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Topics: David Brooks, Erin Shirreff, Knight's Move, SculptureCenter

“Knight’s Move” has more than one false start. Outside **SculptureCenter** through July 26, a few plywood stairs by Matt Sheridan Smith and Nikolas Gambaroff lead exactly nowhere, other than into a blank wall. It blends into the debris on a dead-end street, and I missed it entirely on my way in. **David Brooks** picks up where it leaves off with his *Buried Boardwalk*—except for the mountain of gravel that blocks progress. Its “observation deck” at the end overlooks pretty much nothing anyway, give or take people like me wishing we could climb up. Even if we could, we might find ourselves trapped like criminals on a scaffold.

One gets a third chance on entering the building and at least a fourth heading into the basement tunnels. In practice, almost every work involves repeated starts and inconclusive endings. It might be **Alex Hubbard** on video, puttering around his studio without ever quite appearing, much as in the **2010 Whitney Biennial**. It might be Mika Tajima, leaving paintings on a rack as if waiting for someone to display them. The entire show could serve as an **allegory of the art world**, where anything seems possible but success. For all the talk, **big installations** are giving way to smaller experiments, at the risk of no one breaking through.

Not that uncertain progress means futility. Brooks’s walkway gently twists and soars as an actual boardwalk never could, and it leads the eye from debris to greenery—much like his demented sidewalk in a gallery this spring. At the far end of the sculpture court, he stacks dumpsters like colored blocks, with flora growing on top, high overhead. Downstairs, **Joanna Malinowska** piles her polished imitation walrus tusks next to a washer-dryer as *In Search of Primordial Matter*. In art apparently, evolution can go through cycles and still clean house. In fact, the show combines any number of interdisciplinary trends, to the point that I could almost have curated it myself.

One, as with Brooks or **Allyson Vieira**, is the transformation of Minimalism into what **Mark Dion** would might **urban archaeology**. Vieira’s plaster fragments bring the Parthenon to industrial walls, while Esther Kläs’s horizontal slabs form a broken pyramid. Others, like **Erin Shirreff** and **Sara VanDerBeek**, transform photography into abstraction, but based on real sculpture and model architecture. For **Tamar Halpern**, that leaves the space of abstraction and of imagery difficult to tease apart. For still others, like Hubbard or Uri Aran, process art leaves a real-world mess. Aran’s shavings and shredded wheat suggest a compulsion to create something, even if no one will see it—or, one hopes, eat it.

“Knight’s Move” in fact feels less like a chess endgame than a grab-bag of tricks, trends, and opening gambits. When Virginia Poundstone leaves flower boxes on brightly printed vinyl, appropriation veers on the decorative arts, especially as it might make a nifty shower curtain. When Ohad Meromi sets a primitivist sculpture next to an early modern tower, it approaches identity politics, without having much of an identity. With Cassie Raihl’s *TigerStack*, Alexandre Singh’s assemblages modeled on magic acts, and

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Tom Thayer's low-tech animations, **trashy installations** come close to incompleteness for its own sake. It is not so easy to break free of a static and divided art world. I might turn out a lousy curator after all. The actual curator, Fionn Meade, finds an old-fashioned optimism behind it all. The show's title quotes Victor Shklovskii, the Russian formalist critic who coined the term *defamiliarization*. Shklovskii might enjoy the irony of turning to him to justify so much that is now so familiar. But maybe the trends are converging for good reason, in a revisioning of the city as a site for art. Brooks's mound might well have risen up from the stones of the **Maya Lin** sculpture court, and Smith's stoop might mourn the new glass apartment tower with its back to the museum. Shirreff closes the show with the United Nations as seen from Long Island City, in distorted color—like so many artists with dreams of Manhattan.