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What's in a Name?

Artworks Better Than Theme in Group Show



UNSTUFFED: installation view of Jason Ferguson's "Inanimate Autopsy"

By **Bret McCabe**

Like any coroner, the figure projected against the wall starts with a midline incision. Clad in the *CSI*-familiar medical examiner garb and working in the usual clinical setting with the subject atop a stainless-steel work station—but filmed with much less self-important lighting—the figure slices down the front, cutting through the first few layers and spreading them apart. Gloved hands reach inside and start removing things, setting them aside, and going back to work. It's all done with postmortem seriousness, and it would be grotesque if it were an actual human body and not what could be Archie Bunker's La-Z-Boy. As is, with his installation "Inanimate Autopsy," Jason Ferguson applies the humorless death science to such a banal

item that it elicits a daft, elusive feeling that bounces between the comic and the macabre.

How "Inanimate Autopsy" relates to the 45 other works in *Janus*, the second celebratory exhibit in Maryland Art Place's silver anniversary year, is anybody's guess. The program notes wallow through an idea that "blurring is the new clarity," which is all fine and even dandy, even if it's a sentiment that last percolated through contemporary art most recently 20 years back—and infiltrated popular culture a good decade back (just keyword search: "glitch"). Actually, the thematic or even pseudo-intellectual integument connecting the 15 artists gathered here by curator Sarah Tanguy, from Washington's ART in Embassies Program, is very loose to nonexistent. If you need a title, think *Cool Imagery from Maryland(ish) Based Artists*.

In fact, letting these works justify their existence works much better than any sort of theoretical armature. Even when the visual pleasure is fleeting—Meaghan Harrison's three mixed-media pieces, Beth Line's witty digital prints on canvas, Keith Sharp's human-plant photography, the ritualistic burns in Perry W. Johnson's "Cicada Death Mask"—the works themselves engage the eye and brain better than any amount of urtext. Take Kyle Miller's installation "Break," two long stretches of PVC pipe hanging some average person's height off the ground with small speakers mounted at their far ends. Stand in between the two pipe ends and you catch a split-channel sound piece that loops various iterations and intonations of "you know, I mean," "I know," and "yeah" into a string of comically meaningless prattle. You can graft some discursive linguistic-cum-logical idea onto this if you need to; the rest of us will stand there smiling and thinking about the old joke about the rhetoric professor lecturing about how two negatives equal a positive but that two positives never equal a negative and let Miller's piece provide the deadpan punch line: *Yeah, yeah*.

Even more hard to pin down, Nathalie T.A. Pham's "Brave New World, No. 2: The Wedding Dress" is an ornate, furry love child between some unknown marsupial and a 1950s lamp. Like Celia Eberle's works, Pham's "The Wedding Dress" knows that the 1990s witnessed the reclamation of the traditional home and

the so-called feminine arts and doesn't waste its time validating its purpose. The usual critical strategies analyze "The Wedding Dress" into gender-roles and cross-cultural components, boringly intellectualizing what is, really, the most lavish costume a polyethnic vacuum cleaner could ever hope for. Speaking personally, here's to hoping Pham has ideas for miscegenated appliances and, well, almost *anything* else the world over. The idea of Pakistani-Mexican toaster ovens and Estonian-Arab pens sounds like a vast improvement over the current one.

When *Janus* shines, it does so with klieg-light intensity. Eric Finzi works with resin on wood, and his resulting images are highly buffed eye-grabbers. His three pieces here look like peacock-colored takes on Richard Patterson's abstracted realism paintings further distorted by everything looking trapped in highly polished embryonic sacs: The lines and features of the form in "Augustine, Attitudes Passionnelles" squiggle into whirlpools of contrasting colors and inky smoke, creating a ghost of sacred painting. These works might not have much to say, but they say nothing with arresting floridity.

Travis Childers' small works speak with a larger voice. For his "Cultures" series he's blithely turned laboratory ephemera into witty commentary. In glass petri dishes Childers has mounted amorphous blobs of who knows what, each topped with a person's face—think Silly Putty transfers from newspaper images and you'll get the idea—turning biological product into cheeky family portrait.

And in the back of the show, the video portion of "Inanimate Autopsy" cycles through its unforgiving dismantling. In front of the projection sits the disemboweled recliner, resting in silent reverence like a recently passed friend, and Ferguson overlooks no detail. A stainless-steel bowl rests atop the chair's open torso, full of stuffing. The stainless-steel table is littered with pieces of leather and filling. And the pieces of fabric stuck in the bottom of the table's drain like rinsed-away remains: priceless.