

The New Haven Register

05/06/2006

Lots going on beneath the surface at thoughtful ALL exhibit

By Judy Birke



"25.09.95," a wool, cotton and light work by Cynthia Reynolds.

NEW HAVEN — The current exhibit at Arts + Literature Laboratory, "Surface, Space and Light," is a thoughtful and compact compendium of form and content. A well-distilled exploration of process and materials, narrative and feeling, the show's strength lies in its effective reconciliation between formal clarity and personal expression.

The exhibit of 17 works by 11 artists from across the country includes sculpture, collage, photography, mixed media and installation. The focus is on the interplay of formal elements like surface quality, spatial relationships and the effects of light with personal concerns and social issues.

The high quality of the work is readily evident, the inclusions fun to look at and probably fun to make. Even in pieces in which the stated meaning seems obscure, the artistic and technical characteristics are enough to make them meaningful.

Many of the best works reiterate themes of transformation.

Georgia Tambasis' biomorphic sculpture, "Ponty," of fired clay and rubber, speaks energetically to the natural world. A highly chromatic organic shape of variously textured tactile surfaces, this intriguing creature with rippling body and a mouth-like aperture of teeth-like shards, seems to document the phenomenon of creation and renewal — animated, irregular and still very much in the process of taking form.

Rebekah Tolley's digital video installation, "Under My Skin," in which the imagery is composed of decomposed wood and the artist's skin, addresses the connections between the natural world and humanity. The animated floor piece of changing patterns and evolving surfaces, reminiscent of a crawling animal shedding one skin for another, evokes a hypnotic primal response, the interaction of the shifting surfaces conveying the mutability of physical qualities, both visually and experientially.

Kristina Estell's "2,500 Lenses," of LED lenses and wire, challenges one's expectations. By transforming the utilitarian associations of the materials, and turning them into an elegant suspension of delicate harmony and grace, the hard materials become a soft sparkle of shiny points and lyrical shadows that leave the practicality of their origins far behind in favor of a new narrative that suggests its own associations.

Cynthia Reynolds' "25.09.95," "01.10.02" and "14.03.04" merge rubber, foam, metal, porcelain, wool and cotton with light in order to create tiny sculptural forms that gently draw one into her internal world. These tightly wrought pieces, forced into a formal sameness, only a few inches square, possess a surprising power.

Without being precisely referential, they become spiritual and introspective, the glowing interiors coming alive with oblique allusions to the artist's experiences of the chaos surrounding body image in contemporary society.

Matthew Weber's "Cedar Shingle and Shim Stack I," made of organic materials reconstituted for material construction, challenge the viewer to reconsider the physical mass of the forest structure from an architectural context. Crafted with finesse, Weber assembles individual slats like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, the voluptuous curves serving as a counterpoint to the vigorous geometry of the individual components, a dialogue, perhaps, between the orderly formation of their original environment and the new alignments achieved by the processed intervention.

David Bowen's "Phototropic Drawing Device," makes for a good deal of fun. A playful construction of quirky inventiveness, this kinetic work elicits an uncontrollable "gee-whiz-how-did-he-do-that" response, as one delights in the automated charcoal doodles that Bowen's imaginary creature generates from its response to the light stimuli installed above it.

The exhibit also includes interesting pieces by Tomoko Mukai, Curtis Jones, Neva Setlow, Joy Wulke and Liz Pagano.

Judy Birke of New Haven is a freelance writer and art consultant.