

BALTIMORE CITY PAPER | 2/25/2004

Print

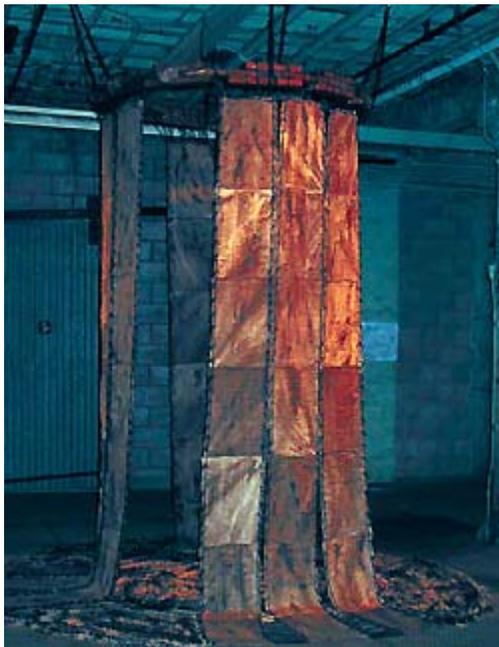
## ART

## The Small "d"

Area 405 Takes on the Final Frontier

by Lily Thayer

death | At Area 405 through March 6



Death By Hanging: Mahasti Ymudd's "The Wall in Between" evokes a primitive vehicle between one world and the next, both grim.

**This past Valentine's Day fell on a Saturday** of spectacular, wintry beauty. The sky was clear, the temperature balmy. The weather appeared to be conspiring with the organizers of the current exhibition at Area 405; to walk into the dim cold of the gallery was to be immediately drawn into the show's eponymous theme--death.

To mount a show titled "death" (with a small "d") when everyone else is cutting out paper hearts or running to the drugstore for the Hallmark version thereof is a reasonably gutsy move for the loose collective of 14 local artists who organized the exhibition. Fortunately, much of the work transcends any gimmickry one could infer from the timing, not to mention an arguably shopworn theme. Many of the pieces in the multimedia show, which includes film, sculpture, painting, and even a performance involving charcoal, lipstick, and a naked artist, are quite affecting. And Area 405's space, with its industrial nuances, is well-suited to the material.

Several of the pieces are obscure--ruminations on mortality that only reveal their conclusions to the

viewer over time, perhaps after he or she has left the space. Tai Hwa Goh's aquatint on Korean paper, "Nerves," has a troubling static quality at first glance but unfolds in the memory as an atomic depiction of suspended life. Goh has hung two vertical layers of Korean paper, made translucent with beeswax. Both bear a similar image--a nerve as it might be seen through a microscope--but there's clearly a disconnect. These nerves no longer are communicating with each other. At the same time, Susan Reynolds' installation of paddleball sets, "Climb and Descend," suggests an unbreaking connection between life and death. The paddles themselves ascend up a wall, but the rubber spheres to which they are tethered strain defiantly for the earth.

The afterlife is a sort of topsy-turvy world full of ruined childhood memories in a film short by Natalia Blanch, "Dark Night of the Soul." (John Watson's piece, "Bedford," consists of rough-hewn wood structures that at least one person mistook as seating for the film. Or maybe that was the point.)

Other works in the show interpret the theme more literally. "The Bees Made Honey in the Lion's Head," by Marelee Schumann, has a stage-set quality; the piece's 15 tripods composed of iron rods and WWI soldiers' helmets are an elegant if obvious evocation of combat graves. Patrick Burke's "Runner" resembles a wood and wax human spine, a punchy graphic element.

The most traditional of the pieces is a series of three "burial blankets" by Faith Wilson. The mixed-media installations appear to play on voodoo and evangelical burial traditions, incorporating scraps of scripture, obituaries, bones, and metal objects. Their intricacy rewards the patient observer. The more time spent in front of these pieces, the more meaning there is to be derived from them. The newspaper clippings and the artist's faint inscriptions and illustrations come to form an eloquent encomium. Mahasti Ymudd's "The Wall in Between" demonstrates a similar folk-art sensibility. A circular enclosure of coffee-stained fabric panels bound together with chain, it evokes a primitive vehicle between one world and the next, both grim.

At more than 6,000 square feet, Area 405's gallery space is the biggest artist-run space in the city--which is a good thing for a show based on a very big theme. The exhibition was curated by the participating artists, with installation and logistical help from the seven artists who own, live in, and work in the 66,000-square-foot former window-blind factory. The space provides its own peculiar reinforcement of the current exhibit's tone. Even filled with people, Area 405's vast gallery feels raw and cold--large space heaters aren't up to the task of keeping it warm, even on a warmish day. And the history of the 150-year-old building itself is morbidly evocative. The previous owners had rented it to a family-owned blind business, which had proceeded to fill the four-story structure with the detritus of its years in the business (*Mobtown Beat*, May 8, 2002). When the head of the company died one day, the staff went home, and no one ever came back.

"The phone was off the hook. There were messages on the answering machine," current building co-owner Stewart Watson says. The space was an illustration of life interrupted.

Now it's the setting for Matthew Ravenstahl's "Lipstick Performance." The exhibition's eccentric coda, Ravenstahl's piece plays on an evergreen trope, the duality of sex and death. Sequestered in a boxlike plywood room during the Feb. 14 reception for the show, the naked, charcoal-covered artist made spontaneous impressions of himself on sheets of paper, which he augmented with lipstick kisses--an act gallery viewers witnessed through a smallish window. (While the performance was a one-time-only event, subsequent visitors will be able to see the sheets bearing Ravenstahl's abstracted image.) Equal parts moody commentary and comic relief, Ravenstahl's performance provided a fitting

accompaniment to an exhibit that does a reasonable job of not taking itself too seriously.

?2007 Baltimore City Paper