An Unsung Hero In Katzen

Right near the back of American University’s Katzen Arts Center resides the iconic American University Museum. Molded into existence in 2005 by the award-winning architectural firm, Einhorn Yaffee Prescott (a few accolades include the 2012 Prix d’Exellence Award by the U.S. Embassy in France, and the 2005 Grand Honor Award for the design of this very museum), and boasting 30,000 square-feet (making it one of the largest art museums in the region), this section of the building serves as a treasure trove of contemporary art, having hosted numerous significant art exhibitions throughout its nine years of existence. Any thirsty art enthusiast that walks through its glass doors is satiated with three whole floors filled with breathtaking, impressive modern paintings, watercolors and sculptures.

Then again, as I wandered aimlessly along the open spaces of the gallery, it was not the art that the museum proudly displayed that interested me, but rather the art that it seemed to have disregarded. A quick climb up the stairs of the museum brought me to the second floor, where, right smack in the middle of the open room, stood a naked, grey pillar. Since its standing debut in 2005, this particular column has seen the coming and going of exhibitions from many artists, from the surreal paintings of the late Tom Green (Jan-Mar 2010) to the flowing watercolors of the great John Cage (Fall 2012). Looking more closely into the dispersed patterns of age and abuse that the column had
accumulated throughout its years, I realized that it itself was a piece of contemporary artwork.

When pondering the shape of this museum, Einhorn Yaffee Prescott probably did not spend too long thinking about the aesthetics of this particular pillar—from not bothering with the pillar, the firm granted the pillar a status in triviality, and a gift of growing in beauty. A few moments of careful study reveals a pleasantly ironic blend of messy domesticity with deep sophistication; this is to be expected of a pillar that has stayed in its place for nearly a decade as the world has passed it by. Its original, smooth limestone beauty has now been defaced with scratches and chips, its gray body now a more rugged version of its former self. The original pattern of the rock has been augmented with a mesh of new designs: an assortment of long, dark grey stripes reaches down from the top of the pillar, mixing in with the powerful white stripes of dry paint that crawl up from below. A long, darkened yellow streak reaches down from the ceiling to about midway, suggesting a history of water leakage to go with the splotches and lines of whitewash. Squares of darkened grey patches are sparingly scattered along the middle, the forgotten residue of tape that once augmented the purpose of the pole. The tiny, yet obvious markings of black rubber reveal the possibility of something accidentally crashing into this pillar and leaving a dark scar. What emerges from all of these markings is the result of the pillar’s maturation from a polished column of virgin limestone to an older and more cultured obelisk for the ages. The humanity in this masterpiece, what makes it art, comes from the stories it has to tell and how it wears them like a shell; every little blemish is a painting of a thousand words.
Perhaps one of the more intriguing parts of this column would be the two holes that were purposely drilled into the rock, one a couple of inches directly above the other. These two cavities are fully fitted with plastic stoppers, which, in this context, suggest that these holes were used to hold up or provide support to a piece of artwork. Now that they have been rendered obsolete, these two holes serve only to augment the beauty of this column, a reminder of the many functions that this one round block has offered to help with the displays in the museum, a true portrayal of man’s innovation and practicality.

Unlike the other exhibited artworks in this building, this pillar provides one more sensory component for its viewer: touch. The fact that you are able to run your hands along the pillar gives you yet another way to appreciate the overall aesthetic of this magnificent column. The forgotten paint droplets form little mounds of braille gibberish, as the larger splashes of white and grey make for an unpleasantly rough surface. Tape marks are given extra life with the addition of an uneasy stickiness. Tiny cracks in the stone are rewarded new definition with a sudden change in depth in the path of the wandering fingertip— a short puff of air into one of these holes could discharge a tiny plume of dust and chalk. What is truly amazing, though, are the random splotches of darkened grey that cannot be felt, like liver spots on an elder’s silken skin. But be not deceived; while the wear and tear of the years clearly shows through its rough patches, this monolith proclaims its youth through its still vast expanse of smooth, polished limestone. The texture of this piece is perhaps the most artistic quality that it possesses: the rough grooves and tacky squares symbolize the very ethics of the museum, a living
deletion of the sweat and tears that went into the making of every exhibit that has passed through the halls.

Ever since the first curious student ventured into its chambers nine years ago, the American University Museum has prided itself on displaying some of the most striking pieces of contemporary art in DC, and in the world. But, despite all the world-class sculptures and canvases that have traversed through the three floors of gallery, this one column on the second floor, which has never moved anywhere, deserves to be the most authentic piece of contemporary art of which this museum can boast: of all modern artworks, what piece of art can be more progressive, more current, more contemporary, than one that remains unfinished, one that continues to gain its beauty through service?

In so many ways, this pillar, shrouded by the veil of misperceived irrelevance, stands as the truest representation of the American University Museum that it holds up. Here’s to the unsung hero of Katzen, an inspiration for us all to live with proactively and humbly.