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Miami gallery shows are smart and beautiful

By Anne Tschida



"Barbed," an exhibition from the collaborative duo known as Guerra de al Paz at Praxis International Art, reflects a trapped world, made here from the wrappings that once enclosed human beings. December 2011.

Three gallery shows opened for Art Basel that should show make Miami proud. And though the fair week is over, these shows remain for several weeks.

Two are from local artists, a third comes from New Mexico; all have some terrific work that is also solid in quality and presentation — not always the case in Miami. On the surface, the exhibits couldn't seem more different: one is video, one huge installation, one small paintings. But whether it is in the precise presentation, the skill in the craft, and even in a sense of wit, the shows are more similar than meets the eye.

- The Bernice Steinbaum Gallery has brought in the latest solo exhibit from a video sculpture master, Peter Sarkisian. The Sante Fe resident scored hits at the gallery in the past, with shows that included video of people driving projected on car-door windows, and boiling "milk" bubbling around in a bucket. This time all of the works are small, with tiny projectors, and are lit individually on their stands in the darkened space. Despite their small size, all are amazing studies in illusion and perception.

In New York, Sarkisian plays with a startling contrast between contemporary and ancient forms of communication. With a strong command of the latest in video technology, Sarkisian manipulates a pencil hovering above a page with the scribbled words: "Mind Over Matter/Matter Over Mind."

Sarkisian, who started off as a filmmaker in Los Angeles, says that he wants to make video mentally interactive, rather than purely passive. The floating pencil "twists video in such a simple but radical way as to create the illusion of material levitation, which in turn raises some vital questions for the viewer regarding the nature of their own experience," he explains of his intent.

"Of course it's all accomplished by joining a material pencil with video imagery to create a hybrid illusion, but as such it [has] transformed the act of watching video from an experience-killing act to an experience-creating act."

In a simple and sad piece called Ink Blot, a tiny little figure wiggles around in spilled black ink, and finally, tortuously, climbs onto a note pad. Is he the last survivor of the age of pen and paper?

The best and most mesmerizing piece is a culmination of this theme, which suggests a loss of

communication in a hyper-technical time. A mini video version of the artist crawls over the pages of a dictionary (at one point even disappearing into the book binding and reemerging on the opposite page) and writes misspelled words and text-speak: Chech Spelling; LOL!. "To underscore the drunk and disorderly way language is thrown around these days," says Sarkisian, "I have the figure whistling Ninety Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall."

That's funny — illusion, like magic, provokes a sense of bemusement. While the issues addressed are heavy (in one work, a little figure is floating in his coffee, and is likely not alive), it's hard not to smile at the optics. "The humor element is every bit as important as the metaphor in this body of work," sums up the artist. "The humor is acting as a sort of governor to ration the amount of darkness that gets through, and in what form."

Details: Peter Sarkisian: New Work through Jan. 7 at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 3550 N. Miami Ave. Miami; www.bernicesteinbaumgallery.com.

- Materials and their bright colors are what also lighten, somewhat, the exhibit Barbed from the collaborative duo known as Guerra de al Paz at Praxis International Art. The Cuban-born couple, Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz, live and work in Little Haiti, where they find their primary source material: discarded clothing. They have crafted tons of it into sculptures, some abstract, some figurative, and often with a sense of humor.

But the theme here is humorless, although the huge centerpiece, floor-to-ceiling sculpture and the three accompanying photos are gorgeous. Over a decade ago, the artists began to notice the pieces of clothing that were hanging, or trapped, in the barbed wire that stood guard on fences across urban Miami. And they started to photograph them.

The three examples that are hanging at Praxis now are downright disturbing and still beautiful. There is an unmistakable likeness to a concentration camp, and the pieces of clothing themselves take on a life of their own; blowing in the wind, stuck on the razor blades, slowly disintegrating, freedom escaping their grasp. The photographs were shot, sometimes several times in the Wynwood area and Overtown, and the artists decided to use three that were taken under gray skies.

In the center, within a fenced-off square also topped with barbed wire, piles and piles of clothes are stacked. Guerra de la Paz had the fences brought in and drilled into the floor, and then like a painting, very carefully chose their color palette out of the discarded clothing to build their sculpture. At the bottom, bright red cloth spills out from the grid of the chain links, resembling a disemboweled creature. Softer colored clothes are layered, and layered, to the top. Each side of this square has a slightly different scheme, each side really is a painting. At places, the cloth pushes against the fence and creates bulges.

One white wall is left completely empty, to show off the shadows from the central sculpture. But it is also a barren, desolate space. All this placement is precise and calculated, to express a "barbed" and trapped world, made here from the wrappings that once enclosed human beings, now thrown to the wind, the razor wire, or the garbage.

Details: Barbed from Guerra de la Paz through Dec. 31 at Praxis International Art, 2219 N.W. 2nd Ave., Miami; www.praxis-art.com.

- Placement is a mark of Mette Tommerup's painting exhibit at Dorsch Gallery, Full Salute. On the 20th anniversary of one of Wynwood's original galleries, Tommerup has delivered a strong collection of new works, a nice combo of local art for the birthday of what has become a flagship gallery.

The first impression is how the still-life influenced paintings are erratically hung, at different heights on the four walls. Again, this is to emphasize the more subtle meaning that emerges from the works, from viewing a piece as a simple slice of cake or two tomatoes to more sexually charged imagery. So for instance, phallic-looking fruit paintings (in really lovely wooden frames) hang, well, low; while paintings that can evoke female anatomy are placed a little higher. In fact, the title Full Salute gives a hint to this dual meaning.

Tommerup's premise here is to question various identity politics, in an art world that the Florida International University professor says has entered a post-identity era. She describes it this way: "Innocent tomatoes and peppers become stand-ins for an exploration of gender, race, and sexuality. In this bizarre post-feminist, post-black, post-gay, post-straight, post-post-colonial garden of vegetables and gnomes, no object is spared from being classified."

Details: Full Salute from Mette Tommerup through Jan. 28 at the Dorsch Gallery, 151 N.W. 24th St., Miami; dorschgallery.com.

All three of these exhibits delve into dark territory while still allowing pure composition and beauty have their day. Maybe most importantly, they are also smart, complete shows — just the kind Miami should put forward when the eyes of the world are upon us.

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