

Artist's yarn strings viewers along

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
Staff Writer

Your first reaction to Fred Sandback's sculpture at the University of Michigan Museum of Art in Ann Arbor might be "Is that all there is?"

Single strands of acrylic yarn trace lines forming a series of five rectangles in the space of the museum. From afar, the art work is undetectable, but stop closer.

The site-specific sculpture responds to the architecture as Sandback stretches yarn from one point to another, hugging walls with open-ended rectangles meant to free the mind and encourage exploration.

Black yarn lying against one flat wall caresses a shadow and creates another shadow, echoing indentations in plaster.

Near the bottom of the curved walls, the native New Yorker tautly stretches rust, black and pale blue yarn between the outer edges of the walls almost like a tightrope. The strands become edges of imaginary planes as Sandback challenges viewers to interact with the sculpture and cross the barrier just like Alice when she went through the looking glass.

"It's minimal art," said Appette Dixon, curator of Western art at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. "It's very, very simple, but there's a lot of intellectual complexity residing in the subtle interplay that the artist sets up between two and three dimensions, colors and play of light and shadow. The yarn forms a three dimensional figure, so all of a sudden I start to see this wall differently."

In the late 1960s when Sandback was a graduate student at the School of Art and Architecture at Yale University, Minimalism and Conceptual Art were all the rage as artists strove to reduce forms and rid their work of the artist's presence or personal touch. For the last 30 years, Sandback pursued his ideal.

"Sandback was one of the early minimalist in the 1960s with Donald Judd and Frank Stella reacting against Abstract Expressionism and the emotionalism in that art," said Dixon. "Minimalists wanted art to be something pure and accessible. Sandback's materials are so homey. He wanted, like all minimalists, to bring art down from its pedestal."

Dixon admits the installation has received mixed reactions. Historically, Minimalism and Conceptual Art have always drawn controversy.

"It evokes extremes from understanding and intrusion to is that all there is?" said Dixon. "The idea of extreme simplicity is still shocking to us 30 years later. It causes people to question is this art? This is right on the edge, extremely daring. I think, it's definitely art. It shows how close art and real life can be. A literal 'in our world art,' it challenges me to look closely."

Is the yarn the sculpture or does it define the space as the art work? That is for viewers to decide. Sandback's gamesmanship is quietly clear.

"Is the sculpture our space?" asked Dixon. "There's a penetration between art and real life. You're tracing a geometric figure



Yarn work: New York artist Fred Sandback ponders how he will transform the University of Michigan Museum of Art Apse with simple lines of yarn.

in a space. These are very ethereal ideas. That art is for everybody."

Sandback took into consideration a number of factors before beginning the work. He spent a major portion of the four days it took to complete the work, thinking Sandback knew he wanted to create awareness of the space as it relates to our minds and bodies. Since his art is typically installed in galleries painted

white, Sandback contemplated use of color. Which would complement, contrast and draw viewers in?

"It's one of the most radically simple of his designs," said Dixon. "It's extremely daring. There's a real element of play in Sandback's work. His art inspires play. It encourages you to go up to it. He's working with our bodies and the way we perceive things out in the world."

Because of the multiple light sources, the yarn creates shadows that seem to bend."

Sandback also took into consideration the original use of the building dedicated in 1910. An alumni effort, the structure memorialized Civil War and Spanish American war dead.

"The building didn't become a museum until 1946 so he wanted his art to reflect that, the way it's in a sanctuary," said Dixon. "He was respecting the use now and then. Apse were used in ancient Roman architecture and church architecture."

Because of the palette and subtle interplay between light and shadow and the curved and flat walls, the sculpture does not dominate the space. It's in balance with the architecture.

"Fred Sandback's art is very quiet," said Dixon. "It doesn't hit you over the head. The viewer has to be patient. I see something new every time I walk through."

An untitled diptych by Sandback hangs on a separate wall prior to entering the apse. The tense-filled bas relief is the opposite of space and light and lends yet another view of the artist. Dark and heavy, the work reverses the minimal mass and maximal void of the sculpture and proves Sandback knows there is more than one way to draw a line.

FINE ARTS

Through the Looking Glass
What: An installation of sculpture by New York artist Fred Sandback. Admission is free.
When: Through Sept. 28. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; until 9 p.m. Thursday; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed July 4.
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