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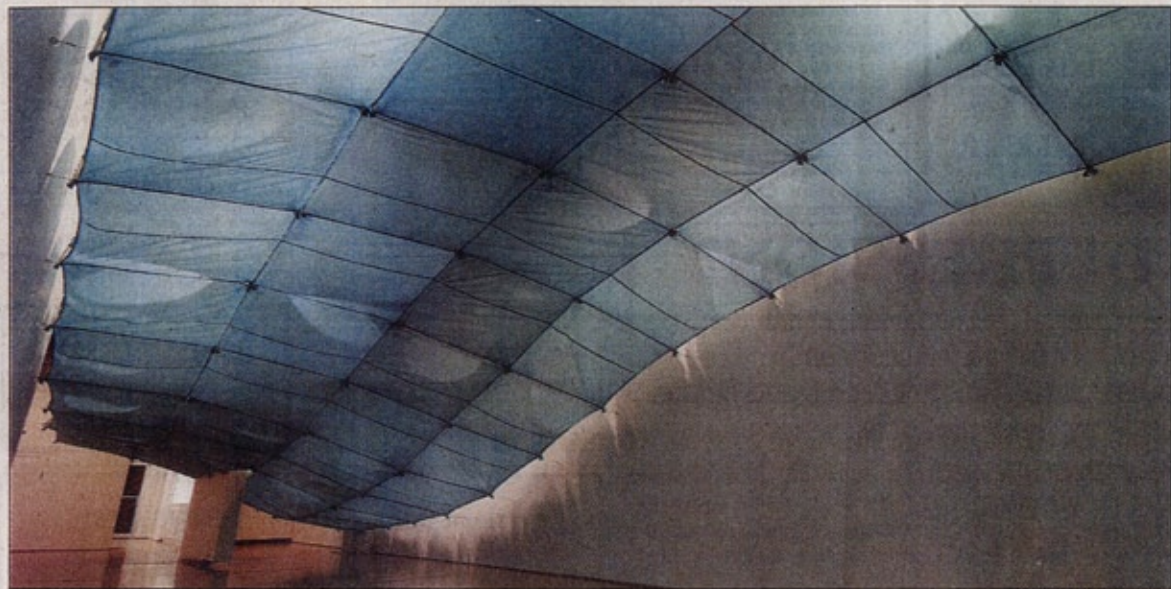
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Kendall Buster's "Model City" fills the length and breadth of Fusebox, but the undulating stretch of fabric is much more than meets the eye initially.

BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH — FUSEBOX

Art

In Kendall Buster's World, Modernism Ends Up on Top

By **BLAKE GOPNIK**
Washington Post Staff Writer

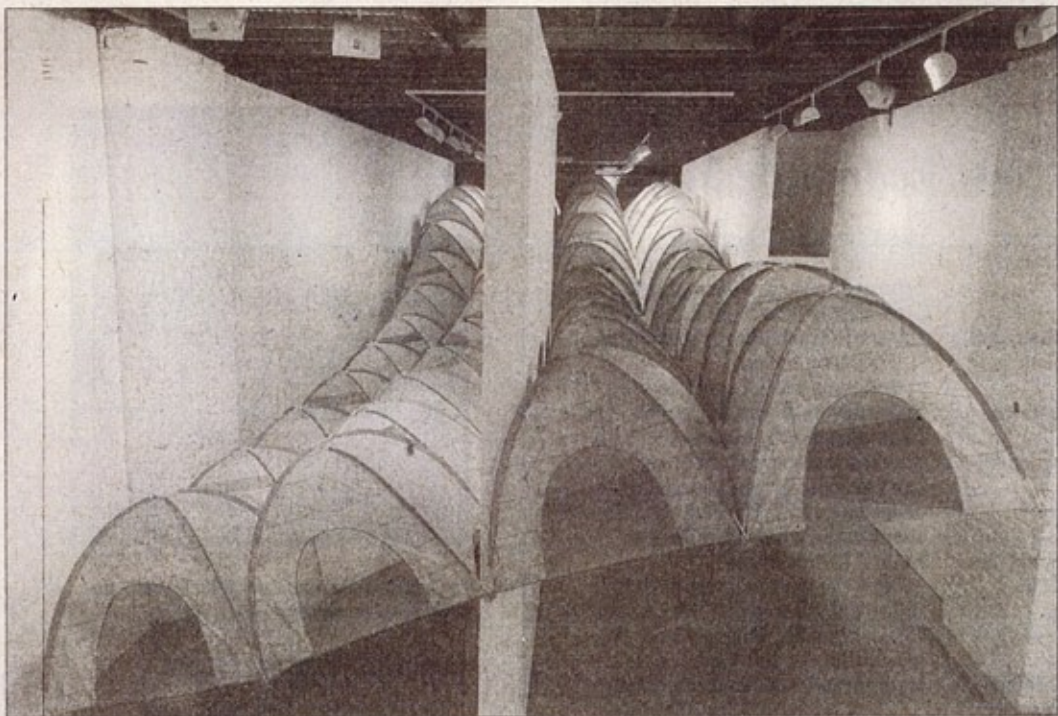
When you walk into Fusebox gallery these days, you see a wonderful work of modernist abstraction by leading local artist Kendall Buster. (She used to be a Washingtonian; now she lives and teaches sculpture in Richmond.)

Buster has replaced Fusebox's lofty ceiling with a giant sweep of taut blue cloth, extending wall-to-wall and front-to-back across the gallery. It swoops down from just above the 10-foot-high front doors, falls to a few feet above the floor once you're well into the space, then soars back up and out of view as it nears the rear wall of the room. Imagine the huge wave from Hokusai's great Japanese print sus-

pended from the sky and you'll get some idea of the effect.

Buster has reworked the gallery's businesslike white cube into a space whose volumes manage to touch us. As you stride into the gallery under her descending field of blue, you feel that your world is closing in. Inside a normal gallery, you move through the neutral environment around you, attending mostly to whatever objects you come across in it. Attention to the thing contained makes its container all but disappear. Now it's the container that makes a move on you, gradually compressing your personal space until you feel almost oppressed. Then, as the fabric sky falls to its lowest point

See ART, C4, Col. 1



BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH — FUSEBOX

Looking back at Kendall Buster's installation from the far end of the gallery reveals the true nature of her artwork.

Putting Down Stakes in Modernism

ART, From C1

and has you nearly doubled over — gallery-goers rarely seem to have the nerve to push back up against it — you discover that it comes to a sudden end just before the gallery's rear wall. You and your spirits are let loose again, as you rise and turn to face the far edge of the cloth and peer into the empty space above it.

Which is where art really starts to happen. You get to see the flip side, in an almost literal sense, of modernist abstraction.

Buster's clean, crisp expanse of minimal shape isn't abstract at all. It doesn't consist, as everyone at

The piece suggests that modernity in its real-world form — unlike the sterile image of it conveyed in fancy abstract art — is about mass production.

first imagines, of a supple sheet of fine nylon that slices cleanly through the gallery. Once the wave's top surface is revealed, you realize that the nylon you saw hanging overhead was in fact a sea of floors looked at from underneath: Buster has taken 52 identical toy tents, scaled for children's backyard sleepovers, packed them edge-to-edge into a rectangle the size of the gallery's floor plan, sewn the square tents together along their bottom edges, then hung the whole expanse in a rolling wave above our heads.

What seemed to be one big colored roof, attractive in its abstract effects, turns out to be the underside of more than half a hundred little huts that have a very different impact.

One take on modern existence is that it's about regimented making and consuming, and these serried ranks of flimsy tents can be read as a metaphor for that idea.

The piece suggests that modernity in its real-world form — un-

like the sterile image of it conveyed in fancy abstract art — is about mass production. It's about making commodities as cheap as they can be and then, where necessary, manufacturing demand for them.

High-tech stakeless tents for wealthy mountain-climbing parents? Sure. But barely functioning, scaled-down facsimiles of them for the little ones to use at home? That sure could sound like consumerism's training wheels, designed to get young shoppers rolling on their own.

Best of all, Buster bought her tents at Ikea, an institution that exemplifies the old idea that modern form comes married to the condition of its manufacture and sale. Until Ikea came along, fine modern design, though invented as a clean-limbed style to be churned out by and for the working class, was mostly a rarefied product that was priced for the elites. At Ikea, the fast lines of modern design

get realized on fast-moving assembly lines that turn out fast-moving product lines.

Buster's installation even includes a nod to modernism's colonial past, cited by many thinkers as a crucial precondition for the West's present prosperity. Buster's Ikea tents came printed with the snow blocks of Inuit igloos — structures that disappeared once their makers began to consume the wonders of their European colonizers' culture. Igloos vanished after World War II, when their itinerant makers were given the means — or, mostly, were compelled — to settle down in Western-style prefab houses, which came with all mod cons, including alcohol addiction and massive unemployment. Now, if an Inuit hunter wants to spend a night outside, he can't go it alone. He's likely to buy manufactured goods — such as, say, a stakeless tent — to guarantee his comfort.

"Model City" hints at the back story that has shaped modern Western life and its trademark ab-

stract art. That doesn't mean abstraction is doomed to fail as an artistic strategy. It works just fine, as the front part of this exhibition demonstrates. But like it or not, modernism's story has another side to it as well.

Model City by Kendall Buster continues at Fusebox gallery, 1412 14th St. NW, through Oct. 22. Call 202-299-9220 or visit www.fuseboxdc.com.