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# Against Nature

Artists At Spaces Rebuild Reality

by Douglas Max Utter



Among other trends in contemporary art is a notable tendency to stroke and fondle odd bits of material until they die from the excess attention. Cool stuff, no doubt; I'm just saying. As an example, there's the work by artists selected from around the country for the exhibit Hyper-Nature at SPACES gallery. Much of it feels like décor for a pet cemetery on another planet. The emphasis here is on "hyper" more than "nature," meaning that some aspect of the world is exaggerated, inverted or

bent out of shape. Materials are considered to be, as well as forced to be, deceptive; things aren't what they seem.

Ceramicist Jason Briggs's bloated, dead-looking objects may resemble coagulated slime but in fact are made of exquisitely tinted porcelain, combined with hair, rubber and nail polish. Their names – "Puff," "Stretch," "Pinch" and so on - are obits as much as titles, explaining how they came to rest on a pedestal in Cleveland after being produced and tortured in Briggs' Tennessee studio. Revolting though they can be (and all possess comparatively attractive passages), Briggs' pieces aren't boring; every creepy increment of pseudo-flesh invites a horrified closer look. In fact, their crinkled delicacy is mesmerizing, appealing to an atavistic, cat-like urge to touch and draw back from knobby, bulging, possibly poisonous things. They're like hairballs designed by Fabergé, ultimately posing questions about aesthetic distances: Why is the boundary between revulsion and pleasure so permeable? What is the affinity, what is the estrangement dividing lace from web? In what sense does the artist "create"?

These basic questions are repeated in various ways throughout Hyper-Nature. Sherry Bittle switches between two and three dimensions, using graphite, gouache, yarn, thread and tree branches in her "Flightless Bird" series. Knotted strands of yarn hang from plaster sculptures of birds, or extend as colorful fantasy branches supporting gouache renderings of blue jays, cedar waxwings and other birds. Much of the New York City-based Bittle's work deals with operations of memory, confronting the fact of death. Her birds, incapable of flight, convert their impotence into spirit through wrapping and binding, as well as literal depiction.



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# Y2Gay

Sexual options explode at the turn of The New Century

Much of the art at Hyper-Nature is low-profile stuff, easy to walk past. But it often needs a second, hard look, and some of it is definitely worth the trouble. Even if it isn't, the artists here demand that audiences pay attention to things that may at first glance seem odd, unpleasant or merely inconsequential, eliciting an "Oh, I'm supposed to look at that?" response. But such moments of incredulity have always been the signature of so-called "advanced" art. If visitors drive through nearby Ohio City and notice a dry stretch of West 25th Street that looks better than the stuff at SPACES, that just might be the beginning of perceptual growth.

New York artist Gina Ruggeri's three acrylic-on-mylar paintings measure between four and seven feet, but they're stuck like fragments of murals or decals left by accident on odd sections of SPACES' massive walls. Depicting turf and caverns - folds in and under the earth - they ask the viewer, "Why are we here; what are we for?" rather than "Why am I a work of art?" Aesthetic sufficiency isn't the issue. These works could be seen as entrances to other dimensions, starting points for much larger works or explosive episodes occurring in the very thin spaces separating paint, mylar and wall.

The most literal throwaway pieces on view are probably Pittsburg resident Carin Mincemoyer's 40 "Miniature Landscapes." Consisting of dirt and bitty things, Mincemoyer builds replicas of fields and parks and parking lots, set in the hills and valleys of transparent plastic packaging which she mounts like shelves. These TV dinner-like, undernourished tableaux are strangely realistic, evoking familiar aerial views of sparse, outlying tracts of countryside. We are reminded of how terribly thin the livable surface of our planet is, and how fragile and nearly comic our lives seem from a mile up, like an ant farm or a model-train set

Landscape itself, as fact and fiction, is the major trope at Hyper-Nature, put to a variety of thematic uses. Chicago's Alison Carey makes ambrotype prints (an early type of photograph) on glass, showing reconstructions of undersea scenes as they might have looked hundreds of millions of years ago. Visiting Czech artist-in-residence Martin Papcœn isn't, strictly speaking, part of this show, but his work is also on display. His two dimly illumined lines of toy houses facing each other amid surrounding darkness explore thoughts similar to Mincemoyer's, suggesting the transitory, child-like, make-believe quality of the human world. Judith Mullen of Wheaton, Illinois makes her intriguing, fresco-like paintings using materials like charcoal and tea combined with pigment on plaster. Her 'scapes could be inner or outer, referring to land as we experience it and to maps of micro and macro systems known indirectly through intellect and technology. New Yorker painter Laura Moriarty's title "SWAG" is an acronym for "Scientific Wild Ass Guess." The pigmented beeswax mass of biomorphic shapes also resembles a coral-encrusted trove. It's a deconstruction of the joys and jewel-like shards of painting.

Kimberly Hart, also based in New York City, has spent the past several years imagining an alter ego who enjoys doing things that she herself (allegedly) does not, like hunting and hanging out in the woods. The two pieces on view at SPACES are a painting of a deer printed in the form of a 24-inch by 30-inch jigsaw puzzle, and a small oval-framed painting of a rabbit named "Blossom", surrounded by treehouse-like balsa-wood scaffolding and Sculpey decorations. The deer is surrounded by a scene showing animals like horses and dogs, all marked with targets.

Again the question arises: Can artists be trusted with their pets? You decide. Check out Hyper-Nature.Ê

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by Christine Howey

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