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The Clocktower Gallery

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James Franco Exhibit at Clocktower Gallery Leaves Us Thinking, "What Can't This Guy Do?"

By Leslie Minora, Mon., Jun. 28 2010

We came to know him as an actor (*Milk*, *Pineapple Express*, *Knocked Up*, and soon, *Eat, Pray, Love*), then, as a brainy student (New York University, Columbia, Brooklyn College, Yale, and the Rhode Island School of Design). Now he's created his first solo art exhibit, *The Dangerous Book Four Boys*, a huge mixed-media experience supported by a high level of work and thought -- and carpentry. James Franco's ethos seems to be "Go big or go home, and look great doing it."

Skeptics may write him off as a pretty-boy actor because when celebrities try to make art -- or perfume, as is often the case - it usually, well, stinks. But Franco being Franco, he pulls off the transition into the fine art world with an exhibit that makes you want to forget yourself and get lost in it for an afternoon. That's assuming you don't get lost on your way there.

Clocktower Gallery (operated by AIR, Art International Radio) is located on the 13th floor of a city-owned building at 108 Leonard Street that requires photo I.D. and an X-ray of your bag to enter. The elevators rise to the 12th floor, and one more flight of stairs will lead you to the entrance, assuming you don't take the freight elevator to 13 and proceed down a maze of hallways like I did.

In the sweeping gallery space, three bare wooden house structures anchor the exhibit, and through adjacent photographs, Franco removes the structures from their sterile surroundings and situates them in a deserted area with sand and mountains, and at times, a stray camera or two. In playing with contexts, the presence of cameras, and the idea of home, Franco deconstructs the reality of fame in a subtle, bare, and elemental way, sparing expected cliches. Though tired ideas about destruction of celebrity and flashbulb-attention surface while viewing his work, the presentation feels new, and more than that, solid.



In the midst of all of this darkness, Franco inserts flecks of playfulness. One meticulously assembled wooden structure is shaped like a spaceship with stairs leading to an open door at its front. It looks like a little boy's dream fort, and it effectively lightens the mood of the space while touching on questions of boyhood and masculinity that are more explicitly addressed in Franco's videos and drawings.

Sound also plays its part in Franco's work. The area near the spaceship structure gives off the rumble of a flying plane, and a video of a man destroying a wooden structure with a hammer reverberates a harsh, methodic "pow." These noises, strong when nearby, combine and softly blanket the entire show. So, while sitting in the largest house-like structure, you will hear soft soothing music from the looped video projection as a playhouse explodes in slow motion -- while you also hear the hammer and plane sounds from outside. It is a mind-bend for the senses, as is the entire display.