Cosmic energy: Real or ridiculous?

The Kabakovs meditate on the power of unseen forces

By Ken Johnson

MEDFORD — Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, the Russian-American team internationally celebrated for their complex storytelling installations, have made a tremendous discovery. They have learned that caves with ancient paintings on their walls are embedded in Walnut Hill, which is now occupied by Tufts University.

The Kabakovs believe that this buried object — a leaping tower of modular, tunnel-shaped elements made of a concrete-like material — once served to gather and store cosmic energy. It is now undergoing excavation, and the artists, who are husband and wife, have made it the focus of their current exhibition, “The Center of Cosmic Energy.”

Why have the Kabakovs’ amazing discoveries not stirred up greater excitement in Boston and around the world? One reason might be that they never really happened. They are the basis of an elaborate fiction whose purpose remains tantalizingly ambiguous. Set up to imitate a combination of public museum, archaeological site, and New Age tourist attraction, the exhibition, though conceptually intriguing, is disappointingly as an actual experience.

Gallery director Amy Ingrid Siegel has overseen an impressive transformation of the space, but there is a perturbing quality to the execution of the Kabakovs’ vision that undermines the transporting effect it is meant to have.

Entering the first of a series of darkened chambers, we view a slide show of an expansive, complicated architectural model: the Kabakovs’ proposal for a fully functioning Center of Cosmic Energy, where cosmic energies would be received and stored.

In the next room, along with text explaining the Kabakovs’ theories about the cosmos, flat-screen monitors offer images of constructions from the past believed to be centers of cosmic energy: places such as Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, and Walter De Maria’s “Lightning Field.”

Next comes the main attraction: We proceed into a small circular amphitheater centered around a rough, huddle-like object with a deep, dark hole in it. Overhead is a round, back-lighted, fabric-covered panel surrounded by a metal rod directed downward like rays of light. Sitting on tiered, semicircular plywood benches, we listen to a taped 15-minute lecture about cosmic energy, at the end of which we are invited to become aware of a feeling of well-being induced by the concentrated energy that the object in the center — a cosmic energy “reservoir” — has gathered. At this point the overhead circular light panel glows brighter for half a minute or so. (Whether any other visitors felt any effects from cosmic energy I can’t say, but I didn’t feel any different.)

We then go down a flight of rough wooden stairs to another dark room directly below the amphitheater. Here we find the tower under excavation: a segmented, stacked structure of massive stone-like forms each resembling the business end of a toilet plunger. The topmost protrudes into the amphitheater above.

The space here is cavelike and mysterious. The tower apparently continues downward below the plywood flooring deep into the earth. Implicitly it connects unknown depths of the earth to unknown upper reaches of the cosmos — or, metaphorically speaking, the depths of the instinctual unconscious to the heights of spiritually enlightened consciousness.

That all this is not as thrilling as it ought to be is partly because of the production values. In previous works, the Kabakovs created carefully finished environments that replicated with uncanny realism places such as old Soviet hospital rooms or tenement hallways. Here there is no such magical realism, and the sense of being swept up into some other, fictive universe isn’t fully realized. It’s more like a set for a play or a movie. As background it might work fine, but as the main vehicle of meaning and object of visual scrutiny, it’s not enough.

What the Kabakovs are up to conceptually, however, is compelling, in part because their project’s purpose is left provocatively uncertain. Do the artists really believe that there are centers of cosmic energy around the world that people using modern (or ancient) technology can tap into? Do they really think that cosmic energy might solve all the world’s problems? Taking the exhibition at face value, it seems that they do — if only as a poetic vision — you may find yourself wondering if there’s anything to their theories.

On the other hand, perhaps they are spoofing wishful New Age thinking. Belief that salvation will come from the heavens has a long history — longer, probably, than the idea that humans have no choice but to solve their own problems using their own ingenuity. The penchant for imagining magical solutions to worldly troubles is a great subject for satire, and the Kabakovs’ exhibition could be seen as a sly mockery of pseudo-scientific enterprises that prey on human gullibility.

Ultimately the tension between belief and skepticism that the exhibition conjures might be the best thing about it: Ambiguity stretches the mind.

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