

g

**ARTS+
MOVIES**

THEATER

**THERE'S MAGIC AND
MORE IN REIMAGINED
'TEMPEST' AT THE ART**

PAGE 3

MOVIES

**FAVREAU SERVES UP
ENGAGING TALE OF A MAN
AND HIS SON IN 'CHEF'**

PAGE 14

MUSIC

**SOMERVILLE PORCHFEST
LETS BANDS PLAY
THEIR HOME TURF**

PAGE 24

Force of nature

**Olafur Eliasson's
waterfall installation
helps Vermont's new
Hall Art Foundation
open with a splash**

**BY SEBASTIAN SMEE
PAGE 8**





HALL ART FOUNDATION © OLAFUR ELIASSON

At new Hall Art Foundation, Olafur Eliasson brings visitors back to nature

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE | GLOBE STAFF

READING, Vt. — A new experience. You drive — let's say from Boston — north on Interstate 93, onto I-89, and then west through New Hampshire until you cross into Vermont. By and by, you arrive at a series of modest but handsomely scrubbed buildings nestled in rolling country between the road, a field, and a river.

You've arrived at what was once a dairy farm and is now New England's most interesting new venue for contemporary art. A sign on one of the buildings says "HALL ART FOUNDATION."

But wait. In the middle distance, you see water falling from a tall structure made from scaffolding. As you wander toward it, you see how it spills down a staggered series of metal trays.

You will probably know — why else would you be there? — that what you are looking at is an artwork ("Waterfall," water installation, 2004, above) by the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson.

Best known for his 2003 conversion of the cavernous Turbine Hall in London's Tate Modern into a fog-filled indoor sunset under a mir-

rored ceiling, and for installing four monumental man-made waterfalls in New York in 2008, Eliasson, 47, is also a familiar presence in Boston and Cambridge. He was recently a fêted artist-in-residence at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and, in 2011, he was one of three artists (the others were Ai Weiwei and Tomas Saraceno) to exhibit in "The Divine Comedy," a show organized by Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

The waterfall piece in Vermont is nowhere near as tall as those New York goliaths, which were installed under bridges and on piers. But then, you don't see it from so great a distance. Falling water seen from afar seems to descend slowly,

whereas falling water seen up close appears to move faster. Eliasson likes how, when you see water falling, you get a sharpened sense of the connections between distance, time, and space.

Of course, when time passes, especially in front of water, thoughts and feelings accumulate and then drift by. Eliasson's art, too, has this effect. It does its work on us, causing thoughts to pool and churn, and then, without fuss, it discreetly excuses itself and moves on.

The Hall Art Foundation is the creation of Andrew and Christine Hall. Much has been written about Andrew Hall, who is evidently a very smart, very successful British oil trader and hedge fund manager. He is the chief executive officer and chairman of Astenbeck Capital Management, a hedge fund focused on commodities based in Westport, Conn.

Hall has a track record of making huge profits against the run of the market. He also has a passion for art and a preference for work — much of it German — that was big in the '80s but tended to languish thereafter. He and his wife, who is equally engaged with art, are among the world's

Olafur Eliasson's installation "Your uncertain shadow (growing)" is essentially a row of five light sources projecting colored light against a wall in a dark room, that is, until you start to play with the shadows.

most prominent collectors.

After years of private planning, their New York-based foundation has recently launched itself into the public sphere. A building, designed and paid for by the foundation, opened last fall on the campus of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams. It contains a long-term display of large-scale works by Anselm Kiefer, one of the Halls' favorite artists.

The foundation also has a partnership with the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University (where Andrew Hall was educated). And the Halls are busy converting a castle in Germany — until 2006, the long-term home and studio of Georg Baselitz, another German whose works they collect — into a museum that will open next year.

The Vermont branch of the foundation has been showing art by appointment for more than a year. For much of this time, the big barn has been installed with works by Baselitz, and these are still there. (His large paintings — colorful but characteristically blowy and lackluster — dominate, but look out for a wonderful wooden sculpture of a seated man, made from wood slapped with turquoise paint, called "Dunklung Nachtung Amung Ding.")

The old farmhouse, meanwhile, has a series of intimate galleries hung with figurative paintings by the relatively unknown Connecticut and New York-based painter Neil Jenney. Ostensibly rote, they're fired into life by a kind of manic nonchalance.

It's only now, however, that the entire venue has been officially opened to the public. It's interesting that Eliasson has been chosen to kick things off, if only because his ethically attuned art, rooted in Scandinavian simplicity and '90s self-consciousness, is so different from the Teutonic histrionics of '80s stars like Baselitz or Kiefer.

Eliasson's career to date has been fascinating to watch. His big early successes — logistical and diplomatic as much as aesthetic — earned him the kind of art world cachet and institutional traction other artists envy. But where, for many of the art stars of the '80s, early success was interpreted as an endless run of personalized green lights, Eliasson has always had



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ART REVIEW

OLAFUR ELIASSON

At: Hall Art Foundation
Vermont, 551 VT Route 106,
Reading, Vt. Through Nov. 30.
802-952-1056,
www.hallartfoundation.org

an eye on things beyond himself, and beyond the traffic of the art world.

He established, for instance, an experimental school, a five-year project that only recently came to an end. With the designer Frederik Ottesen, he also developed a solar-powered LED lamp. "Little Sun," as it is called, has been distributed around the world, with a view to focusing attention on how to get electricity to people without it in sustainable ways.

As he spelled out in an e-mail to me, he has in recent years enjoyed a series of "deep exchanges with specialists in environmental sustainability as well as experts in compassion, with talented and inspiring tech doers at MIT, with people who run refugee camps in Africa," and so on.

"Such conversations," he continued, "inspire and help expand my field of artistic work. I speak with these people — and many more — because their thoughts inform my work, they help me push the boundaries of what art is and can do."

Despite the high ambition, there is a playfulness, a cultivated naivete, and a quiet conviction in everything Eliasson does. His work blurs lines between science, art, and social experiment, and brings fruitful questions to bear not only on art but on its reception, and on how the singular encounter between artwork and viewer connects with the plural reality beyond it.

Several of the pieces at the Hall Art Foundation would not look out of place in a science museum or a showroom for new tech products. One, "Light ventilator mobile," is a hanging mobile: It has a motorized fan on one end that balances a light on the other.

The fan makes the mobile rotate around the room, almost touching the walls as it does so. The light, as it gets close to the walls, comes to a sharp focus, and briefly projects a pattern that resembles both the fan and a human eye. The projection spreads out and accelerates as it continues its endless circling, like a roving searchlight. (Intermittent flashes can be seen from the adjacent room, triggering involuntary surges of dread.)

Another installation, "Your uncertain shadow (growing)" is essentially a row of five light sources projecting colored light against a wall in a dark room. It's nothing — it's quite meaningless — until you enter the room, and, by moving your body closer to the wall, start to play with the hypnotically patterned shadows you cast in staggered shades of violet, blue, black, orange, and brown.

As with Eliasson's "The Weather Project" at Tate Modern, where people were simultaneously inside an enchanting communal experience and acutely aware of their own role in it (one saw oneself — and everyone else — reflected in a mirrored ceiling), you can't be part of this work without feeling a kind of double awareness — a sense, as Eliasson has put it in another context, "of being singular and plural at the same time."

And since the shadow patterns change according to how close you are to the wall, you also become unusually conscious of distance and space.

Eliasson's works are often modest demonstrations of simple relations that may, once amplified, have large, and even world-altering, consequences. Some of his works induce shrugs; they seem to ask for a level of curiosity and interest they don't always command, or deserve.

But he is interested in connecting art with the world, and sometimes that involves a kind of disarming of the art experience — of the expectation that, to be worthy of its name, art must always be transporting, enchanting, precious, and separate.

Indeed, at the core of his endeavors is a



At the Hall Art Foundation, Georg Baselitz's 2009 sculpture "Dunklung Nachtung Amung Ding" (left) and an installation view of Olafur Eliasson's 2002 "Light ventilator mobile."



JEFFREY NINTZEL

belief that "we need to get better at bringing our micro-experiences into a global context to feel responsible for finding sustainable ways to live."

I had my own micro-experience as I wandered around in the vicinity of Eliasson's outdoor waterfall. Unlike, say, oil trading, or tax laws affecting the establishment of art foundations, you can easily see how the waterfall mechanism works. There's no sleight of hand, no loophole — it's just scaffolding, metal trays, flexible tubes up through which the water is pumped, and a triangular pool to catch it all.

But what you also notice, as you approach, is that immediately behind this artificial waterfall is another, real waterfall. So you may wander — as I did — past the scaffolding and up the slope until you come upon two outdoor chairs, side by side, facing the river.

Taking a seat, you may watch the rapids tumbling and surging over huge, glistening rocks, and begin to feel either very

old, or else very young; either way, you succumb to the unfamiliar feeling of having all the time in the world. It feels good.

If the chair next to you is empty, as it was for me, you may suddenly wish you had company, that you had not come to such a lovely spot alone. But slowly, you let yourself feel the reward, after so long a drive, of being finally alone, the car radio switched off, the fresh air pressing in.

At which point your legs will want to move again, and you may notice a little trail that leads down to the rapids. You follow it, hopping from rock to rock, and in the blink of an eye, you find yourself

standing in the midst of a chaotic vortex of energy, noise, and spray.

Very stirring. You must be — you are — in nature!

But of course, you're not. The opposite bank — you probably noticed from your earlier perch — is reinforced with a wall of huge stones, carefully installed by heavy machinery. And beyond it are the (unfenced) backyards of several houses whose occupants are just beginning, you suppose, to accustom themselves to the idea of living beside the Hall Art Foundation.

So be it. It was a pleasant illusion, a tonic for the weary. Sometimes it's nice to immerse yourself in the picture before you become conscious of the frame and the world beyond it. At other times, of course, you need to see the world — the whole world! — before you can really see the picture.

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