

# 'Riches' Spins Its Gold From Everyday Straw

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You might think that an exhibition called "An Embarrassment of Riches" would be about artists coping with a culture of plenitude. In fact, the show at the Huntington Beach Art Center through Nov. 17 is about doing more with less--or at least, with ordinary objects of little perceived value.

Former center curator Marilu Knode has brought together 14 artists who have built their own little worlds from such different materials as scratched out words on a wall and laundry baskets. The artists who cultivate a sort of ersatz lusciousness with cheap or even downright pathetic materials come out looking best in this show.

Young An plants glistening, pre-sucked hard candies in her tiny paintings of plants, earth and sky: Her "jewels" are as common as the pleasures of nature itself. George Stoll builds a graduated tower of prettily colored wax replicas of Tupperware--a "re-imagining" of the humble contents of the kitchen as a wistful postmodern tribute to formalism.

Liza Lou, famous for beading just about any object she can lay her hands on, has contributed a preternaturally gleaming self-portrait and frame. Her work, rather over-hyped by critics, makes a claim for the omnipresent, pan-cultural decorative urge.

Chris Finley's unclassifiable groupings of such things as stacked plastic place mats, Brancusi-in-miniature chains of tiny, two-headed pencil stubs and shish kebabs of tiny pink plastic circles have a loopy allure. Mingling art, food, suburban household and childhood game associations, Finley lets the viewer sort it all out.

Maura Bendett sketches gorgeously airy, flower-filled universes with tendrils of wire, painted bits of paper, glass and beeswax that spring delicately off the wall. Commingling fecundity and otherworldly fantasy, these works are testaments to the pleasures of making and imagining.

One of Bendett's particularly virtuosic pieces, "Empire," consists of a circular web of flowers and sea horse shapes attached to one another with nearly invisible strands of acetate. Suspended on long nails driven only partway into the wall, this fantasy kingdom of continuously inventive variations on a theme casts a lacy shadow in its wake.

Jacci Den Hartog's extraordinarily inventive recent work is based on juxtaposing the complex strands of nature and culture in classical Chinese landscape painting and decorative sculpture with contemporary Western attitudes.

The watery blue-green and violet polyurethane sheets that hang from knobby outcroppings of plaster in "Reflection Through a Plum Blossom Mist" are Den Hartog's interpretations of the Chinese landscape paintings from the Sung and Yuan dynasties. By translating the vaporous color and structure of a highly codified painting style into idiosyncratic contemporary terms, she underlines the suspension of disbelief involved in all representations of nature.

Den Hartog's "Invitation to a Reclusion"--a stylized mountain of green resin sitting atop a decorative green three-tiered base--straddles the line between tourist-shop kitsch and historical homage to a distinguished epoch of nature-inspired jade carving. The reclusion, or solitary existence, of the title suggests both the famously lonely life of the Chinese scholar-painter and the stylistic limbo of an outdated aesthetic.

Other artists in the show deliberately cultivate disquieting effects, presumably exposing the fallout from a culture of plenty. But these efforts--particularly when juxtaposed with the open-ended, overwhelming style-conscious appeal of the other works--tend to be less effective.

Angela Lim's minuscule mixed-media "pastries" from her "Sweet Domain" series suffer from an overdose of irony-free cuteness that mars the effect of their deliberately cloying qualities (fuzzy, oddly vaginal peach slices, big-eyed mask faces cut from leftover dough).

The illegible slips of paper citing crime statistics that are packaged with tiny plastic guns in C. Ian White's toy dispensing machine ("25 Will Get You 25") don't convey much to the uninitiated viewer. Regardless, the piece is tiresomely predictable in its social preaching.

Joe Magrum's sprawling installation, "Me, the Man and John Brown"--seemingly about the tug-of-war between enlightened urban planning and industrial pollution--has a dismayingly simple-minded viewer-interactive component.

Another piece suffering from an overdose of recycled social angst is Kenneth Riddle's "Untitled (Walking Garden)." A free-standing tangle of machine parts and spacer objects (including a miniature model of a sorcerer) perched on knife points, it grafts the soul of a true believer to the sort of bricoleur sculpture fashionable a couple of decades ago.

Flawed but intentionally pathetic in a laugh-out-loud way, Terri Friedman's "Sort of (Rough Draft)" is the text of a personal ad, writ large--complete with second thoughts and cross-outs--on the wall. Next to the word "thin," she adds "not exactly," then changes it to "not remotely." And so on, describing her desire to meet a man--or maybe an art dealer.

For all the real-life fudging, compromising, self-doubt and daydreaming, the piece seems ludicrously over-scaled and tries too hard to be witty.

Other work in the show is by Michael McManus (whose East-meets-West "American Prayer Series" collages were reviewed last spring), color-block painter Carlos Estrada-Vega and Tim Nolan. Nolan weds a minimalist aesthetic to bland domestic materials (lawn chair webbing, clothesline) without quite finding the right form or scale to consummate the marriage.

In the small rear gallery, "Body Archaeology From 'The Anatomy Lesson' " showcases the work of Joyce Cutler-Shaw, artist-in-residence at the UC San Diego School of Medicine. Among her detailed, spidery drawings are images of elderly cadavers, their skin occasionally zipped open to expose blood and tissue.

Knotted and gnarled skeletons sometimes appear as headless "monsters" in these sketches--an effect the artist clearly intended. She writes (in a wall text) about the disembodied aspect of medical science, from the lack of whole body images in Gray's Anatomy to contemporary medical imaging systems that reduce the body to an image, seen but not touched.

When Cutler-Shaw ventures into territory identified more with contemporary art than illustration, she falters. The self-portrait photographs overlaid with images from the Wide World of Medicine (including Rembrandt's painting "The Anatomy of Dr. Tulp" and a Benetton ad showing a newborn infant) and the lab coats covered with drawings of fetuses and infants are too literal-minded, as are the artist's flat-footed poems.

The drawings on paper much more effectively represent Cutler-Shaw's intense curiosity about the aging body, her gravely humanistic pursuit of the unknown and unknowable. It is as if her preoccupation with noting details of bodies on each side of the divide of death could yield insight into that twilight zone, in almost a literally subcutaneous way.

\* "An Embarrassment of Riches" and "Joyce Cutler-Shaw: Body Archaeology From 'The Anatomy Lesson,' " through Nov. 17 at the Huntington Beach Art Center, 538 Main St. Hours: Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, noon-8 p.m. Thursday, noon-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday, noon-4 p.m. Sunday. Admission: \$3; \$2 students, seniors. (714) 374-1650.

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If you happen to be anywhere near the Santora Building in downtown Santa Ana Friday or Saturday and feel like having a Dr. Ruth-style giggle, drop into the Meta Gallery to see Laurie Hassold and Jeff Gillette's mini-video show, "Mutual Submission (An Intimate Collaboration)."

In one of these feather-light pieces, monitors facing each other at a distance of about 6 inches display the artists' sexual organs, one still, the other suggestively bouncing--as if the monitors were engaged in a virtual sex act. In another piece, double monitors zero in on each artist's back being squeezed rhythmically by the other's arms, accompanied by carefully timed groans and yelps. The piece mocks the clinical gravity of sex manuals, fantasies of absolutely equal sexual pleasure and the viewer's willingness to watch even the most farfetched simulacrum of sex.

\* "Mutual Submission (An Intimate Collaboration)," through Saturday at Meta Gallery, 207 N. Broadway, Suite E, Santa Ana. Hours: Noon-4 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Admission free. (714) 836-6858.