

LongHouse Dons an Extra-Large Shirt - April 26, 2007

By Janet M. Goleas

(04/24/2007) Imagine colossal chairs, huge steel heads, houses with tongues and wings, rabbit factories, flying churches, lightning bolts, and brick chimneys tied up in knots. Too much sun? You wouldn't be dreaming. You would be engaging in the subversive, elastic, and satirical art of Dennis Oppenheim, whose 2004 sculpture "Entrance to a Garden" was installed over the weekend at the LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton.

The sculpture, which will be on view beginning Saturday, was fashioned in the shape of a huge (15-foot) collared shirt and tie articulated with a bright-blue steel armature. Mr. Oppenheim sliced away a portal just below the necktie, precisely where the solar plexus would reside, to serve as a tunnel to the gardens beyond.

Mr. Oppenheim, a West Coast transplant who has lived in New York for four decades, has been coming out to his house in Springs since the 1980s. When asked how he spends his time here, he said recently at LongHouse, "I don't work here. I think. I pace around," adding, "Sometimes I take my dog to the beach."



Morgan McGivern

Dennis Oppenheim at the LongHouse Reserve

The oxford shirt in "Entrance to a Garden" is architectural in scale, bordered by the lapels of a suit. "It's a fusion of art, architecture, and fashion," the artist said.

The sculptural shirting was fabricated from perforated steel mesh, each gauzy panel slightly varied in patterns of punctured holes. The figure itself, a torso, stands like a renegade Everyman defined only by its clothing, drawn in hard-edged lines of structural steel. "I wanted to make a sculpture that was a hybrid image of the body," Mr. Oppenheim said.

"I wanted to make a hush of a sculpture," Mr. Oppenheim said. Indeed, the artist has been reinventing figurative art since the 1960s, when he was among the young artists who set out not only to subvert the gallery system, but also to avenge the European masters and, perhaps

most important, redeem the art world from Minimalism by reintroducing the landscape and the figure into contemporary art.



Dennis Oppenheim

Morgan McGivern

Back then Mr. Oppenheim favored large “drawing implements” such as snowmobiles, bulldozers, and chain saws with which he could address the landscape as if it were an extension of his studio or a very large sheet of paper. He sliced circles into the ice on St. John’s River just at the border between the United States and Canada (“Annual Rings,” 1968), harvested wheat fields in the shape of a giant “X” (“Cancelled Crops,” 1969), hired a small plane to sky-write loops in the shape of a tornado (“Whirlpool: Eye of the Storm,” 1973), and lay in the sun until burned everywhere except the rectangle where a

book with the title “Tactics” had been left open on his chest (“Reading Position for 2nd Degree Burn,” 1970).

Earth art, body art, video, performance; these were the game pieces in a cultural universe that ostensibly redefined the art world. And this was just the beginning of Mr. Oppenheim’s radical and pioneering body of work.

“When I did Earthworks the problem was that you couldn’t see them,” he said. Like the massive line drawings carved into Peru’s Nazca Plains or something more recent like crop circles, such works were best seen from the air. Transitory in nature, their existence was marked chiefly by drawings or photographic documentation.

“That was a problem because then people thought I was a photographer.” It’s always something. Photographs and photographic collages of the artist’s works can also be seen at the Gallery in Sag Harbor through May 20.

It is difficult to think of another artist who has so effectively translated thought and gesture into form, as if capable of seizing the very moment of conception and giving it a physical presence.

“I’ve always been only interested in doing radical work — work that makes you uncomfortable — that puts you on edge as opposed to using virtuosity or facility,” the artist said, and shrugged. “I’m not sure how that’s going. Well, I’m still pretty uncomfortable, so I guess it’s working.”

In the 1980s Mr. Oppenheim began making sculptures that functioned like machines, often with complex technological elements, moving parts, and startlingly illogical associations. His first public art commission, “Image Intervention,” was made possible by an eccentric patron in Anchorage in 1984.

Since then the opportunities to create large-scale public art projects in cities across the world have been numerous. Working in the public arena changed Mr. Oppenheim’s thinking about his

art. He has become one of very few artists who learned to negotiate the corporate teams and committees typically involved in large-scale commissions. To do so and still produce art is something of an art in itself.

The large works created since the 1980s are sublime in their capacity to interact with the environment, whether a gallery or museum or the public domain. They are active participants in their own apprehension, weaving in and out of logic, satire, and various constellations of meaning.

In his work "Jump and Twist," 1999, winged Quonset huts fly across a plaza at the University of Freiburg in Germany, eventually bursting right through the atrium walls into an interior pavilion. Such vivid theatricality exists both within the sculptural elements themselves and in the way viewers experience them. It's as if all of these parts become active verbs in a sentence that is in a continual state of reinventing itself.

The artist refers to his "full-frontal immersion" into theory or structure or whatever it is that becomes the catalyst to make an idea take on form. Like his work, Dennis Oppenheim seems to defy stasis, shifting in and out of meanings, breaking through here, pulling apart there, in an artful and stunning dance between the lines.