In ‘Rough Shape,’ architecture in decay

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“Rough Shape,” a dour yet cheeky exhibit at Samson by the sculptor duo Antoniadis & Stone, startles right out of the box with sheer dreariness on a grand scale. On first impression, the work is all big and breaking down: toppling towers of concrete, overturned staircases, and rusted steel. The works reference institutional architecture — the kind found in places where the design is based on utility, not on aesthetics, or where the aesthetics are overtly modernist (such as the Brutalist architecture of Boston City Hall). We can extend the metaphor and read a critique of crumbling institutions of power.

But here’s the funny thing about Antoniadis & Stone, who will have work in the 2012 deCordova Biennial opening later this month: Nothing is ever what it seems. The duo builds trompe-l’oeil sculptures. There’s no concrete here, no metal. “Support System” looks like three pillars of painted, stacked concrete blocks, with one falling into the next. But they’re made of particleboard and plastic. The artists finesse every dirty detail — dings and streaks and scratches. While you think you might be able to smell the mold on these things, they’re complete fabrications.

“Social Climber” makes a giant upside-down V out of what look like two inverted concrete staircases. There will be no climbing here. At the bottom stands what appears to be a brown paper wrapper that might swaddle a wine bottle. The irony of the title is a little heavy-handed, but the handiwork is, once again, fascinating — this one is made of urethane foam.

The objects here don’t have the histories they hint at. They’re lighter and newer. They demand to be looked at as precisely crafted works of art, not relics of institutional decay. They turn out to be absorbing and funny, even as they grimly comment on what they represent.