

## **“Heaven Is Now” by Janeil Englestaad at the Lill Street Art Center**

by Joshua Siegal

Tucked away, literally, in a corner of the Lill Street Art Center’s Faculty Exhibition is a stand-alone show by Janeil Englestaad, aptly titled “Heaven Is Now”. The installation rests in a corner of the gallery space, where the viewer must walk in through a narrow opening and traverse the negative space through a layer of stones and sand set across the ground. This path leads one to a spare, unfinished wooden bench that faces the video portion of the piece. Behind the bench is a paper wall, evoking Asian interior design, and on various sides of the space are prints of photography (presumably digital) and “pagodas” made of medium-sized stones piled carefully by the artist among the smaller rocks on the floor.

According to the Artist’s Statement, posted outside the installation, the video portion of the installation represents months of documenting other artists creating stone pagodas at her invitation (but without her direction), an activity she claims is based on Buddhist tradition. The real impact of the piece is not the pagodas themselves, stoic and reaching though they are, but the way in which the elements of the piece subvert notions of space and time, which itself might be a Buddhist tradition as well.

Not content to fuse religious and environmental art, Englestaad also has made her exhibit interactive, and this is where space and time become beautifully confused for the audience. The Artist’s Statement encourages the public to create their own pagodas from among the smaller rocks that take up most of the installation’s floor space. While I was sitting on the bench, watching the video portion, two small girls walked into the exhibit and began to tread on the small rocks. One admonished the other, “everything you move, you have to put back.” To which I said, “read the second paragraph on the wall there – you can make your own pile!” They didn’t believe me at first, but were soon at work on their own pagoda. Then they gave this up and said “let’s just sit in the rocks,” which they did. I also built a pagoda out of the smaller rocks, though the two children and I seemed

equally irked when the exhibition staff reminded us that the larger rocks were reserved for the artist and the smaller (though more plentiful) ones for the public.

The process of building my own pagoda brought the exhibition to life and rescued it from what might have otherwise been an interesting but somewhat bland mix of documentation and representation. I could sense the time distortion that was being presented by the video in combination with the artist's own pagodas in the space, that is, viewing both a construction that has happened in the past while at the same time being in the presence of a similar existence. Sitting on the floor, creating my own pagoda, balancing rocks and working with space and gravity, brought the piece out of the past/present and into the realm of created/in existence/unfinished. This subtly insisted that the audience not only participate in the art, but contemplate their participation as well.

The mix of ephemeral and concrete was heightened by the four photographs arranged vertically on the wall opposite the actual pagodas in the installation. The top print showed a pagoda that had been built on the beach by one of the other artists, tiny in the distance, overshadowed by a cliff. The next print was of a different beach pagoda, shown a bit closer, the figure against a ground of waves and ocean horizon. In the third photo, whitecaps overcome a pagoda, washing around it, and in the last photo, the closest shot, an intact pagoda dominates the beach.

The weakest aspect of the installation was the video portion itself. Though nicely edited, it was documentary-style footage of the various artists collecting materials and constructing their pagodas. Some of the shots were very nice (especially one on a beach near sundown with the artist meditating in silhouette next to his or her work and two seagulls in flight), and though the audio of ambient nature sounds added much to the space, the video never reached beyond showing us what had been done (possibly, this may have been the intent). The artists themselves were shown as augmentation to the pieces they'd created, at times completely or mostly out of the shots. At times, their clothing was a stark color contrast to the natural tones of the overall piece. The artist of the installation, however, left the DVD player on the floor among the rocks; this certainly

could have been more integrated, though the player itself did have a slim, silver design that suited the overall feel of the piece.

Invoking both environmental art (particularly Goldsworthy, though hardly as delicate) and Buddhist meditation, “Heaven Is Now” succeeds in situating the audience on the precipice between past and possibility. Asking more of the viewer than simply to view, it creates a real environment within the context of the artistic space and thus transports us out of our notion of space and time. Like Buddhist meditation, though, appreciating this work requires both attention to instruction and the patience to find the middle way between passivity and activity.