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Olafur Eliasson's "Waterfall" is on display at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading, Vt. (Courtesy Hall Art Foundation)



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By Nicola Smith

Valley News Staff Writer

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Who hasn't been in an exhibition of modern art and heard, at some point, often muttered by some codger, the refrain, "My 6-year-old could have done that!"

Sometimes the criticism is leveled at a deliberately obscure or incomprehensible piece of pretension that deserves the disdain, but just as often the reaction is born of bafflement or fear. Fear that you aren't getting it, fear that you're the butt of a joke being played on you by the artist, fear that everybody else sees something that you don't. So you strike back: My kid did something like that last week; they call this art ?!

If some contemporary art induces in the viewer skepticism and anxiety, or just indifference, isn't that an accurate reflection of modern life?

To break through a viewer's resistance there has to be real craft. But there's more to it than technical skill; there has to be evidence of an organizing intelligence, and a point of view, and you have to want to spend time with that mind. In an era of iPhones, Instagram, Twitter and myriad apps, that can be a lot to ask from an audience that is easily distracted and eager for novelty, avid consumers of infotainment.

The works of Olafur Eliasson, whose installations and photographs are on view at the **Hall Art Foundation** in Reading, Vt., compel your attention because it's immediately apparent that here's a person who is thinking all the time, in a smart, deep, engaged manner, about the way we live now. And he's not shutting you out, he's inviting you in.

You'd think that would be an obvious starting point for any artist, but not everybody understands that. Still, Eliasson hasn't swung open the door himself to greet you, he's not standing there with a drink in hand and slapping you on the back; rather, he's left the door ajar, signaling that you may enter if you choose. And he's doing something else that not too many artists ask of their audience: he's inviting you to insert yourself into the frame.

Born in 1967 in Copenhagen, Eliasson grew up in Denmark and Iceland, and he works in both photography and installation. In recent years Eliasson's works have been seen at the Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, among others.

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One of his works at the Hall Art Foundation is called the “Volcano” series, in which he positions on a wall 63 photographs taken from the air of different volcanoes in Iceland next to each other, nine photographs across and six down. It can be read as a whole piece, or photograph by photograph.

And in the photographs we see, occasionally, evidence of human presence and activity: perhaps three or four cars in a parking lot near the edge of a crater, a sly juxtaposition of human pragmatism and hubris.

How do you get to the top of a volcano crater? You build a road. Once you build the road, you have to build the parking lot. Once there’s a parking lot, the cars come, bringing the people. Once the people are there they get out and walk around and look into the abyss of the crater, and then they get back into their cars and go home. Maybe. Or maybe the volcano erupts, or someone falls in, or some other unforeseen calamity. And over the volcanoes hovers the invisible mechanics of climate change. Is the receding snow in the photos evidence of thawing glaciers, or is it just the end of winter?

This gets us thinking about change, and choice. Some of the way we live now comes out of choices we make, but a lot of it doesn’t; there are changes imposed on us, whether we want them or not. Change today happens with overwhelming speed, leaving us in doubt of what we’ve gotten ourselves into.

And it’s in that gap, between what we want (or think we want) from technology and culture and what we get, that Eliasson is making art that is pointedly, but playfully, breaking through the fourth wall between artist and audience. You get to choose how you respond to his art. We all do that with any work of art, of course: we walk away or we linger, pulled in by something that we can’t always articulate. But there’s another level of response here, a back and forth between the audience and the art.

Stand in front of the installation called, with deceptive blandness, *Light ventilator mobile*. It takes up one room. Here, Eliasson set himself three challenges. One was a technical challenge: designing an intellectually complex installation that looks like simplicity itself; the second was imagining how it would occupy space; and the third was flagging the attention of a fickle public for more than a few seconds.

A bar hangs from the ceiling like a mobile. On one end of the bar is a lit spotlight; on the other end of the bar is a whirring fan. The bar revolves, much as Alexander Calder’s mobiles move in space on air currents, but this one is powered by electricity. If you walk into the middle of the room, near the mobile, you not only hear the quiet purring of the fan but your presence influences the mobile’s movement. The more people crowd near it, the more it slows. And our shadows are thrust into dramatic relief by the spotlight, so that we become actors in a drama — or a comedy.

But the mobile exerts its own sphere of influence: To get out of the field and back to the wall of the room, you have to time your exit with the revolutions of the mobile, so that you aren’t hit on the head by the spotlight or the fan.

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In this is a brilliant metaphor for a surveillance society of eavesdropping, closed-circuit television, video security monitors, nanny cams, YouTube, selfies, downloads and uploads. The spotlight finds us, a big eye is watching, the impersonal machinery whirs nearly silently, we try to escape it or we draw near it, but it's pervasive, it permeates everything we do and it's implacable.

Eliasson has also designed a waterfall which, happily, has been sited by the exhibition designers at the Foundation near an actual waterfall — not a large one but still, a fall of water over rocks in a stream. Eliasson's waterfall is a structure built from scaffolding, with descending steps, or trays, from which water cascades down into the next tray.

The water is recycled through pumps back up to the topmost step. It splashes and plinks, and sends mist into the air. As a free-standing structure it can be observed from any angle. It brings pleasure, which is a response sometimes overlooked in the more ascetic confines of the modern art gallery.

There is also a show of the German painter Georg Baselitz in the Hall Foundation's barn. These are monumental paintings, most of them round canvases stretched over a circular frame. Baselitz is one of the 1980s art stars who was big at the box office. There's humor, and some poignancy, in the way he places himself (and his wife) upside down in his canvases, with his feet where you think his head ought to be. The feet often point to a path through an allee of trees, a road map of sorts, to childhood, to enlightenment, perhaps to disenchantment. But I found myself overwhelmed, or underwhelmed, by one big painting after another, which seemed more about big for its own sake.

Also worth looking at is a show of paintings by American Neil Jenney, who has forged his own idiosyncratic path through the commercial modern art marketplace. Born in 1945, Jenney began painting figurative art — taking relish in making his brushstrokes bold and visible, and even sloppy looking — in an era of 1960s and 1970s minimalism and photorealism.

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His work is divided between what he calls, and what has been called, "Bad painting," and "Good painting." He uses earthy, almost deliberately ugly tones of brown, green and black, in acrylic and oil. The mood is sardonic, and the events depicted are cryptic. One painting is called *Schmuck and Schlemiel*, in which one man laughs at another's tears. In *Threat and Sanctuary*, two shark fins circle an empty life raft: We're there people in the raft and if so, where are they now? In *Hunter and Hunted* a man takes aim at a deer. What are we seeing: the moment before, during or after the bullet reaches the target?

At the other end of the spectrum are *Daytime* and *Atmosphere*, paintings that don't so much replicate light as give it off. They're painted with the densest of brush strokes. In fact, stroke isn't the right word. The technique, which is finer than stippling, is invisible. They're quite remarkable.

The Hall Art Foundation in Reading has been open to the public since fall 2013. The foundation is named for Christine and Andrew Hall, who, according to reports in the *Boston Globe* and Bloomberg News, is a British businessman who has made a considerable fortune as an oil trader and hedge fund manager. His passion is collecting art, and he has gallery space at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, of which he is a graduate, in a castle in Derneburg/Holle, Germany, at MassMOCA, in North Adams, Mass., as well as in Reading.

The Vermont gallery, which is tucked away on Route 106, is a strange place in some ways. The property was once a farm, with a large barn and outbuildings, all of which have been turned into gallery space. It's handsome, and spotless. But the galleries feel a bit antiseptic, with their whiter-than-white walls and minimal natural light coming into the buildings. The interiors look like *New York Times* Real Estate section advertisements for Soho lofts now out of financial reach of the artists who used to inhabit them. But these are quibbles: having another gallery in the region where you can see first-rate modern art is another indicator of this area's flourishing arts scene.

Tours are given three times daily on weekends at 10 a.m., 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.; and on Wednesday afternoons at 4 p.m. A knowledgeable docent takes you through, but there is little time to linger over art that asks for a closer look. In an email, Maryse Brand, the director of the Hall Art Foundation in New York, said that the emphasis is on keeping the museum free-of-charge to the public, and that to allow visitors to go through at their own speed would require additional staff. "I appreciate very much the experience of being able to look at art at your own pace, so this setup may change down the road," she wrote.

For information on hours, booking tours and directions go to hallartfoundation.org or call 802-952-1056.