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Lowell in motion: The Revolving Museum's community art

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" LocalMotive: Public Art Off the Beaten Path"

At the Revolving Museum, 22 Shattuck Street, Lowell, through April 4.

I got my introduction to the city of Lowell — the birthplace of Jack Kerouac, the site of a popular folk festival, and the adopted home of generations of immigrant mill workers when the city flourished a century ago, and now of another generation of Cambodian immigrants — on a sleeting, sunless afternoon this past Saturday. I was bound for the show of indoor and outdoor installations at the Revolving Museum, and as I made my way from the Lowell train station to the designated-landmark district downtown, I ran a dismal gantlet of empty brick warehouses, silent storefront evangelical churches, abandoned buildings, and almost abandoned streets. But then my eye caught the pair of 19th-century electrical candelabras that grace the ceiling of an otherwise nondescript business on Central Street. A block later, I was awestruck again, this time by Carlos Dorrien's 1989 Human Construction. Dorrien's goal is to make seemingly crude stone monoliths look as graceful as ballet slippers, and he's done just that with his Lowell project, a matching pair of gigantic gray granite steps that flank either side of Lowell's Pawtucket Canal.

Both the despair and the beauty that are present-day Lowell inform the ambitious, uneven, exuberant show "LocalMotive" at the Revolving Museum, which occupies a cultural cornerstone in the rebirth of Lowell. Displaced from its (now high-rent) digs in the Fort Point area of South Boston, where it had thrived for 18 years, the museum relocated to Lowell in March of 2002 with a reignited sense of mission. The city of Lowell asked the museum to dismantle the outdoor portion of "LocalMotive" by December 1, so I regret having waited until the new year to see the show. What remains of the outdoor components is smart and sensitive and delightfully quirky. At the wrought-iron entrance to a small Victorian garden about a block from the museum, artist Alison Nesbitt supervised a group of children in the creation of a network of make-believe flowers woven into the ironwork. The individual blossoms, each the size of a large fist, were made from carefully assembled refuse — toothpaste tubes, bottle caps, mustard jars — and then just as carefully painted in an unlikely array of unnatural colors. The result is that even the vestigial few still on display (originally the entire entrance to the garden was designed to be a mad, massive bouquet) look like transplants from Munchkin Land or The Little Shop of Horrors.

Just beyond the garden lies a meticulously planned open area where a beautifully maintained ancient locomotive and a nearby freestanding brick wall commemorate the original location of Lowell's old train terminal. There, next to the antique train, stand the similarly scaled remaining cars of an imaginary train in bright paint on shaped wood, courtesy of artist Nora Valdez and students from the Lowell Community Charter School. Your average didactic, feel-good public art is usually brain-dead — three-dimensional clichés posing as original sentiments. That's not the case with Dream Locomotive, which even in its attenuated form achieves emotional ambiguity, refusing to put a smily face on complex issues and emotions. Across the top of one car, a banner reads, "Welcome to Lowell." Beneath the banner stand an array of people; they're meant to represent various immigrant groups, but their ethnicity isn't obvious, and their predominantly brown robes and decidedly somber attitudes make the notion of welcome almost painful. Paired with it is a car with two dancers in traditional Cambodian costume; you can feel the tension between the pull of heritage and the pull of assimilation, the loss and the gain of all belonging. Dream Locomotive also enjoys the perfect location, at Lowell's great port of embarkation. Were it a wall mural, the notion of connection and separation that the coupled yet distinct train cars embody would be lost.

Jean DuBuffet meets Keith Haring in the mixed-media sculptural installation The Amihoutornaut.

Caleb Neelon (a/k/a Sonik) draws on the bright colors and pared-down simplicity of children's-book illustrations and outsider art for his recurrent images of farm animals and shoes and pithy aphorisms. Just when you think you've got a handle on his hodge-podge aesthetic (he makes me think of an interior decorator on crystal meth: no matter how twisted, he's always harmonious), you catch sight of an enigmatic, provocative panel, like the one of a pyramid-shaped cartoon character covered in large white dots. The character lies sandwiched between two phrases, "on my way home" and "I spotted a fat man."

The attraction of Lowell both to art institutions like the Revolving Museum and to the increasing number of artists who are making Lowell their home is that the city has affordable space in which to make and present art. Yet space is precisely what the interior exhibits of "LocalMotive" have been denied. Both large, interactive, multimedia installations and diminutive, traditional works have been shoehorned into a divided floor-through. The area is so over-crowded — a graffiti wall (by Caleb Neelon and someone who goes by the name Bare) bumps up against an acoustically manipulated hollow log (Jim Coates's View from the Woods) that in turn lies inches away from a cement block you're invited to hammer (Rob Duarte's Story #2, The One with the Hammer) — that it's almost impossible to separate one work from the next. You can't be sure what anything looks like because the sight lines make almost everything converge. Who knows what power Dawn Southworth's Spirit Trap might convey? As it stands — one ceiling-to-floor wall with makeshift crosses peppered with handwritten notes provided by museumgoers appears opposite another towering wall with found wood paneling adorned with crude metal hoops — you don't really see the installation so much as feel it closing in on you.

Similarly disserved is Kathleen Driscoll's Covered Wall of Water. Driscoll creates monolithic, frozen drapery; the cascading monuments of white plaster look simultaneously stationary and kinetic, like iced waterfalls or monumental curtains. I saw one of her pieces at Forest Hills Cemetery last summer, and it was mesmerizing. Positioned outside the entrance to the Revolving Museum's new and spacious gift shop, Covered Wall of Water was made awkward.

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