

Dare to Enter

By David Brickman

Tim Clifford and Bill Mead

LAKE GEORGE ARTS PROJECT, THROUGH OCT. 17

ONE OF THE BEST SMALL-VENUE exhibitions of the year is now on view at the Lake George Arts Project, whose Courthouse Gallery is a welcoming square room of intimate proportions. The temporary marriage of

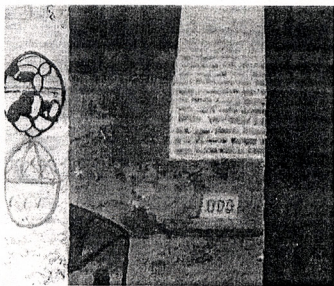
1999 to 2003, about half of them in the last two years. Never having seen his work before, I am grateful to have the opportunity, even in a show so small, to try to understand the arc of Mead's progress, which flows approximately from recognizable subjects in a somewhat limited tonal range to geometric abstraction in a wider, more vivid palette.

His use of the casein medium (which is milk-based) gives Mead's surfaces a matte

not feel the need to step back, however, because Mead's colors, textures and images held me in their intimate embrace.

Clifford's work, on the other hand, succeeds in keeping you at bay—or in actually enclosing you if you venture inside the one called *Periphery*. A 2001 NYFA Fellow, Clifford has taken the white picket fence, that symbol of American domesticity and security, and turned it into something you'd better not completely trust.

Though three of the four pieces use the same basic triangle-topped wooden slat as a building block, they each venture in very



Layers upon layers: (l-r) Bill Mead's *Gold Brick* and Tim Clifford's *Fence for Four Properties*.

Brooklyn-based Tim Clifford's sculptural installations and Woodstock-based Bill Mead's paintings is an inspired pairing that works perfectly.

While both artists clearly are interested in issues of scale and intimacy, subject and symbol, color (or lack thereof), texture and mood, they use different approaches to arrive at different interpretations with similarly cool and clever results. Clifford works big, in pure white, three-dimensional form and space; he makes variations on a theme, creating pieces that are, in themselves, somewhat variable and, in one or two cases, participatory. Mead uses color, shape and texture, and in some instances symbolic subject matter, as elements in a complex personal dialectic on a small scale—most of his paintings measure about a foot square.

The way the two bodies of work occupy the gallery's space forms a delicate balance between crowding the viewer and inviting the viewer in. Though Clifford's sculptures (there are only four) are fairly large, they neither block the view of the paintings from any point in the gallery nor hold the viewer too close to the paintings. Yet the sculptures still attain their apparent goal of oppressing, caging or blocking the viewer (but in a nice way), the result of Clifford's deft handling of detail, size and space.

Mead's paintings, meanwhile, form a soothing, challenging band of color, concept, and theme that encircles the gallery (and Clifford's pieces) in a sort of philosophical embrace. Created in casein on boards, the 23 paintings were made from

finish and his colors a softness despite their being quite saturated. All but a few of the compositions comprise three vertical bands, the wider central one flanked by narrower ones like an altarpiece. This compositional device also resembles many national flags and, like a flag, it evolved out of necessity: All the paintings are made of small boards pieced together, a method that saved the artist the added expense of buying larger boards.

Mead explores the space and formal elements of his compositions sufficiently to avoid an annoying repetition of the triple bands—instead, some are symmetrical but evoke a deep space in the center, like a landscape; some are asymmetrical, emphasizing a black-yellow-red relationship among elements; some use whites and grays and incorporate subtle, floating figures like snowflakes or subatomic particles in space. And in the latest group, titled *Spare Parts*, the composition is broken up into more pieces, horizontally as well as vertically, with strong colors and shapes that often cross the boundaries, increasing both the focus and complexity of the paintings.

What I like best about Mead's paintings are the textures and color relationships he builds up by layering the casein (and, presumably, removing layers in part as he goes), which give the small images a richness that is intriguing and very satisfying. The subtlety draws you in close to examine the painting—a good thing in this installation, because if you were to try to step back for a more distant look, you'd trip over a Clifford sculpture. I did

different directions, a tribute to the richness of Clifford's imagination. The earliest of the four, *Fence for Four Properties*, is a nearly solid cube of ranked, hinged fence pieces; they are joined at the center, their pointy tops forming rows of dangerous-looking ridges. On closer examination (and with help from the artist in my case), one sees that these are rolled-up lengths of fence, created to run in four directions from the center, perhaps in a straight, 90-degree formation, or perhaps in some more snaky configuration. In a much larger interior, this would have been the setup—instead, here the piece takes on a whole different presence as a coiled geometric construction.

Barrier and *Bastion* have transformed the flat running fence into a deep, grooved, solid presence that occupies a lot of space, weighs a lot and, frankly, is sort of creepy. While *Barrier* (from 2002) is a simple sculptural expression of this newly created form, *Bastion* (installed here for the first time) places a one-eighth-scale house at the center of a field of these malevolent space-eating fences. Ghostly white, and exquisitely detailed, the house squats in the middle of its domain (and the gallery), daring you to even think of entering.

Experiencing the multitude of levels on which these two bodies of work communicate, one would be stunned to know that the two artists met for the first time on the show's opening day. Perhaps this will be the start of something bigger for them in showing together. If not, it was great while it lasted. □