

Galleries

Art, Commerce Come to a Head at Logan Circle

GALLERIES, From C1

This street-level exhibition is the blessing of a sluggish economy. Metropolis Development Corp., owner of the storefront and the condo building enclosing it, awaits a retail tenant for the space. Until then, Moe's installation, certainly one of her most effective to date, serves the Metropolis brand.

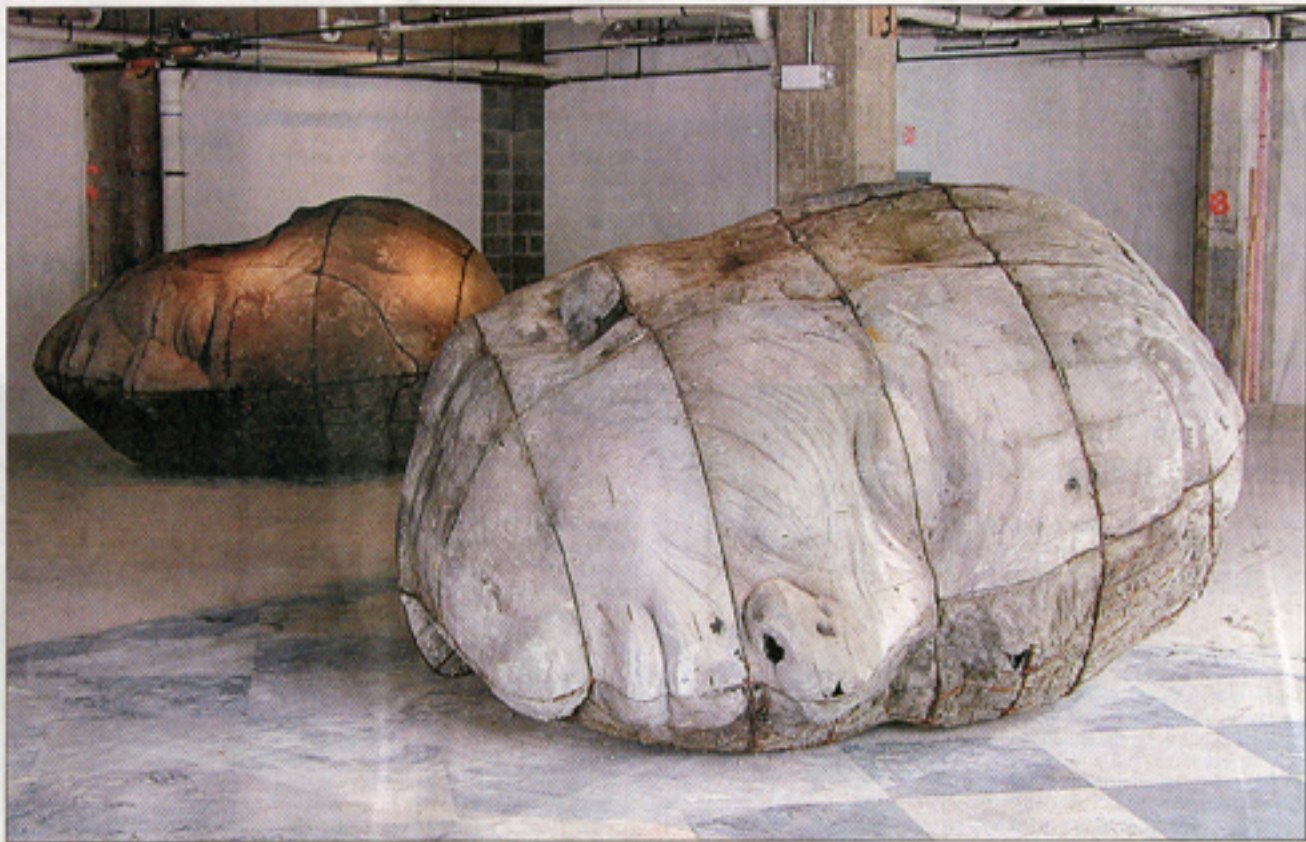
A signal of aspiration and good taste, art provides Metropolis — the firm behind a handful of brand-new, loft-style condominium buildings around the intersection of 14th and P streets NW — with a strategic dose of cachet. John Grimberg, a consultant to Metropolis and the man who suggested installing art in the storefront, says the impromptu exhibition helps Metropolis remain on the neighborhood radar. Grimberg says the company's aim was "to use the space to create a presence" for the firm's brand. As Grimberg phrased it, showing art is "in keeping with the Metropolis aesthetic."

Metropolis marketing director Carol Felix says the company plans a second exhibition in the coming weeks. It will occupy the development firm's sales office, which sits across Church Street from the Moe installation.

What's good for the developer also benefits artists. When Grimberg approached Annie Gawlak of G Fine Art to ask about an artist appropriate for the 1520 14th St. space, Gawlak was delighted to suggest Moe. It turns out that the artist, who lives in Baltimore and teaches at the Maryland Institute College of Art, had been hoping to exhibit "Memorial (Collapse)" in a raw space. (The work has been shown twice before, in Des Moines and Fairfax.) Once Metropolis and G came to an agreement on the costs associated with installing the work, the deal was done. Moe's piece occupies the space rent-free.

Crafted to appear worn and ancient, the heads fit just right among the unfinished storefront's dusty floors, exposed wiring and black rat traps. Moe is known for her bigger-than-life-size sculptural installations. Past works have dominated their surroundings with a Richard Serra-like assertiveness. Just out of reach and behind plate glass, "Memorial (Collapse)" gains an extra degree of subtlety from the distance. (Those eager for closer inspection should show up on Saturday, Sept. 16, when G Fine Art opens the space from 6 to 9 p.m. in conjunction with other neighborhood gallery openings.)

By day or night, the three heads make for a mysterious scene. They lie on their sides like oversize Brancusi. Made from distressed concrete slathered on metal armatures, the works' raw finish and exposed steel suggest age and decay. They could be ancient Mayan artifacts, the decapitated heads of massive sculptures. Perhaps they're lost memorials erected by a regime once very powerful and now defunct. Their androgynous faces are still, their eyes



The enigmatic "Memorial (Collapse)" is in an unleased storefront on 14th Street NW. The space's owner, Metropolis Development Corp., plans a second exhibit nearby.

closed as if sleeping. One imagines they'd have stories to tell if roused, stories detailing the hubris of their makers.

Paradoxically, installed behind the glass, the massive heads also manage to suggest precious trinkets lovingly displayed. In fact, the sculptures are the size of refrigerators, and they're hollow. (The artist, a compact woman, is able to climb inside one.) On a far wall behind Moe's sculptures hangs a large black, white and orange banner that reads "Retail Space for Lease." Posted by Asadoorian Retail Solutions, the sign provides the phone number of John Asadoorian, the man who will lease you the space, so long as you put up \$50 a square foot and sign a five-to-10-year lease.

After all, this space is available.

Taken at its most genial face value, the installation of "Memorial (Collapse)" proposes an egalitarian role for art. It adds significant interest to Logan street life. It's open to everyone, all the time. A public sidewalk offers the most privileged view. We've seen such productions around the city before, memorably so a few years back around Dupont Circle. Such spaces give artists great exposure and liven the urban experience.

But there is an unfriendly aspect to this phenomenon, too. A temporary exhibition in retail space sends a mixed message about where art belongs. Though art should be part of urban street life, it is allowed to occupy only borrowed space — and then only until a paying customer arrives. In this model, art is a provisional attraction, one that ensures a de-

veloper remains on the public radar.

I can't blame artists and their galleries for riding this wave of development — after all, they benefit, too. All the same, the art community should keep in mind what such partnerships entail.

In the early decades of the 20th century, car dealers monopolized the block of 14th Street where Moe's installation sits. Today, real estate developers rule. We can only guess at who will own this corner a hundred years from now.

The site fits faultlessly with Moe's meditation on the powers that were.

Memorial (Collapse), by Ledelle Moe, at 1520 14th St. NW, through Sept. 20. For more information, contact G Fine Art at 202-462-1601 or www.gfineart.com.