

Step Inside With Buster

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN
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The other day, while standing in front of an array of sculptor Kendall Buster's preparatory drawings, a roomful of which are on view at the Kreeger Museum along with a couple of full-scale, sculptural installations, I gradually became aware of an indeterminate sound. As I soon discovered, the noise, reminiscent of the rush of blood heard through a stethoscope or of rhythmic breathing, came from behind the very pictures I was looking at, inside the wall in front of me that hid the mechanical heating and cooling systems a museum publicist called the building's "guts, its lungs."

It seemed doubly appropriate, not only as a kind of soundtrack to accompany these sketches of—what?—organs, pumping chambers, vessels and vesicles, but also in the way the sound straddled the mechanical and the biological, the built and the grown. Buster's art, of course, does that too, but it doesn't stop there. As much as it sometimes seems to evoke our innards, it's also about the space around us.

"Kendall Buster: Inventory of Imagined Places" is "more archive than retrospective," as essayist Paul Brewer correctly notes in the catalogue (or, more accurately, artist's book) that accompanies the show. Aside from a pair of fully realized sculptural installations—one an array of puffy, air-filled PVC pillows that turn a single, long gallery into a kind of marshmallow maze, the other a towering form made from a transparent scrim stretched around an urn-shaped skeletal substructure—"In-

ventory" consists mainly of models, maquettes and graphite-on-Mylar drawings that relate to other projects. As the name suggests, it is both an itemized listing of things that exist elsewhere and an investigation of the process that went into *inventing* them.

It is, however, more than a process show.

In addition to anatomical structures, the smallish, unassuming drawings conjure other marvelous things in and of themselves: mollusks, larvae, ocarinas, a medieval helmet, amoebas and other obvious fallout from the artist's early training as a microbiologist. The models, too, stimulate the imagination to wander in directions too numerous—and too idiosyncratic—to classify.

What they do not do is bum-rush the senses in the way that Buster's finished sculptures can, at their best. Much like Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's room-filling, often tactile installations (seen not too long ago at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Baltimore Museum of Art), Buster's art is meant, in a way, to attack the viewer. It does not want to behave.

In that way, it interferes with our personal space—even when, as in a piece planned for the new convention center (a model of which is at the Kreeger), it hangs several feet above head level. Buster's art acts both as aesthetic object (that is, something to be enjoyed with the eye) and as architectural space. In other words, it is something to be traveled through or around.

Walking through Buster's "Cells/Fragmented Gallery," a field of inflated cubes made from whitewater raft mate-

rial tethered to the Kreeger's floor, feels sexy and scary at the same time in the way it rubs up against us like an overly affectionate dog. It's slightly uncomfortable, naughty and fun, like rubber pants. Its active engagement, even encroachment, upon our personal space is the most powerful part of the show.

Don't think, though, that Buster's art is all about confinement. The cage-like sculpture "Garden Snare," for instance, made for the Kreeger's lawn in a 1998 collaboration with high-school students, may look claustrophobic from the outside, but it contains a world of its own inside.

For Buster, science, nature, architecture and art are all intertwined. The distinction between the made world and the organic, between discipline and wildness, between what is and what can be imagined by the artist, is an arbitrary, even false one.

After all, she says, "If you look at the way a leaf grows, it has a kind of math to it."

KENDALL BUSTER: INVENTORY OF IMAGINED PLACES—Through June 21 at the Kreeger Museum, 2401 Foxhall Rd. NW. 202-337-3050. www.kreegermuseum.com. The special exhibition may be viewed Tuesday-Friday at 10:30 and 1:30 or Saturdays at 10:30 as part of the museum's regularly scheduled tours. Call 202-338-3552 for reservations (reservations not needed on Saturdays during the exhibition from 1 to 4). Admission is by suggested donation of \$8, \$5 for students and seniors.

Public programs associated with the exhibition include:
April 24 at 7—Art critics and curators Andrea Pollan and Sarah Tanguy engage in a roundtable discussion with Kendall Buster. \$10. Call 202-338-3552 for reservations.
June 1 from 11 to 4—Open House, featuring music, gallery talks and art workshops. Free. Reservations not required.



Kendall Buster examines her "Cells/Fragmented Gallery," one of the stronger pieces at her Kreeger Museum exhibit.

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BY ERIC KEEL