

The Boston Globe

Boston Globe, The (MA)

July 11, 2004

PRETTY, VACANT: HIGH-QUALITY LOCAL WORK GETS SHOWCASE AT TUFTS

Author: Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent
Review

Edition: THIRD
Section: Arts / Entertainment
Page: N6

Index Terms:
LIV

Estimated printed pages: 4

Article Text:

MEDFORD - The space was empty for the summer. The Tufts University Gallery's new director, Amy Ingrid Schlegel, made a canny move. She reached out to artists in the Tufts neighborhood - Somerville and Medford - and invited them to exhibit. The Tufts First Annual Juried Summer Exhibition offers a taste of the high-quality art being produced in the area. It also gives Schlegel, the lone juror, the opportunity to broadcast her aesthetic early; although she took over the gallery months ago, more than a year of previously scheduled exhibitions are planned before she can initiate her own programming.

It's a disappointingly beautiful show: all ribbons and bows and not enough content. Schlegel has an eye for the rapturous and a passion for process. She's put together a collection of 20 artists, and they're all quite good at what they do. The bent of many of them toward the ethereal or toward lush materials and colors sates an appetite for beauty qui! ckly - like a meal that's all sweetness, with little tang. The tangy works are here, but you have to look for them; it's so easy to get caught in a sugar high, you might miss them.

Hwae Jung's stunning installation "Drawing in the Air" sets the tone. She has suspended a huge, snaking length of delicate paper, ripped and shredded along the way, coiling out from a window right into the center of the gallery.

One vast section is mostly white; the loop that dips closest to the ground crinkles with black ink that traces the folds and creases, drawing a remarkable landscape through the air. It's a magical piece, a mystic scroll unfurling and offering up riddles of the spirit.

That same quality of beauty shows up again and again. Beverly Sky's handmade paper-pulp paintings of forests, shimmering with threads of gold and silver, seem suspended at a moment between abstraction and realism, as if they are just now cohering into trees and puddles (having originated in just that source material - plant fiber and water). M. L. Van Nice's artist's books open out, in image and word, into purposely elusive journeys of image and text - not unlike the elusive journey through life. "Simple Story, Untold" meanders through some darkly romantic and insinuating possibilities of one woman's history, all a tease to illustrate the power of suggestion.

Justine Waitkus's automatic drawings in ink follow a similar path. They're bold and gestural; they let the process take them where it will. Yet as in so many works in this show, that open-ended quality ultimately frustrates; it seems like a cop-out: "I don't really have anything to say, so I'll just doodle for a while and make something pretty." Joan McCandlish's digital photographs of plants and vegetables transform them into brilliant abstract forms; it's a neat trick, but it belongs more on a greeting card than in an art show.

This exhibit cries out for a little ugliness. The best art, the most beautiful, encompasses the difficult as well as the brilliant. The possibility of it shows up in some of the other photographs. Toru Nakanishi's close-up photos of noodles take on a satisfyingly weird quality: "Nong Shim, Neoguri, Red" is a circle of damp, pink-red pasta coiling around itself like a nest of worms. Gary Duehr's untitled color photos catch their subjects cinematically just after heated moments: One shows a woman in the passenger seat of a car, looking dully away from the man in the driver's seat. (Other photographers - Andrea Wenglowczyk and Surendra Lawoti - fall into a recent trend of images of empty interiors that's wearing thin.)

Some of the strongest works get drowned out by the visual fireworks of some of the lesser works. Nataliya Bregel's little oil paintings start from video stills of ordinary life, such as in "Father Shaving." The images look slightly overexposed and utterly mundane, yet there's a richness in their humanity.

Nancy Murphy Spicer's installations of dried paint pools and stretches of wood curling from wall to ceiling don't use the space as operationally as does "Drawing in the Air." Yet they challenge our perceptions of how to read an exhibition space and push at our expectations of what art is. Kathleen Finlay's sculptures are all about process - like many of the lushly lovely works in the

show - yet there's a greater, more self-aware inquiry in her pieces. Using cloth, sheet rock, plastic and other materials, she explores the mechanics of creation by building sculptural pulleys and support systems.

It is tough to install a juried show that has no parameters other than geography. Shlegel had to find her own themes, then work around the centerpiece of "Drawing in the Air." That places sheer beauty front and center. Then she had to segregate smaller and subtler works off in the corners, setting up an awkward imbalance. She has managed to show off some of the talent in Somerville and Medford, and that's a pool well worth dipping into. If there is a second Tufts Annual, Schlegel should curate it around a theme, as well ! as a neighborhood. That would make a more cohesive show.

Caption:

Hwae Jung's installation "Drawing in the Air" sets the tone for a Tufts University Gallery show filled with works that trend toward the ethereal or toward lush materials and colors.PHOTO

Memo:

VISUAL ARTS

Tufts First Annual Juried Summer Exhibition

At: Tufts University Gallery, Aidekman Arts Center, 40R Talbot Ave., Medford, through Aug. 1. 617-627-3518. www.tufts.edu/as/gallery

Copyright (c) 2004 Globe Newspaper Company
Record Number: 0407110081