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Henrique Oliveira's art takes root in Boulder

By Kyle MacMillan

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Henrique Oliveira: "Untitled (Brushstroke)," 2011, site-specific installation. Bending board and salvaged plywood, screws and staples, approximately 345 by 157 by 118 inches. (Photo by Richard Peterson)

In an art world where ideas often trump objects and new media increasingly supplant the old, there is something reassuringly solid, tangible and real about Henrique Oliveira's installation at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art.

The graceful, sinuous work, the latest in a series of such site-specific constructions that have gained the Brazilian artist increasing international attention, wraps comfortably around a corner of the museum's main gallery and seems to emerge organically from the walls.

Titled "Untitled (Brushstroke)," the enthralling 29-foot-long wood piece, which stretches from floor to ceiling, is the centerpiece of a solo exhibition that also includes three preparatory drawings and eight paintings. The long-running offering is set to close June 5.

The installation swells and dips and kind of droops over on itself in certain places. Elsewhere, parts of the work jut gently forth to form peaks and several pointed, gourd-like forms.

As three nearby preparatory drawings make clear, Oliveira considered varying compositions before settling on this interconnected panorama of contoured shapes, which coalesce into a satisfying, gently flowing whole.

The artist constructed the piece on site, using a stapler to meticulously attach hundreds of thin strips of weathered, discarded wood to a hidden understructure. The wood, reminiscent of that once used to make light crates for fruits and vegetables, served as fencing at construction sites in Brazil.

Some of the strips are already painted when Oliveira finds them, but he adds more color, leaving some sections untouched and raw. He thins the acrylic paint and applies it in such a way that it is impossible to tell the difference between the old, faded applications and the new.

Along with the installation's innate tactile, sculptural and even architectural qualities, the washes of color and undulating lines give it a painterly dimension as well — one that is clearly intended, as the piece's subtitle, "Brushstroke," makes clear.

It is telling that Oliveira began as a painter and in graduate school started making his "tridimensionals," which he understandably sees as essentially three-dimensional paintings.

To provide some useful context, a selection of the artist's paintings are also on view, and these boisterous works, with their electric, even psychedelic colors, vary surprisingly from the sedate palette and disciplined craftsmanship of the installation.

In these abstractions, he manipulates thick pools of paint, allowing them to bump against each other and sometimes merge, forming swooshes and curlicues that can evoke hard-candy shapes or vaguely suggest land- or seascapes. Even though long dry, these acrylic pieces still have a liquidy look.

These canvases, which draw on the work of Jules Olitski and others, are strong and eye-grabbing. But they do not possess the distinctiveness or visual power of Oliveira's installations, which, at least to this point, are likely to define the legacy of this artist, who was born in 1973.

This international exhibition, a striking complement to the rich mix of other art offerings on view elsewhere in the Denver-Boulder area, supplies the latest evidence that the Boulder Museum is back on track.

The compact institution has undergone its share of ups and downs since its founding in 1972. But David Dadone, who took over as director in February 2010, has re-energized it and instilled a renewed level of curatorial sophistication.

The challenge now is for the museum to clearly define its niche among the area's growing number of contemporary art spaces and maintain a high-level consistency in its exhibitions.

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HENRIQUE OLIVEIRA.

Art. Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 1750 13th St. A site-specific installation anchors a solo exhibition dedicated to the Brazilian artist, featured at the 2010 São Paulo International Biennial. Through June 5. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays and 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesdays during the run of the Boulder farmers market, which begins next week. \$5, \$4 for seniors, students and educators. Everyone admitted free on Saturdays and 4 to 8 p.m. Wednesdays during the farmers market. 303-443-2122 or bmoca.org