

**PRESENT**

at the Hyde Park Art Center,  
through July 16

**DETOUR: SCULPTURE, DRAWINGS,  
VIDEO, AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
ROBERT "JAKE" JACOBS**  
at RX, through July 12

**ELIZABETH NEWMAN**

at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, through  
July 12

By Fred Camper

## COME OUT AND PLAY

What constitutes interactive art is no easy question. John Dewey made the broad claim that any artwork is completed only "in the experience of others." Yet many go too far in the other direction and confuse interactivity with physical interaction, as Adelheid Mers and Jackie Terrassa point out in the exhibition booklet they wrote as curators of the Hyde Park Art Center group show "Present." For this exhibit they chose to tread a fine line, looking for artists "who were interested in exploring possibilities... but [who] resisted the impulse to impose definitive answers to the questions their own work raised." The result is an open-ended playfulness and a balance between the viewer's and the artist's roles.

In this respect "Present" is a welcome contrast to the Museum of Contemporary Art's "Performance Anxiety" exhibition, now in its final days. While the interactivity of the MCA works is overly literal, almost authoritarian, only some of the artwork in "Present"—by seven current art-school students or recent graduates, all but one from the Chicago area—suggests it should be touched. And one of the appealing aspects of the show is the variety of physical and mental interactions offered, in works from Arthur Myer's enigmatic arrangement of artifacts like old photo albums and canceled checks to Lili Martinez's couch, with its sheaf of papers filled with her hand-written reflections.

Shuko Wada's humorous, sprawling *Masking Tape and Carpet* invites the viewer to walk on it. A rectangular rug with red and tan stripes lies in a corner of the exhibition hall, great skeins of tan masking tape looped

over the wall and ceiling above it like a rapidly spreading shrub. Some viewers have simply walked on the carpet, but others have gotten more involved, pressing the masking tape to the wall, where it makes a contrast with the more billowing forms of tape higher up. Together the carpet and tape make the room itself more visible, filling the negative space of the corner. A clump of tape hanging across the room suggests that these tape blobs are growing and have taken root elsewhere.

David Meyer's similarly playful two sculptures also invite the viewer to participate directly and provoke thought: "Play," he writes, is "an activity where knowledge can be obtained." In *Virtual Pairs*, a square piece of Corian lying flat with a plate of glass on top holds hundreds of tiny lead beads; framed like a picture and mounted on a pivot, it tilts and sends the beads rolling. Stopping the beads' motion, one can make one's own patterns, though the method implies there's considerable arbitrariness to image making. For *The Pole of Inaccessibility*, Meyer mounts five slate wheels on a pole that projects horizontally from the wall, each smaller than the one behind. An outline of Antarctica is etched on the slate wheels, which are weighted so that the coastlines match when the wheels come to rest. The viewer can spin any or all of the wheels, but the artist has the last word—make whatever image you like, Antarctica always returns in the end. One could also give this piece an ecological reading: landscape endures over human endeavor.

Lisa Conrad's video installation, *Basketball Was Her First Love*, #2,

### "MASKING TAPE AND CARPET" BY SHUKO WADA

combines intellectual and physical interactions with an emotional component. This work is best when viewed at its full seven-minute length and more than once. Facing the monitor and speakers is what looks like an old gym bench inviting one to sit, which immediately implicates the viewer in the piece's autobiographical story. The speakers play the repetitive, echoing sounds of one player bouncing a ball in an empty court, while the video displays only text: scrolling rapidly from right to left are white letters on black so large that often only a part of each word is visible.

Conrad begins a statement on her piece with a quote from Roland Barthes—"To read is to make our body work"—and by presenting her story the way she does, she asks the viewer to struggle to absorb it. There's a tension in the video too between letters as repeated abstract shapes—akin to the repeated sounds of the basketball—and as components of words and sentences, which because of the scrolling cannot be grasped at a glance. The text is fragmented as well, a mixture of specific recollections—of basketball camp, for example—and more poetic and philosophical statements. The last phrase—"patterns that the mind could replay as one continuous motion"—could describe both basketball and reading. The steady movement of the text ultimately tends to fuse its disparate subjects, suggesting that writing and reading, like life itself, are forms of play. But what's so affecting about *Basketball Was Her First Love*, #2 is that the fusion is never complete. Autobiographical fragments stand out in

memory—inexplicable, living facts that won't be homogenized into pure shape or rhythm by writing or play. I still wonder why the young Lisa felt the need to get away from Joe, a need to which she ascribes her obsessive basketball practice.

Playing is also important to the works of Robert "Jake" Jacobs, eight of which are on view at RX. Only one is physically interactive, however: *Play* is a model railroad track that snakes like a roller coaster from about waist level to the floor. It's supported

by piles of books, most belonging to Jacobs, a few borrowed from the gallery. The track has three "rails," and viewers can place marbles on the tracks two at a time and watch them descend. Their speed varies on different portions of the track, apparently depending on their size, offering a sort of physics lesson: one can think more calmly about gravity here than on a stomach-twisting roller coaster. *Play* also invites the viewer to consider the use to which these books are put. Closed, their titles are often hard to read; one might infer that Jacobs

