

Synthetics

“Big Plastic,” Sean Duffy, Terri Friedman and more

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That hydra-headed facility known as the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, having recently moved into an enormous warehouse space on the north end of Fair Oaks Boulevard while its familiar Old Town digs are being retrofitted, is marking its temporary relocation with a group exhibition that uses the building's history -- it was home to the Hi-Plas plastics extrusion company -- as a jumping-off point. Several of the artists in “Big Plastic” (which opened October 7 and continues through the end of January) rise to the occasion with works that address the cavernous site (17,000 square feet in the main exhibition space). Paul Tzanetopoulos produces a hybrid of John & Yoko's art antics and New Yorker cartoon surrealism with his giant “YOU ARE HERE” dot; Habib Kheradyar's red-fabric Impasse improbably invokes both Bruce Nauman and Ruth Kligman; Megan Geckler recalls the roots of string art in her jaunty Day-Glo flagging-tape corner piece Double Sweet Sixteen -- but in spite of their uniform (and winning) frisson of early-'70s formalist extravagance, these are not, surprisingly, the most successful works in the exhibit.

Ashley Thorner, Jaime Scholnick, and the collaborative team of Monique van Genderen and Margo Victor all score by hunkering their works into subdivided portions, real or hypothetical, of the hangar-sized concrete space. Thorner treats her square footage as if it were a small gallery, installing a selection from three recent bodies of work -- her literally candy-coated minimalist fiberglass spheres, her creepy but elegant limp chandelier clusters of bubbly vinyl tetrahedrons linked by surgical tubing, and the mutant new beetlelike Blob, sewn together from poured sheets of blue, gooplike plastic -- as if for a solo show. Van Genderen, whose accumulations of colorful vinyl membranes are usually of interest only for their handsome design sense and the conceptual play between their high Ab-Ex appearance and their materials, is given a quantum kick in the ass with the superimposition of Victor's blurry, high-contrast 25-minute black-and-white film of three figures in makeshift radiation spacesuits fumbling around aimlessly.

Projected onto an autumn-hued van Genderen screen in an easily overlooked corner cubicle, Victor's otherwise amateur film transforms the otherwise inert slashes of yellow and orange into a formally striking moving picture of the swinging apocalypse, straight out of Chris Marker's La Jetee or Richard Lester's The Bed Sitting Room, its fiery, dreamlike tone oscillating between WTC rescue efforts and the Apollo 1 launch-pad deaths of Gus Grissom and company in 1967. Scholnick's City is an aberrant variation on early Disneyland aesthetics: a brightly colored, geometrically simplified urban landscape filling a small office adjacent to an interactive area for visiting schoolchildren. Made entirely out of what appears to be empty industrial-strength plastic thread spools, the work's cheerfulness is curdled slightly by a subtle but insistent suggestion of factory sweatshops and industrial globalization. It's a small world after all!

The Armory's public educational wing is a neat little exhibition in itself -- in some ways more successful than the show it explains. The obligatory Carlos Mollura inflatable modernist pun is given needed depth with the disclosure of his ongoing familial history in the plastics industry, which explains how he can afford to continually turn out such immaculately crafted objects. Hilary Norcliffe's goggles and loopy freeform carving made from milk and water jugs are better artworks than the more ambitious, large-scale stacks and woven grids that are her official contribution to the show. The evidence of previous visitors creating their own modest versions of Stephen Shackelford's twin PVC-pipe-and-plastic-flower chandeliers, Endless Endless Summer (Pink) & (Blue), is funnier than the originals, and devoid of the undertone of '90s slacker sculptural contempt that weighs them down.

Many of the artists in Big Plastic falter in just this way -- the grandiosity required by the enormous scale of the venue is at odds with the intimacy and ephemerality that normally transform their cast-off industrial media into meaningful art. Gloria Sedaghat and Anita Rafie's enormous stripe-painting agglomeration of sparkly factory ends of extruded resin adds nothing to the inherent gorgeousness of the material, and does so in an enormously self-important way. Dianna Cohen attempts to translate her often-successful 2-D assemblages of multicolored plastic shopping bags into a grand, encyclopedic, site-specific sculptural piece, but achieves only passages of her usual visual facility. Which is fine; it's enough. While it's always easy to speculate on what the same artists might have accomplished with more time and bigger budgets, or what some of the legions of not-included L.A. Plastic Fantastic artists (off the top of my head: Shirley Tse, Gordon Haines, Jason Rogenes, Sean Duffy, Terri Friedman) might have accomplished, the truth is that grappling with such an environment would be daunting for any artist, and even to fail at such a scale makes for more interesting art than most.

Conveniently enough, two from my list of left-outs have shows up in other parts of town -- Sean Duffy in the upstairs project room at Suzanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Terri Friedman at Shoshana Wayne Gallery. Duffy's show continues the artist's peculiar mixture of Pop-ish formalist aplomb and peculiar layers of art-historical and cultural references. The two central pieces are quixotic in the extreme. The first, a multiple-tone-arm Triple-turntable (2001), collapses the sequential narrative structure of a given LP (The Who's Odds & Sods, on one recent day) by playing three equidistant grooves simultaneously. This instant dub machine, which references fairly obscure similar turntable sculptures by artists such as Thomas Brinkmann and Gary Quinonez, is displayed on a pedestal made from commercially manufactured stretcher bars and painting canvas, making the work a sort-of comment on the postmodern collapse of history and its

disruption of the respective roles of popular and fine art. The Double-wide Sofa (2001) is an equally idiosyncratic monstrosity, expanding George Nelson's iconic Marshmallow Sofa from a streamlined modernist perch into a sugar-bloated white-trash wood-grain sittin' trough. The rest of the show is made up of small modular groups of spin-art turntable paintings that recall the targets of Kenneth Noland, the spin-art of Damien Hirst, the circular record drawings of Tim Hawkinson, and '60s Mod design. Several related works are in the backroom and office, and are worth searching out -- a pair of gorgeous fun-fur-under-plexi targets, and my pick for art buy of the holiday season, the underpriced and inexplicable Mini Mod Marshmallow Sofa, an edition of 11 tiny replicas of Nelson's couch made from red-white-and-blue Who-style target lapel pins, and mounted on a scooter rearview mirror. Nostalgia has seldom been this warped.

Sadly, Terri Friedman's "Falling Up" exhibit at Shoshana Wayne features only one (albeit gigantic) example of the artist's awkward, anthropomorphic kinetic inflatables. Fly Naked's rickety 2-by-4 structure teeters 17 feet toward the ceiling of the large gallery, anchoring assorted tumorous windsocks, collapsing and re-inflating in some vaguely organic rhythm. As in Duffy's work, the grafting of a pathetic anthropomorphism on the plastic inflatable -- a medium which, in the early '70s, symbolized (and for some artists still does symbolize) the pristine evacuation of the human touch from art making -- provides a welcome depth to the glut of superficial '60s modernist appropriation that passes for art-historical engagement these days. Apart from a mysterious giant aluminum bowl, the rest of Friedman's show treads dangerously close to such easy decorative flatness, with layered, translucent poured-acrylic paintings on plexiglass, like lovely stained-glass versions of Morris Louis -- beautiful to behold, but not too challenging.

The companion exhibits to both Duffy and Friedman are also curiously related. Phil Argent, at Shoshana Wayne, is easily the most interesting of the abstract painters to emerge from the graduate program at UNLV led by Dave "Genius" Hickey. Stephen Heer, in the front space at Vielmetter Projects, studied under Argent at UC Santa Barbara and navigates the same Web-influenced aesthetic terrain. Both artists overlay carefully drafted elements that recall electronics diagrams, industrial machinery and the negative spaces of manufactured plastic goods. Both address the flatness of their sources by inserting carefully orchestrated passages of texture, a la Lari Pittman's candle drips. While I'd like to see something in either artist's oeuvre get a little out of control, both proffer substantial visual pleasure. Design-wise, it's pretty much a toss-up between the two -- Heer's embossed biscuit-tin grounds and card-table corners have a retro sci-fi charm, and his murky ruby-colored oil-paint lozenges seem like portholes into abysmal depths. But in the end, I think I'd lean toward Argent's work, with its hedonistic inclusion of diamond dust and curiously stripped-down evocation of decorative excess. Argent's paintings have always possessed an admirable compositional complexity, but his pictures have gotten less cluttered over the last couple of years, allowing new, subtle plays on continuous pictorial depth to emerge from what had been the entertaining, but less painterly, jostlings of geometrical fops in Edwin A. Abbott's Flatland.