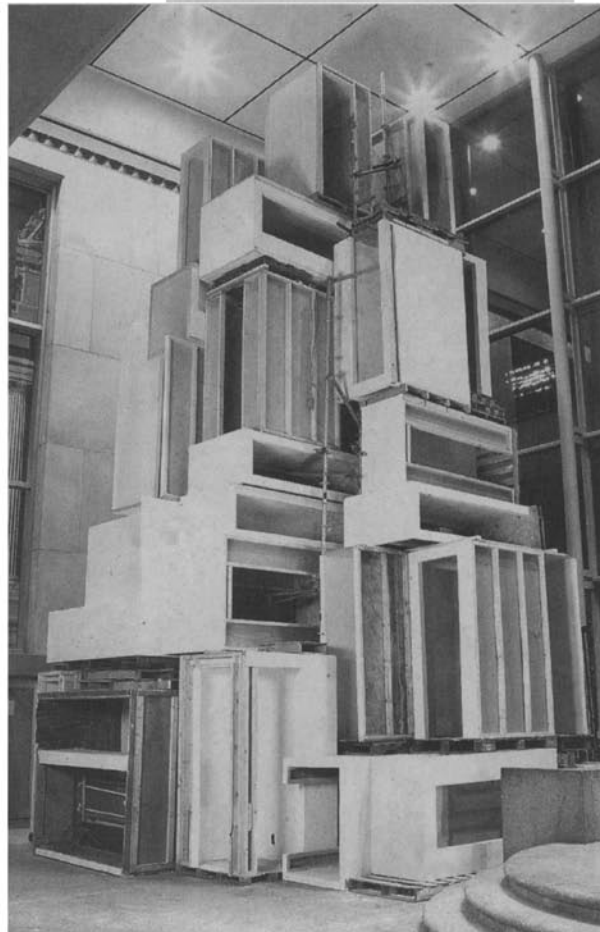
If you want to see another piece of heavy-lifting construction art that is still around, at least through Jan. 22, visit the Whitney Museum's Altria gallery at Park Avenue and 42nd Street, where the Brooklyn-based artist Rob Fischer has filled the space with works that revolve around ideas of building and demolishing.

The centerpiece — its title, "Your vigor for life appalls me," is borrowed from R. Crumb — is a 35-foot tower made from what appear to be closets and hallways, all held together with scaffolding and clamps. (An engineer had to sign off on the structural stability of the piece.)

Shamim M. Momin, the branch director of the Altria space, recalled that during the three weeks it took to assemble the installation, she and the artist changed their minds about the placement of another piece, a 3,500-pound Dumpster that has been balanced on its end and covered with mirrors. One of the Whitney's head art handlers, Filippo Gentile, looked at her in disbelief and told her he needed five minutes to walk outside and be alone, she said.

"But then he came back in completely calm and said, 'O.K., where do you want it?'"

RANDY KENNEDY



December 23, 2005

New York Times

Art in Review; Rob Fischer

By GRACE GLUECK

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria
120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street
Through Jan. 22

The sculptor Rob Fischer gives the word recycle a new dimension, using the commodious indoor courtyard here as a showroom for eight works.

In the inner gallery he has composed what might be called a junkyard still life, "30 Yards (Minor Tragedies Dissected)." Framed by a cut-apart, neatly quartered Dumpster are four compositions made largely of pieces salvaged from previous Fischer works: battered metal sheets, old oil drums, plumbing pipe, engine parts and other detritus. An American idyll of the Rust Belt genre, it may not only reflect Mr. Fischer's memories of a Midwestern childhood, but also serve as a portent of the country's future.

His chef-d'oeuvre, "Your vigor for life appalls me" (the title is from R. Crumb), is a monumental, jerry-built tower that all but touches the gallery's 40-foot ceiling. Composed of raw-looking modules of plaster and wood -- small versions of empty rooms and even coffins -- the benighted structure, sparked by the Tower of Babel, is held together by a fragile pipe scaffolding. Skinny, nonfunctional plumbing pipe threads through it like a set of veins, but doesn't bring life to it.

Across the courtyard is a different story, a tall, slender processional archway titled "I bet you think this song is about you" (from Carly Simon). It's a jazzy Broadway-vulgar structure, made from the skeleton of an upended Dumpster. Its chicly rusted framework is gridded from top to bottom (except for the passageway) by small mirrored compartments, whose reflections make it hard to see the work as a distinct entity. But it's a snappy foil to the lugubrious tower.

Smaller works lie between the two large ones, among them "Not waving but drowning," half of a steel boat hull lying on its side, whose partially mirrored interior reflects dead space. In the canon of junk sculpture, Mr. Fischer's work has a place.

~GRACE GLUECK



December 14, 2005

ROB FISCHER

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria
120 Park Avenue New York, NY
Times Square

This sculptor conjures beauty from such homely materials as rusty dumpsters, paint-spattered floorboards, dented oil drums, wallboard, and wooden pallets. In one piece, closet-size white plaster rectangles bound together with pipe scaffolding become a soaring 35-foot-high ziggurat of sepulchres, a notion not necessarily contradicted by the title, *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*. Monuments of mortality, Fischer's huge constructions retain a human scale—you want to clamber through them in search of lost inheritances.

(BAKER)



frieze
June/July/August 2005
p.171

Rob Fischer

Cohan and Leslie, New York, USA

Although he gleans most of his working materials from the scrap heap, Rob Fischer's sophisticated grasp of space, texture and colour nimbly avoids any precious piety towards found objects. Instead, he keeps his lyrical tendencies in elegant check with a strong undercurrent of wry, sunless humour.

Fischer is adept at controlling and commandeering a given space – even the unaltered raw concrete ceiling and floors played into his overall scheme of rectangular forms. For example, the viewer was not obliged actually to pass through the archway of *Altar* (2004–5), a carved-out, up-ended and mirror-faced dumpster positioned at the gallery's entrance. But even circumvented, the massive form held monolithic sway over the room, its delicately reflective industrial surface repeating the fragmented likenesses of the circumambulating viewer, the passers-by on the sidewalk outside the gallery's plate-glass window, and the speeding traffic on Tenth Avenue. The effect was dreamily aquatic but not without a degree of menace, the shape of *Altar*'s threshold subtly suggestive of a guillotine.

Set in a metal tub at the gallery's centre was *Summary (Goodyear Ecology)* (2004–5), a continuously irrigated car tyre track, carefully 'excavated' along with its unruly grass border from the artist's own cultivated swamp. The faint loamy odour and burbling stream of water contributed to the unexpectedly resonant and poetic commentary on how we imprint ourselves on the natural world in the most oblivious and innocuous ways. A clear plastic tank below the tub received the rusty oxidized run-off, while water for *Summary* was transported via a series of slender pipes, connected at right angles, which ran through a wooden enclosure similar to an adult-sized playhouse.

Lit by bare bulbs and traversed – often obstructively – by the water pipes, *Chapters (1-4)* (2004–5) consisted of narrow whitewashed hallways, stained and blotched walls and floors and cramped spaces all too reminiscent of New York's stingy living-quarters. At the centre of these interconnected 'chapters' (redolent of the grim enclosures of Ed Kienholz and the claustrophobic installations of Bruce Nauman) was *Abstract Sculpture* (2004–5), a shambolic meeting of steel, glass and wood evocative of countless recent media images of wrecked domestic dwellings. Industrially visceral in effect, the interior of *Abstract Sculpture* felt like a secret sanctuary, and viewing it like being granted an intimate glimpse of the piece's scrappy innards.

Providing a sense of relief as you exited Fischer's 'chapters' was *Greenhouse No. 4 (Repetitive Cycles)* (2004–5), a child-scaled hot-house powered by a tangle of bright orange extension cords and filled with moss and other flora collected from Fischer's yard. Even under glass and out of reach, the enclosed foliage was a welcome counterpoint to the confining spaces of his other sculptures.

On the walls Fischer mounted 'Highway 71 No. 1–3' (2004–5), a series of colour photos shot from his car window (which serves as a frame within a frame) of bedraggled Midwestern roadside trailer homes, over which he later painted fake orange flames and grey and black smoke billowing from doorframes and air vents in acts of painterly vandalism. Another series of mobile home shots, 'Unity Road No. 1–5' (2004–5), was slightly more bucolic, but the photographs' pastoral elegance was made equally disturbing by the overlay of a pyromaniac's fantasy of backwoods immolation. Like Fischer's own recycling process, the trailer long ago underwent an entropic shift in the American vernacular from the suburban home on wheels – 'everything to make you happy and contented, no matter where you choose to be' in the words of an early advert – to a commonplace wayside eyecore; rural slums on wheels that never go anywhere.

Each part of Fischer's installation worked separately and in concert with others, the whole simultaneously muscular and fragile. At a time when easy literalness seems the order of the day Fischer is refreshingly suggestive, the work oneiric yet unmythical. 'Ballad of Easy Rider 1–4' (2004–5), a series of slightly too wistful versions of the explosive final scene of the classic 1969 film of the title, again elaborated on themes developed elsewhere in the exhibition: Americans' axial and contradictory yearnings for the seductions of mobility and the rootedness of home. **Megan Ratner**



Rob Fischer
Highway 71 No. 2 (detail)
2004–5 Acrylic on C-type print mounted on Perspex 107x107cm



Artforum
Summer 2005, p. 327

ROB FISCHER

COHAN AND LESLIE

Despite the widespread reverence among younger artists for Robert Smithson's art and writing, it's rare to encounter someone who wears his mantle as snugly as Rob Fischer. The notion of entropy (technically a measure of the disorder that exists in a system), a Smithson buzzword, is used frequently in descriptions of Fischer's project. But in this show the artist hewed even closer to another Smithsonian concept, that of excavation.

Visitors to Cohan and Leslie were greeted by *Altar* (all works 2004–2005), a twenty-four-foot rusted fabricated dumpster turned on its end to create a threshold or portal. Panels from the sides of the dumpster were removed and replaced with mirrors, a favorite Smithson material. Beyond this was *Summary (Goodyear Ecology)*, an irrigated steel trough containing a tire track in wet dirt, complete with delicate blades of grass "excavated" from the artist's studio's yard. *Greenhouse No. 4 (Repetitive Cycles)* is the closest Fischer has yet come to a signature structure. This greenhouse, your classic glass-walled, pitched-roof affair, contains a watering system and flats filled with logs and moss. Nearby were the four "Chapters," maze-like architectural assemblages that resemble fragments of a cramped tenement hallway, linked together by crude plumbing. They recall both fragments of work by Gordon Matta-Clark and Smithson's smaller *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965, of which the angular composition was inspired by the symmetrical molecular structures of crystalline compounds.

Lining the walls of the gallery were two series of painted photographs that transformed Smithson's sci-fi-tinged entropy trope into a kind of rural survivalism. Recalling Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic*, 1967—the famed photo-essay in which the artist audaciously compared the industrial ruins of his hometown to the remains of ancient Rome—Fischer has mined the rural landscape of his native Minnesota. "Unity Road No. 1–5" and "Highway 71 No. 1–3" feature lone, battered campers parked in the rural wasteland. Here, they become the new "monuments" of the forgotten heartland, engulfed by painted trompe l'oeil flames.

Despite the eclectic nature of the show, the works played well against each other: the rusted dumpster next to the trough;



Rob Fischer, *Greenhouse No. 4 (Repetitive Cycles)*, 2004–2005, mixed media, 83 x 53 x 76".

one of the fragmentary "Chapters" concealing a pile of wood flooring and steel-and-glass scrap in the corner bearing the tongue-in-cheek title *Abstract Sculpture*. Combining the archeological with the poetic, Fischer confronts transience and longevity, issues that have haunted art for much of the past half-century, from Rauschenberg's rotted, mud-covered canvases and the Earthworks of Nancy Holt (incidentally Smithson's wife), to Meg Webster's plant works and Mark Dion's *Vivarium*, 2002–2003 (an homage to Smithson's *Dead Tree*, 1969).

The works in this show might not function as well individually. Together, however, they poignantly evoke a world of decay and regeneration, nurture and neglect. The one misstep was a series of small canvases titled "The Ballad of Easy Rider," inspired by the closing scenes of the titular film in which Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda's bikers meet a fiery end. The flames in these paintings mirror those in the camper photographs, but here—unlike elsewhere in the show—Fischer's subject seems hackneyed, referencing a notion of '60s cool worlds away from Smithson's.

—Martha Schwendener